



RURAL FIRE PROTECTION IMPROVEMENT TASK FORCE

REPORT TO THE LEE COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

February 1, 2006

Members:

Bob Brown – Commissioner
Scott Holt – Lee County Volunteer Fire Chief
Bob Dalrymple – Lee County Citizen
Roger King – Lee County Business/Industry Rep.
Wes Lail – Office of State Fire Marshal
David Smitherman – County Manager
Alvin Ward – Assistant Fire Chief, Town of Chapel Hill

I. Background

Over the course of the past several years the Lee County Commissioners have become more distinctly aware of the challenges facing the volunteer fire service. The annual budget process routinely provides new insight on the daily requirements of operating a volunteer department. Recently, the process has brought about requests for paid staff to assist in meeting these demands. To address these requests, the Commissioners have granted limited paid staff positions. The Board also authorized the hiring of a Fire Marshal to in part act as the County's liaison with the volunteer departments.

In an effort to accurately ascertain the comprehensive fire service needs of the county, the Commissioners contracted with a third-party consultant to provide recommendations to best serve the fire service and tax payers for the near and long-term future. Specifically, the consultant was charged with reviewing the current status of the county's fire departments and determines whether there is a need for changes in resource needs (i.e. career staffing) and/or uses, or alternative service delivery methods that may better serve the citizenry and improve efficiency and performance. Unfortunately, the conclusions of this study were deemed insufficient and unclear. Therefore, the study has not been used as more than a reference document to date.

As a second attempt at determining the best methods for administering rural fire services, the Board decided to elicit the help of an ad hoc committee of citizens and experts. The Rural Fire Protection Improvement Task Force was created by resolution of the Lee County Board of Commissioners on November 21, 2005. The purpose of the task force was to study and make recommendations on the following matters:

1. *Ensure maximum resource utilization efficiency countywide*
2. *Consider implementation of a countywide fire tax rate*
3. *Determine methods to improve ISO ratings countywide*
4. *Consider merits of countywide first responder service*
5. *Consider alternatives for reducing volunteer departments' administrative burden*

The task force did hold four meetings to determine the best recommendations for each of the above issues. It elicited the assistance of fire service professionals, local government attorneys and State Fire Marshal officials. The conclusions of the task force are contained herewith. While all members may not agree with the details of all conversations regarding the recommendations, the conclusions do represent the opinion of the group at large. It is the task force's opinion that the implementation of these recommendations will improve the provision of fire protection services for all Lee County citizens.

II. Organizational Context

Prior to analyzing any present day matters, it is important that the current structure of Lee County fire service be generally reviewed and understood. The

county is organized into nine fire service districts. Eight of these districts are serviced by volunteer fire departments situated within the county's political boundary (the other is serviced by a department in Moore County). Seven of these eight districts are organized under NC General Statute (NCGS) 69.25 as tax districts created by petition and vote of the citizens living in the service area. The other district (Carolina Trace) was established as a service district by resolution of the Board of Commissioners, pursuant to Article 16 of NCGS Chapter 153A. In both types of district the property tax is the primary source of revenue. Each of the tax districts are required to be governed by a Fire Protection District Commission as specified in NCGS 69-25.6. However, the task force can find no evidence that these commissions exist or have ever been effectively used to govern the proceeds of the special fire protection tax.

North Carolina law began to recognize the need for Counties to provide fire protection services in 1939 when it provided the ability to contract with municipalities for said service. In 1945, counties were permitted to establish departments of their own. The creation of tax and service districts was permitted in 1951 and 1973, respectively. In 1989, counties were charged with enforcing a statewide prevention code, thereby created the need to exercise its authority to hire a Fire Marshal, which was permitted in 1959.

The County of Lee has chosen to provide fire protection by contracting with incorporated volunteer departments. The agreement is similar to any other service contract; the contractor (volunteer department) agrees to provide certain services (fire protection) in exchange for a financial contribution. In the case of county fire service, this revenue pledge is satisfied by the levy of a tax within the contracted service area. The ability to tax is in no way granted or assumed by the incorporated fire department. Only the Board of County Commissioners has the authority to levy and collect the tax. The tax proceeds must be used for fire protection, but are not necessarily earmarked for the contracted party's use. Additionally, per NCGS 55A-45 (and the service contract), all assets purchased with the tax funds revert to County ownership or another organization providing such service upon dissolution of the corporation (volunteer department).

