

WORKSHOP

EMS Staffing and Funding

Dixie County School Board Meeting Room

February 18, 2021 – 2:00 PM

While adhering to the following State of Florida Executive Orders: 20-51 Establishing Response Protocol, 20-52 declaring a Public Health Emergency, 20-69 regarding Local Government Public Meetings and also Dixie County Emergency Declaration 2020-27. The Board met and had limited access by staff to the meeting room while broadcasting the meeting via audio to the public who were provided other accommodations outside of the meeting room. The public could also participate via conference call at 1(917)900-1022 and enter code 32628.

COMMISSIONERS

Jody Stephenson
Mark Hatch, Chairman
W. C. Mills
James Valentine
Jamie Storey, Vice Chairman

STAFF

Duane Cannon, County Manager
Cheyenne Hutchinson, Asst. to the County Manager/Grant Coordinator
Michael Osteen, County Attorney
Barbie Higginbotham, Clerk of Court
Jacki Johnson, Chief Financial Officer
Della Rhymes, Asst. Chief Deputy Clerk

CALL TO ORDER

The workshop was called to order at 2:00 PM by Chairman Hatch.

INVOCATION AND PLEDGE

The invocation was led by Commissioner Storey and the Pledge to the American Flag was led by Commissioner Mills.

Commissioner Hatch addressed County Manager Duane Cannon and Director of Emergency Services Darian Brown and opened the floor up to either of them for discussion.

Director of Emergency Services Darian Brown appeared before the Board and said that about 40 years ago there was EMS service and a volunteer fire station which was called Dixie County EMS. He said that today the Emergency Department Services transfer 4,000 calls; they travel 56 miles one way to transport people to the hospital; they handle 1,500 fire response and 60 to 80 residential structure fires per year. He said that his staff covers Fire, EMS, 911 and Emergency Management also handles billing and maintenance. He said they cover 8 stations, 11 or 12 fire apparatus, 5 pumpers and 5 brush trucks, 2 tankers, and 7 ambulances which travel 100,000 plus miles per year. He said that to fully equip a man it costs \$8,000 to \$9,000.00 and every single fire fighter needs to be equipped. He said this must be replaced every 10 years to regardless of use. He said the ambulances must be replaced 1 per year to keep up. He recognized several past and present staff that was present. He stated that the EMT Certification process takes three and 1/2 months depending on the school they attend. He stated that Fire School Certification requires 500 plus hours or 12 weeks from 8:00 to 5:00 Monday through Friday. He stated that Paramedic Certification is a year long course and you must be a Certified EMT before attending. He said that in order to staff the ambulances you must have an EMT and Paramedic to transport. He said all the crews are overwhelmed with calls. He discussed the Staff Report which shows the fire response for working and non-working fires performance level at 11 and 12 percent for 2010 and 2011. He said they added the Jena fire station and the levels increased slightly. He said in 2012 they got the Safer Grant and hired 15 fire fighters. He informed the Board that you must meet the requirements of the report 80 percent of the time and Dixie was at 11 percent before they hired more staff in 2012. After they hired more staff in 2012 the level of performance went up to 86 percent. Then in 2014 they had to lay off nine staff members. He said they have been able to maintain what they have. He said the EMS Budget has \$150,000.00 to replace equipment. He said they must re-chassis an ambulance every year from Texas. He said there are now new requirements on stretchers and there is no more money for this. He said their reserves are used up. Operating supplies and phones cut back. The Fire budget not good for equipment replacement. The fire trucks are 2002 models and there is no money to replace the trucks. He stated that due to prior Budget issues they cannot afford \$324,000.00 for a new fire truck. He said it cost \$1,000.00 for spare air bottles and there is no apparatus replacement plan for the fire trucks at this time. He said the staff are paid and they try to take care of them as well as they can. He said the employees fluctuate between 40 part time and full-time staff. He said at one time they had 60 volunteers. He stated that the State has increased the training hours needed from 40 to 320 for volunteer fire fighters. He has taught 9 to 12 training classes, unfortunately it takes more than one person to hold the class. He said people have jobs and lives and there is not enough interest to hold a class. He said multiple people are needed for the class because they work as a team and as a group it takes 18 to 24 people to work a fire. He said they have 3 people each day on duty and 4 Administrative Supervisors that are also fire fighters. There are 7 to 9 trained active volunteers for the whole county and if they are not available then there is 3 fire fighters on duty and Supervisors to help after hours if they are not out of town then the Fire Engine that has 2 fire fighter of the 4 that is required is now down to one man. He said the staff makes decent money and they offer incentives and buy boots and uniforms for them. He said they can't do more for staff due to funding and can't fill empty positions. He said when a Certification takes a two-year commitment people will work where they can advance and move forward. High school graduates may get an EMT Certification, but eventually they want to move up. Mr. Keen has been with Gainesville for 12 years and is a Lieutenant and make more than me as the Director. These people want a return on their investment. We need to attract people and keep them here. He said he knows money is not everything. He said they have kept this department together because they have a good reputation throughout Florida. He said that won't keep people forever, other things are needed. There is not a lot of opportunity for advancement. Mr. Pendarvis is leaving for better pay and to advance his career. He said he has someone in mind to fill this position and will talk more tonight at the Board

