

(May 6, 2021 Special Meeting)

**BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
MEETING MINUTES**

May 6, 2021

Governor Charley E. Johns Conference Center
1610 N. Temple Avenue
Starke, FL 32091

IN-PERSON AND TELEPHONIC
(Due to COVID-19)



Special Meeting
Meeting Time 6:30 P.M.

PRESENT: Commissioner District 3 – Chair Joseph C. Dougherty
Commissioner District 4 - Vice-Chair Danny Riddick
Commissioner District 1 – Carolyn Spooner
Commissioner District 2 – Kenny Thompson
Commissioner District 5 – Diane Andrews

STAFF MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE: County Manager/County Attorney Will Sexton; Executive Assistant Alyssa Winston; Clerk of Court & Comptroller Denny Thompson; Chief Deputy Clerk Rachel Rhoden; Finance Director Dana Lafollette; Fire Rescue Director Allen Parrish; Fire Division Chief Ben Carter; Emergency Medical Services Division Chief Dylan Rodgers; and Fire Marshal Chris Cooksey.

CALL TO ORDER: Chair Dougherty called the meeting to order at 6:30 P.M.

Chair Dougherty opened the meeting with a brief explanation on the transition of fire operations from volunteerism, to the Sheriff's Office, and back to the Board as Fire Rescue.

Chair Dougherty opened the floor to the Board for comments. No comments from the Board at this time.

1. FUNDING FOR FIRE RESCUE DEPARTMENT

Chair Dougherty recognized Will Sexton.

A. ACTION ITEM: AUTHORIZATION TO REENGAGE CHRISTOPHER B. ROE OF BRYANT MILLER OLIVE.

i. INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND INFORMATION – COUNTY ATTORNEY WILL SEXTON.

Mr. Sexton presented a [PowerPoint](#) presentation providing the following background information on fire operations in the County:

- Fiscal-Year 2018/2019, the County's fire operation was based on a volunteer only system with a budget of \$524,060.00. Mr. Sexton indicated that the volunteer service was no longer viable based on State certification requirements.

(May 6, 2021 Special Meeting)

- On May 16, 2019, the Board transferred fire operations to the Sheriff and contributed a minimum of \$1,236,941.00 to assist the Sheriff with funding fire operations.
- In August of 2020, the Sheriff provided the Board with two proposed budgets for Fiscal Year 2020/2021 fire operations:
 - Option 1 – 4 Full-time Firefighters (21 total employees); budget of \$1,615,573.49.
 - Option 2 – 6 Full-time Firefighters (28 total employees); budget of \$2,057,343.15.
- On August 20, 2020, the Bradford County Fire Department was transferred back to the Board of County Commissioners with an effective date of October 1, 2021. At that time, the Board created a combined Fire Rescue Department, appointed Allen Parrish as Fire Rescue Director and approved a combined Fire Rescue Budget for Fiscal Year 2020/2021 of \$5,975,147.00 (\$1,835,771.00 was for fire and the remainder was for EMS).
- Since the transfer of fire operations back to the Board, Fire Rescue Director Allen Parrish, Fire Chief Ben Carter and EMS Chief Dylan Rodgers have built a combined Fire Rescue Department. The following key points were noted:
 - Fire Rescue is staffed by paid professionals who are responding to an increased number of emergency calls.
 - Salaries are commensurate with those of other similarly situated small rural and neighboring counties that include Alachua, Baker, Clay and Union. Employees of said counties (with the exception of Union County) are members of the union.
 - The County's staffing model provides fewer firefighters on each response than is currently recommended to meet the minimum safety standards for motor vehicle accidents and structure fires.
 - The number of firefighters employed by the Fire Rescue Department is less than the proposed number of employees in the \$2,057,343.15 budget proposed by Sheriff's Smith for fiscal-year 2020/2021.
 - The Fire Rescue Department maintains a fleet of hand-me-down vehicles from either the Sheriff's Office or Public Works Department. The Fire Rescue Department has not purchased a new vehicle, other than an ambulance, with county funds.

ii. OPERATIONAL AND BUDGET PRESENTATION – FIRE RESCUE DIRECTOR ALLEN PARRISH.