Currently, most fire departments are solely staffed by its volunteer membership. However, in five (5) departments, full and/or part-time paid staff is utilized. The County has a Fire Marshal position budgeted, but not currently filled. The position was authorized in July 2004, but has only had an incumbent for approximately six months. It was the County's intent that the Fire Marshal be a liaison to the volunteer departments and also be responsible for all code enforcement and inspection activities. All Fire Marshal activities are housed in the County's Emergency Services Department and coordinated through its Director.

III. Matters of Consideration

In its enabling resolution, the Board of Commissioners charged the task force with providing recommendations on the previously listed five matters. The task

force deliberated each and provides recommendations below for the Commissioners' consideration. Please note that several recommendations contained were not specifically requested in the resolution, but are viewed as critical to the implementation of the five original objectives. It is the task force's belief that none of the five areas of consideration can be adequately implemented without properly empowered and instructed staff. Therefore, this report contains recommendations as to the proper role of the Fire Marshal and the organizational structure of Lee County fire services.

IV. Task Force Recommendations

A. Organizational Structure

Upon initial review of the Board of Commissioners charge for the task force, it was apparent that prior to any formal deliberation the committee should consider and recommend an organizational structure for the delivery of fire protection services. The task force reviewed several management structures in place throughout North Carolina and considered improvement to that of Lee County. The primary objective was to ensure that the Fire Marshal Office is responsive to the needs of the volunteer departments. Also important was to ensure that the Commissioners have in place a formal advisory board to provide oversight and recommendations on fire service matters. Finally, the task force recommends a more formal role for the current Fire Chief's Association in the County's operations. All of these recommendations are represented in the organization chart included toward the end of this report as Exhibit A.

1. Fire Marshal

Without question, the common denominator in all of the task force's discussion was the need for the County to employ a high-quality individual as its Fire Marshal. The County has the unique opportunity to hire a person to fit its specific needs and charge them with the implementation of the task force's recommendations since the position currently has no incumbent. The Fire Marshal's importance to the County should also be reconsidered. The current structure requires that this position report to the Director of Emergency Services. The task force recommends that the Fire Marshall report to the County Manager and be made a Department Head level position.

The Fire Marshal should be largely focused on determining the needs of the individual fire departments and representing these needs to the Fire Advisory Board and the County Manager. He/She would be responsible for reviewing, validating and recommending the annual fire department budgets on the County's behalf. Finally, the Fire Marshall should coordinate fire prevention, code enforcement and training activities countywide. The task force further recommends that the County authorize the hiring of a full-time fire inspector. The responsibilities of

the Fire Marshal are too great to add daily inspections activity to an already full agenda. The sheer number of annual inspections required, not to mention new construction plan reviews, make it necessary and justified that a full-time inspector be employed.

2. Fire Advisory Board

The task force recommends the creation and appointment of an advisory board to represent the Board of Commissioners and make recommendations on all fire related matters. Specifically, the fire advisory board would be charged with reviewing and recommending the annual county fire department budgets and coordinating with the Fire Marshal on countywide matters. The board should be comprised of seven members with the following representation: two (2) members of local fire departments/boards of directors (to be nominated by the Fire Chiefs' Council and the Firefighters Association), two (2) members representing business/industry, two (2) members of the general public and one (1) member of the Board of County Commissioners. This board would also coordinate activities and receive expert advise from the below recommended Chiefs Council.

3. Chiefs Council

While the fire advisory board is largely concerned with the annual budget process, the formation of a Fire Chiefs Council is recommended to provide expertise on operational issues. This group would be a resource to the Fire Marshal, volunteer fire departments and fire advisory board on coordinating fire service operations and seeking efficiencies in its provision. The Council should be comprised of the eight Chiefs from the in-county fire departments. The Fire Marshal should act as the primary support and coordinator of the Council's activities. It is recommended that the existing Fire Chiefs' Association be utilized in this role and formally integrated into the County's management structure.