meeting. Then someone else can advance. Other departments don't transport 4,000 calls per year or put 56 miles one way on an ambulance. He said people can go elsewhere and work less and earn more money. He said they are short staffed and cannot even rotate people for proper staffing requirements. He said there are more issues than just the pay rate. He said they can't afford to upgrade equipment. He said the fire assessment is around \$500,000 per year. Most of his staff must be paid out of the EMS Budget. He said they bought 11 trucks fully equipped trucks and spent 1.6 million dollars. He said it now cost \$340,000.00 for one truck with no equipment. A new ambulance is \$220,000.00 without the \$40,000.00 stretcher. He said they can't afford to buy new ones.

He said they can't keep up with repairs and maintenance budget and may not be able to re chassis an ambulance next year. He said when they have a possible Hurricane threat, they may not have enough people to staff the office. He said it is hard to recruit people to work for Dixie County when they may have to lay them off in the future.

He said the lights quit working on the Firetruck that was responding to a call today and one truck was in the shop. He said there are 3 times as many people applying for 911 addresses than last year. He said more people are moving into the area which means the call load will increase. He said they are hoping for an ER facility to be built in Fanning Springs, Florida because that would help us.

He informed the Board that some of the equipment is from 1998 and that Mr. Fulford was on a call recently and the Extraction equipment would not work. He said thankfully they were able to get the person out of the vehicle by other means.

Commissioner Stephenson asked when the equipment was last serviced. He said it needs to have regular maintenance.

Director Brown replied every year and at the meetings. He said the equipment is 30 years old and wore out. He said they purchased a cutter and a spreader for \$30,000.00 two years ago.

Commissioner Stephenson said that maintenance affects the equipment no matter how new or old.

Director Brown stated that each year they service every apparatus, the SCBA, the extrication equipment and test hoses and appliance for the hoses. He said the service crews assigned to stations also check everything on a regular basis.

Director Brown said there is no volunteer crew in Suwannee, although two live at Yellow Jacket, or Horseshoe or Jena. There are two that live in Old Town and three live in the First District. He said they are so busy and short staffed and don't have enough people to run calls and do servicing and repairs on equipment. They do have a maintenance schedule and they do the best they can.

Commissioner Hatch asked if the faulty extraction equipment belonged to the Town of Cross City.

Director Brown replied yes. They have 3 pieces of equipment and 9 people, 8 of which are his full-time staff.

Commissioner Hatch asked if that equipment is checked.

Director Brown replied yes, they check it as often as possible. He said the Town of Cross City Fire staff is made up from the County Fire staff.

Commissioner Hatch said to let the Town of Cross City know about their equipment failure.

Director Brown said he felt the Board needs to understand their issues.

Commissioner Stephenson asked what the Board can do to help.

Director Brown said they need encouragement from the Board and to know that they are supportive of staff and their efforts. He said they need to come up with a plan to get some new equipment every few

years. He said they don't see any forward progress. He said they are cutting the budget here and there to keep what they have. He said the assessment increase will help with the budget, but there should be a plan for future increases and for it not to stay the same. He said that may help with paying more to keep staff. He said it's hard to compete when other counties offer people \$7,000.00 to \$8,000.00 more to work elsewhere.

