

**EXCERPT FROM THE MINUTES OF A WORK SESSION  
OF THE JACKSON COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS  
HELD ON MAY 11, 2021**

**(5) VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENTS BUDGET DISCUSSIONS:** Mr. Adams stated that the Board had been in conversations regarding Cullowhee Volunteer Fire Department moving to full-time status. The Board indicated a willingness to look at a potential overall general tax rate increase of one cent to help fund that. Previously, the Board discussed that once the Cullowhee Volunteer Fire Department went full-time, there would be approximately \$400,000 in the fire fund that would become available. The Board wished for the County Manager to meet with the fire chiefs and have a discussion about their needs.

On April 26<sup>th</sup>, county staff met with five fire chiefs. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the \$400,000 that may become available in the fire fund if Cullowhee VFD became a full-time operation. Cashiers-Glenville VFD, Cullowhee VFD and Highlands VFD did not attend because funding for their operations would be handled differently.

The following were in attendance of the meeting:

- Chief Brian McMahan, Balsam-Willets-Ochre Hill Fire Department
- Chief Terry McCall, Canada Fire and Rescue Department
- Chief Kent Moore, Qualla Fire and Rescue Department
- Chief Mike Beck, Sylva Fire Department
- Chief Floyd Green, Savannah Fire Department
- Don Adams, County Manager
- Todd Dillard, Emergency Management Director
- Michael Forbis, Fire Marshal

The following items were discussed regarding additional funds:

- The five fire chiefs agreed that an additional administrative person at each fire house would greatly assist in their operations. Estimated costs, including all benefits, for all five positions would be \$270,910.
- The fire chiefs would also like to see some type of pay per call provided to each member that responded to an emergency. It was recommended that this pay per call be set at \$12 per call. The remaining \$129,090 would be used to cover these costs.
- The fire chiefs also discussed that there were needs regarding personal protective equipment. It was requested that the Commissioners consider assisting with these needs. It was requested that the county be prepared to expend \$50,000 per department (\$250,000) to match other funding sources (grants, donations, Town of Sylva) to go towards the purchases of personal protective equipment. This would be an allocation from the county's fund balance.

This may be a continuing conversation, he thought they should initially look at this as a one-time expense and see how the fire departments came back and submitted their requests.

Chairman McMahan stated that the state grant cycle opened in February and announced the award in May. Federal grants were open in the spring and announced the grants from FEMA in September. A lot of the departments applied for the federal FEMA grant 15 years ago and were awarded for new equipment. The departments were able to buy new equipment at the same time, but it all expired at the same time.

Most departments were coming up on the 15 years for replacement. If they could get them on a grant again and cost share, then it made it much more achievable. If the departments could buy together in bulk, it could mean they would get a better price. There was a lot of discussion about how to approach this to provide the protective equipment and meet the requirements in a cost effective way to benefit everyone. Also, the three items discussed were unanimous by all five departments.

Commissioner Jones asked if the \$250,000 had been set aside for matching grants?

Mr. Adams stated that because of the timing, it would take some time for the fire departments to find out what other funding sources were available. All of the fire chiefs agreed, if there were other funding sources, they would attempt to go with them. At that point, instead of setting the funds aside, the county did have a good fund balance and the Board could go ahead and set this as something they intended to do. When the fire departments were in a place to come make their requests, it would then just be a fund balance allocation.

Commissioner Woody stated that she was so pleased they approached it in this way by getting the fire departments together. Did they get a sense that the fire chiefs felt this was approached in a fair way? Did they feel it was right for Cullowhee to have full-time?

Chairman McMahan stated that he did not hear any negative expressions about Cullowhee moving to become a full-time staffed department, nor had he heard those expressions from any of the individuals privately. He went as far to say to the group that Cullowhee had spent quite a bit of time coming up with a plan, presented the plan to the county and was ready to move forward.

If any point in the future any of the other departments felt the same, then the opportunity and the door was open for them to make a presentation as well. They all recognized that they all relied on each other for help through mutual aid agreements. None of them could do what they did without the help of the others.

Mr. Adams stated that this item would be addressed in the recommended budget.

Chairman McMahan stated that in the same line of thought, he requested staff to look at the rescue squads as he thought they suffered from some of the same issues that the fire departments suffered from as far as recruitment and retention. There may be some opportunities to assist them in some way.

*Informational item.*