4. Deputy Fire Marshal & Emergency Response Technicians

The previously mentioned organizational chart (Exhibit 1) list Emergency Response Technicians (ERTs) and a Deputy Fire Marshal as future needs for the Lee County fire service. Recognizing the growing demands of the County, the Commissioners should recognize that there may become a time when another operational level position may be required in the Fire Marshal's Office. Additionally, as the demand for paid staff increases, the County may wish to deploy field technicians to assist in volunteer department response and any other needs as dictated by fire department workload demands. The ERTs would be responsible for assisting with code enforcement, fire investigations, mobilizing apparatus, fire suppression, equipment checks/testing, pre-incident surveys and other tasks deemed helpful to the volunteer departments upon request of the fires chiefs in the respective districts. ERTs would

be assigned to one or more fire districts and coordinates all activities with the respective Fire Chief and the Fire Marshal. They would be County employees and report directly to the Fire Marshal.

This change in service may be characterized as a significant departure from the current staffing structure; the task force advises that this structure be put in place after the hiring of the Fire Marshal and detailed discussion with the Fire Advisory Board and the Chiefs Council. However, it is the task force's opinion that current volunteer department paid staff members could be integrated into this role with little or no additional expense to the taxpayers.

B. Ensure Maximum Resource Utilization Efficiency County-Wide

County fire services should be viewed as an extension of county government. The Board of Commissioners needs assurance that all resources dedicated to fire protection are utilized efficiently and redundancy of service eliminated where practical. The Fire Marshal should be the County's agent in coordinating efforts aimed at resource utilization efficiency. He/She should work closely with the fire departments via the Chiefs Council to determine where efficiencies may exist. However, the task force recognizes that all fire service districts have unique requirements that may preclude the County from one-size fits all equipment standardization.

The County should not necessarily mandate coordinated activities, but should seek to coordinate individual fire department efforts where practical. Purchases of equipment and apparatus should be accomplished through coordinated means with an effort made toward bulk purchasing. For cost and cross-training purposes, equipment type/sizes should be standardized where possible. Efforts toward fire prevention activities and firefighter training should be centralized. Placement of future fire stations should be reviewed for best countywide response. The Chiefs Council should be charged with seeking efficiencies in the fire service as part of their primary mission.

Communications infrastructure and management should be reviewed and analyzed to determine if alternate methods could provide better service to fire personnel. The task force (and the County) has repeatedly heard concerns regarding the level and quality of communications provided to the fire service. The task force recommends that the Board of Commissioners review its contractual relationship with the City of Sanford for this service. Upon hiring a Fire Marshal, the County should embark on a comprehensive assessment of fire service communication needs and the ability of the City of Sanford to provide such.

C. Consider Implementation of a Countywide Fire Tax Rate

The principle of having one tax rate for fire services throughout the county is aimed at equity of cost to each taxpayer. Currently, fire tax rates range from

\$.04 to \$.085 per \$100 of valuation. The committee was charged with determining if a single rate can be instituted countywide. After exhaustive research of the General Statutes, conversation with local government attorneys, and discussion with other County governments, it is the task force's belief that such is a viable option for Lee County.

Generally, the Board should seek to create a countywide service district that encompasses all unincorporated areas and levy a single tax. The service district may be created by resolution of the Board after holding the requisite public hearing and certifying that certain General Statute specified criteria have been met. The new service district would be superimposed on the current districts, excluding the Moore County area, the City of Sanford and the Town of Broadway. The current tax/service districts would remain intact for service purposes, but no tax would be levied.

If petitioned to do so, the Commissioners may include the municipalities in the new Lee County Fire Protection Service District. It is doubtful that the City of Sanford would see advantage to such as that they have their own department and stations. However, the Town of Broadway may find this an attractive alternative since they do not operate a municipal department and instead contract fire services with the Cape Fear Fire Department.