Commissioner Stephenson suggested they advertise for new people to fill upcoming positions instead of in-house staff moving up.

Director Brown said they have several vacancies now and more upcoming vacancies. He said they can't match the pay scale other counties are paying for that position. He said the in-house staff need to advance because they have chosen to stay here and make a career.

He said another staff member is leaving March 31, 2021. He said he has hired one new person this week and hopefully two people will start next week. One candidate is a Firefighter, EMT and soon to be Paramedic. He said he can fill some positions and advertise for others.

Commissioner Stephenson said if you advertise you may get more qualified people with fresh ideas.

Director Brown said he will consider the suggestion. He said they have a person who has presented some ideas and they can address that tonight at the Board meeting.

Commissioner Hatch said he remembers the funeral home hearse doubling as an ambulance, so the county has progressed through the years. He said the Board is proactive with the EMS and Fire departments. He said that they purchased a COVID ambulance and with the re-chassis of the Dodge for an ambulance.

Commissioner Hatch said the Tax Increase was on the Ballot to be voted on in the past which should not have been done. The \$180.00 assessment has been in place for many years. He said the Penny Sales Tax goes in the General Fund and has kept the tax base low. He said it may be possible to use the penny tax for jail maintenance.

Commissioner Hatch said he felt that they do provide good service He said 22 people have left since 2018 for different reasons per Director Brown's records. He said he thought they left for reasons other than money maybe it is older equipment. He said we are smaller and cannot compete with larger counties like Alachua and Columbia. He said even Gilchrist County has a larger Budget than we do. He said the Board tries to update the equipment as they can. He said the assessment has not been changed and they are working on changing that now.

He said we have great employees and we want them to have good equipment even some of the Department Heads are driving newer trucks.

However, we must be cautious on giving raises and what we do and how we do things.

He said a lot of money flows through this Department. He said he doesn't see how it will be possible to raise the pay to compare with Gainesville.

He said when Director Brown spoke to him previously it was not clear if the problem is morale, you act like the problem is not the pay or that's the way he understood the conversation.

We need to figure out what is going on and what is the problem.

He said he felt the equipment was great and the employees are great.

Director Brown said he did not say this was not about money. He said his department needs funding and Dixie County is the lowest paid county around. He said he knows they can't compete with larger counties, but they need to be comparable to Suwannee, Levy and Gilchrist County. He said to the Board

if they think he is the problem to let him know now. He said they are doing the best they can. He said he doesn't want to be the problem and if staff has a problem with him to let him know.

Commissioner Hatch said I don't think you should call anyone out. Actions speak louder than words. He said we have a hiring freeze in place, and you have an employee who was making \$15.00 and you raised them to \$22.00 per hour. He asked why didn't he take some of this raise and give it to other people. He asked him to clarify this.

Director Brown replied this employee was previously working a shift schedule at a lower rate plus getting a lot of overtime. He was severely injured in 2015 and was no longer able to function full time in the field. He took an office job last year on light duty and works only 40 hours a week and I increased the hourly pay for him to make his salary and not take a \$22,000.00 pay cut. He still took a \$5,000.00 pay cut by taking on this position. The change in work hours is the reason for the pay rate increase. The shift hours are 2,080 hours plus 840 overtime hours working on a truck.

Commissioner Hatch asked if the job was the same.

Director Brown replied no the job was not the same.

Commissioner Hatch said you were keeping his salary the same with a different job description.

Director Brown said when the position changes from the road to that office position the hourly rate changes due to the hours changing.

Commissioner Hatch said the workload, job description, working weekends, night shift and day shift changes.

Director Brown said staff are salaried in the office except for the Billing Department. He said that office staff work calls in the field and they work extra hours too.

Commissioner Hatch said that was a large pay raise especially now. He said he thought the Board voted not to do anything until the Budget is straightened out.

Director Brown said that was not a pay raise.

Commissioner Hatch said yes it was from \$15.40 up to \$22.00.

Mr. Jason Lemmerman spoke to the Board and said he does not get any overtime. He said he use to make \$60,000.00 working on the road because of the overtime. He said he took a \$9,000.00 pay cut and does the jobs of three people now. He said he had to take the position due to being injured on the job.

Ms. Allison Stephens spoke to the Board and said Mr. Lemmerman was severely injured serving this community.

Commissioner Hatch said they understand that and appreciate that, but that is not what is being discussed. We are discussing the pay per hour.

Mr. Lemmerman said he is doing the job of one person who got overtime in the past plus he is taking on the jobs of two people who are leaving and he helps with billing. He said he is doing the jobs of three people with no overtime.

Commissioner Stephenson said the \$22.00 pay rate is irrelevant because he gets paid salary and doesn't get paid overtime.

Director Brown added that this position was already a budgeted position.

Commissioner Hatch said the Board was asked to look at money, so they did the research.

He said the decision should have been explained better ad up front. He said that was a significant change.

Director Brown said this process was talked about with previous county manager and he approved this.

Commissioner Hatch said that nothing was signed, therefore he did not approve.
Director Brown said nothing was signed.

Commissioner Storey said staff is working overtime and making more money. He stepped down to a salary position. He said we are short-handed, and he is taking on two or three people's jobs. He was making \$60,000.00 and is now salary at \$40,000.00.

Commissioner Hatch said we are looking for money and so what part of that is not understandable. He said his job is to do his research and ask questions. He said if it had been explained to him it would not have been brought up. He said they are angry at him because he is asking questions. He said the job description is not the same and the job has been empty since 2018 at \$14.50 per hour. He said we need to look out for everyone not just a select few.

Commissioner Mills said he understands the man is doing several jobs for less money than he was making. He said he understand that it is not just one job.
Commissioner Storey said he was not mad at Commissioner Hatch.
Commissioner Hatch asked the Board members if any of them knew about this.

Mr. Jimmy Golden spoke to the Board and said that many people have several different certifications. He said that Director Brown has done a lot for them, he has trained and provided for future growth. He said they have staff certified as Inspectors and Investigators. He said they must provide service for everyone who may travel through Dixie County not just the residents. He said the population of Dixie County is 25,000.

Commissioner Mills said they started this assessment study over a year ago, why is it still going on. Where is the study, when will it be finished? He said the Board must do what's right whether they get re-elected or not. He said for too many years people have been worrying about getting re-elected. He said the Board must unite and do what's right for the people and the county. He said if the people want him to be their Commissioner again, he will do it. He said when the study comes in, he will vote for what's needed. He said some of this stuff should not be on the Ballot. He said the people have elected the Board members to make the decision and do right for the people not what's going to get them elected again.

Commissioner Hatch asked if everyone agrees with Commissioner Mills about doing your job and not worry about getting reelected.
Commissioner Stephenson, Commissioner Valentine and Commissioner Storey all said yes.

Director Brown said he thinks there was some discussion and confusion with putting the assessment on the Ballot.
Commissioner Stephenson said when the funding ran out it would be brought to a vote.

Commissioner Storey said he appreciates everyone on the EMS and Fire staff. He said that they have taken care of his family before. He said that Director Brown is not the problem.

Ms. Bambi Roberson spoke to the Board and said she works here, was raised here and graduated from here. She said she serve the community by working with the Sheriff Department and the EMS Department. She said they need the proper equipment to work with. She said that one bullet proof vest is one size fits all and does not fit some of the smaller staff properly. She said she purchased her own vest

for proper fit and performance. She said between her two jobs she works 100 plus hours. She said money for new equipment is needed for staff safety. She said they must share equipment with each other. She requested the Board look for some money. She said they are losing staff due to lack of money. She said she took a job with the Sheriff Department for more money.

Commissioner Storey said he can see the county growing due to the increase in his own private business of putting in water wells. He said the county still trying to operate on what they did 25 years ago. He said they need to be able to do their job correctly and they need to keep staff from leaving.

Ms. Mandy Lemmerman spoke to the Board and said she started with EMS after graduating high school. She said she was a Volunteer Firefighter then an EMT and after 13 years she is now a Lieutenant. She said the moral is high with Chief Brown. She said she had a job offer from Columbia County but chose to stay here. She thanked Commissioner Mills and said she hopes the Board will support them. She said she wants to stay here and work here and that the staff love Chief Brown. She said even though they are a smaller agency that they still provide many services that bigger crews do not. She thanked the Board for the assessment. She added that Mr. Jimmy Golden does fire inspections for three counties.