To support current fire service funding levels a tax rate of \$.065 would be necessary. The fire advisory board would annually recommend the after review of the individual departmental requests. A table that illustrates the funding requirements of the fire departments and the tax rate history of each district is provided below as reference.

Fire District	FY 2003-2004		FY 2004-2005		FY 2005-2006	
	Budget	Rate	Budget	Rate	Budget	Rate
Cameron	37,225	0.071	41,411	0.068	41,902	0.068
Cape Fear	133,732	0.068	146,972	0.066	160,045	0.066
Carolina Trace	90,470	0.037	105,896	0.037	117,125	0.040
Deep River	103,600	0.076	131,795	0.076	137,553	0.082
Lemon Springs	145,279	0.070	163,809	0.072	167,366	0.072
Northview	293,675	0.070	312,952	0.077	318,281	0.060
Northwest Pocket	94,600	0.084	109,717	0.079	115,441	0.085
Tramway	136,360	0.038	166,397	0.042	193,787	0.049
West Sanford	50,348	0.088	54,603	0.082	57,366	0.082
District-wide	1,085,289	0.062	1,233,552	0.068	1,308,866	0.065

D. Determine Methods to Improve ISO Ratings Countywide

Traditionally, the Insurance Service Office (ISO) rating is the standard by which fire departments graded for insurance purposes. The rating system is a cumbersome criterion that represents the fire department's ability to respond to an incident. Each department receives a rating of one to ten, with one being the best, for a fire protection area. The rating is used to determine property insurance premiums. The lower the rating, the bigger discount a homeowner receives on their annual premium.

Lee County fire departments have ratings from five to nine. A fire department that receives a Class 9 rating will help property owners in their service area receive at least a 25 percent reduction in their insurance premium. If a department achieves a rating of Class 6, an additional 25 percent may be saved. Any rating lower than a six can significantly help business and industry with their property insurance premiums. The task force was charged with determining methods to ensure that every department is able to achieve the lowest rating practical for their district. For example, it's not practical or necessary for all departments to achieve a Class 5 rating; the cost of doing such would outweigh the benefit to business and industry.

Because of the unique characteristics of each fire district, the task force does not feel it is proper to set a uniform insurance rating standard for the county. There may be districts that will never have the need to obtain a Class 5 rating because of the relative lack of business and industry in their protection area.

After deciding that a uniform rating was not reasonable to require, the task force considered implementing some other standard by which all departments would be judged. However, the committee did agree that the expertise to establish such a standard did not exist with the committee. Instead, the Fire Marshal should work with each department to assess its current insurance rating and determine on a departmental level what is necessary to improve. The Fire Marshall should be charged with becoming the county's expert on insurance ratings and be capable of providing thorough assessment of each department. Working with the advisory board and the individual departments, he/she should focus priority on maintaining the current ratings and seek improvement where reasonable possible.

E. Consider Merits of Countywide First Responder Service

The growing trend in emergency services is that fire departments act as primary medical responders in all calls for service. These EMS services have been provided by fire departments throughout the state and country since the 1970's. Being that fire stations are strategically located throughout the county, a much faster response may be achieved for medical emergency versus dispatch from a single central location as currently provided. The

overwhelming majority of all Lee County citizens live within 5 miles of a fire station.

There are distinct advantages to implementing a medical first responder service countywide. Every minute that a patient goes without CPR and early defibrillation the chances of survival decrease seven to ten percent. Currently, most Lee County fire departments have the equipment necessary to begin said service. If they don't, a department may be outfitted with the necessary equipment for approximately \$5,000. However, to embark upon this dramatic change of service requires an exhaustive study to determine resources necessary and the impact on current conditions. Furthermore, the County should review its relationship with Central Carolina Hospital for emergency medical services to ensure the service would not cause an overlap of resources currently available.

It is important to note that this service could cause a negative affect on fire personnel by increasing call volume and requiring additional department resources. The task force believes that a decision such as requires research and expertise beyond that which this group is able to perform. Regardless, the task force recommends that the Board of Commissioners study the matter further.

F. Alternatives for Reducing Volunteer Departments' Administrative Burden

The Board of Commissioners has repeatedly heard from many volunteer fire departments that the administrative responsibilities that come with operating a fire department are overwhelming and require the dedication of paid staff. The Board's skepticism of allowing paid staff in the volunteer departments is a significant reason this task force was created.

The daily responsibilities of a volunteer department include, but are not limited to emergency response readiness, equipment checks, business inspections, fire investigations, pre-incident surveys, equipment maintenance, hydrant and hose maintenance.

The task force did look at possible ways to assist the Volunteer Fire Departments when it considered organizational structures for administering fire services. Under the recommended structure, Emergency Response Technicians (ERTs) could be employed and placed in the field to support fire departments in their daily activities. They would be capable of assisting on emergency scenes and providing support with routine administrative matters deemed time consuming and tedious by the volunteers.

The previously discussed organizational scheme that deploys ERTs is largely viewed by the task force as the most effective manner of providing assistance to the volunteer departments. Additionally, by being employees of the County, the ERTs would receive an increased level of supervision and employment benefits (insurance, retirement, etc.) that is not capable of being provided by the volunteer departments. The deployment of County

employees for the benefit of the volunteer fire service should provide considerable assistance in lightening the daily burdens of operating a volunteer fire department. Additionally, it places the County Commissioners in a better position to more efficiently administer fire protection tax proceeds on the citizens' behalf.

Summary of Recommendations

A. Organizational Structure

1. Employ a high-quality individual as Fire Marshal
2. Restructure the Fire Marshal to a Department Head position reporting directly to the County Manager.
3. Authorize the hiring of a full-time fire inspector
4. Create a seven-member Fire Advisory Board to represent the Commissioners' on all fire service matters.
5. Formally integrate the existing Fire Chiefs' Association into the County's management structure to provide expertise and be a resource on operational matters and coordinate activities with the Fire Marshal.
6. Approve the task force's preferred management structure (Exhibit A), which espouses the field deployment of County staff to assist departments in daily operations and emergency call response. Upon hiring, the Fire Marshal should work with the Fire Chiefs' Association and the Fire Advisory Board to determine the roles and responsibilities for these County employees.

B. Ensure maximum resource utilization efficiency countywide

1. The County should not mandate coordinated activities, but instead seek to coordinate fire department efforts where practical via the Fire Marshal.
2. Placement of future fire stations should be reviewed for best countywide response and service needs.
3. Charge the Chiefs Council with seeking efficiencies in the fire service as part of their primary mission.
4. Instruct the Fire Marshal to conduct a comprehensive review of communications infrastructure and management with regard to the current contractual relationship with the City of Sanford.

C. Consider implementation of a countywide fire tax rate

1. Create a countywide service district that encompasses all eligible unincorporated areas and levy a single fire tax.

- D. Determine methods to improve ISO ratings countywide
 - 1. The task force does not feel it is proper to set a uniform insurance rating standard for the county
 - 2. The Fire Marshal should work with each department to assess its current insurance rating and determine on a departmental level what is necessary to maintain and improve their rating.

- E. Consider merits of countywide first responder service
 - 1. While many merits exist, the implementation of Emergency Medical First Responder service should be studied in detail by the Board of Commissioners or a separate task force.
 - 2. Review the County's current relationship with Central Carolina Hospital for Emergency Medical Services (EMS) to ensure maximum benefit for Lee County citizens.

- F. Consider alternatives for reducing volunteer departments' administrative burden
 - 1. The Fire Advisory Board should utilize the task force's preferred organizational structure to assist with the daily operating challenges of the volunteer departments.

Conclusion

The Lee County Rural Fire Protection Task Force is pleased to submit this report for the Board of Commissioners consideration. The task force believes that the implementation of the previously listed recommendations will enable the County to become a leader in rural fire protection services that other communities will seek to emulate. The full implementation of this plan will result in better service and more efficient utilization of collected fire tax funds. The task force recognizes the seemingly dramatic departure from status quo that these recommendations represent. However, we truly believe that such can be implemented without any disruption of service and that county fire services will benefit for decades to come for all citizens of Lee County.