Commissioner Mills said the Board feels the same. He said they are all committed and frustrated that they could not have already done something.

Mr. Jimmy Golden spoke to the Board and said we live, work and play in Dixie County. He said we are familiar with the area, the backroads and the residents.

Mr. Chuck Elton spoke to the Board and suggested since the Ems information has been turned in already, maybe it would be easier on the taxpayers to deal with one increase this year and other one next year. Commissioner Hatch said the Board chose to do this all at one time. He said they have an Inter-local agreement with Taylor County to service Jena. He said the Board voted not to shut this down. He said the Board is proactive and they will find the money. He said we are all quick tempered, but we want to make good decisions and do what is feasible for the county. He said the employee raise was not explained to him very good before.

Mr. Jason Lemmerman spoke to the Board and said he wanted to comment about hiring people to fill positions. He said many people want to work a career in one place. He said he has been here 20 years. He said that some people would leave due to bringing people from outside to be promoted. Commissioner Stephenson said they need to advertise and get the most qualified person for the job and move away from favoritism if the person is not qualified.

Mr. Lemmerman added that they need to promote from within. Commissioner Stephenson said they should advertise and see if they can get better qualified people for the job.

Commissioner Hatch asked what the difference is and did the \$5,000.00 change the morale. Mr. Lemmerman replied my situation was my family. He said no one else wanted the job and the last person was paid \$14.50 plus overtime. He said he wanted to clarify the comment of favoritism and said that Director Brown has stayed out of the promotion process in the past and took advice from outside recommendations.

Commissioner Hatch asked why the morale is better.
Mr. Lemmerman replied there is a level playing field.
Mr. Golden said morale is what holds them together.

Mr. Corky Young spoke to the Board and said he started working here 2 years ago after being a Chief for 25 years. He said he will finish FRS get in the Drop program and retire. He said morale is not the problem. He said they have 60 percent staff now. He said you don't pay enough money. He said he makes \$2.00 less than others and works more hours to make \$40,000.00. He said other counties you can work less hours to get \$40,000.00. He said you have good staff and you need to keep them here.

Mr. Duane Zeller spoke to the Board and said the pay is the issue not the morale.
Commissioner Hatch said we are working on the pay.

Commissioner Valentine said he is proud of everyone and will do all that he can to help.
Mr. Zeller said he is a volunteer and that Director Brown is a good man.
Commissioner Storey said so you don't even get paid.

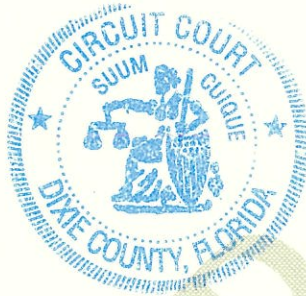
Mr. Zeller said he is a volunteer. He said the men and women who work deserve more money. He said it's a shame for the time lost to that vote and you lost some good people too.

PUBLIC COMMENTS AND CONCERNS

There were no comments or concerns expressed from the public at this time.

ADJOURN

Commissioner Mills made the motion to adjourn the workshop at 3:22 PM. Commissioner Stephenson seconded. Board approved.




BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
DIXIE COUNTY, FLORIDA

ATTEST:



Mark Hatch, Chairman


Barbie Higginbotham, Clerk-Auditor

PLEASE BE ADVISED that if a person decided to appeal any decision made by the Board with respect to any matter considered at such meeting or hearings, he/ she will need a record of the proceedings, and for such purpose, he/ she will need to ensure that a verbatim record of the proceedings is made, which record includes the testimony and evidence upon which the appeal is to be based.

“Persons with disabilities requesting reasonable accommodations to participate in this proceeding should contact (352) 486-4931 (Voice & TDD) or via Florida Relay Service at (800) 955-8771.”

The Board meets the first Thursday of each month at 10:00 AM and the third Thursday of each month at 6:00 PM. Individuals that would like to be placed on the agenda should call Barbie Higginbotham, Clerk of Court, by 4:00 PM on the Friday Preceding the Board meeting, at (352) 498-1200.