Mr. Sexton recognized Fire Rescue Director Allen Parrish to make a brief presentation on current Fire Rescue operations. Mr. Parrish provided a summary overview of Fire Rescue operations as follows:

- Operations are 4% under budget.
- Responded to 4,141 emergency calls - a 60% increase in call volume.
- Fire Rescue is staffed as follows: Theresa and Sampson City both have one fire engine (staffed by two crew members) and one Advance Life Support (ALS) ambulance; the City of Starke has two ALS ambulances; and the City of Lawtey has one fire engine (staffed by two crew members) and one ALS ambulance.
- Due to increased calls, ambulances are operating during a 12-hour peak time in the Heilbronn Springs area.
- Fire Rescue is on track to respond to over 8,000 calls. Fire Rescue responds to 100% of all calls with an eleven minute average response time.

(May 6, 2021 Special Meeting)

At the conclusion of Mr. Parrish's comments, Mr. Sexton followed with a brief background concerning the current funding situation of the Fire Rescue Department:

- On September 8, 2020, following the transfer of the fire operations from the Sheriff back to the Board, then County Manager Rachel Rhoden made a presentation to the Board advising them that funds necessary to operate the Fire Rescue Department for Fiscal-Year 2020-2021, which were approximately \$1,311,707.00, would have to come from the Board's unassigned fund balance or reserves. Ms. Rhoden further advised the Board at that time that utilizing those reserves to fund the Fire Rescue Department was not sustainable and that moving forward the Board would need to discuss some other method to fund Fire Rescue.

Mr. Sexton advised that as he begins to develop the Fiscal-Year 2021-2022 budget, the Board will need to discuss reliable funding for Fire Rescue operations because they can no longer afford to continue funding from reserves. Mr. Sexton recommended that the Board reengage the services of Christopher B. Roe of Bryant Miller Olive (BMO) to assist in determining the best option for funding.

Mr. Sexton reminded the Board that in 2018, Mr. Roe and his team assisted the Board in developing the framework for a fire assessment, a service for which the Board already paid for and will not need to pay again. Mr. Sexton anticipated that if the Board authorizes the reengagement of Christopher B. Roe and BMO, he will meet with staff to develop a presentation to the Board to provide funding options and specific detail on how each parcel will be assessed.

At the conclusion of Mr. Sexton's comments, Chair Dougherty announced that the Board has not discussed any fees and that through engagement of Christopher B. Roe and BMO, the Board can be advised on options for potential fees.

Chair Dougherty asked for a MOTION to AUTHORIZE AND REENGAGE THE SERVICES OF MR. ROE AT BRYANT MILLER OLIVE TO DETERMINE WHAT THAT'S GOING TO LOOK LIKE FOR OUR FUNDING SOURCE.

Discussion:

- Clarification on the Boards funding obligation to Christopher B. Roe and BMO.
 - Mr. Sexton replied that the fee is broken into two phases: Phase 1 – Development, which has already been paid for by the Board and will not need to be paid again; and Phase 2 – Implementation of Assessment, which has not been paid because the Board has not elected to proceed with Phase 2. If the Board elects to proceed with Phase 2, the Board would incur an additional cost of which Mr. Roe would have to provide a cost estimate.

After discussion, Chair Dougherty deviated from the order of the agenda by moving into Public Comments. The stated motion lay pending.

(May 6, 2021 Special Meeting)

iii. **PUBLIC COMMENT(S)**

(Chair Dougherty deviated from the order of agenda when he addressed Public Comments)

Chair Dougherty recognized the following individuals for public comments.

Telephonic public comments. No comments.

In-person public comments:

- Comment from the audience – name unknown.
 - Chair Dougherty responded to comment from the audience concerning Phase 1 and Phase 2 of a proposal from consultant Christopher B. Roe and BMO. Mr. Sexton confirmed that the cost of Phase 2 is in the neighborhood of \$40 thousand and that the Board does not have to pay that unless it elects, at some future meeting, to impose the fire assessment.
- Joel Lebo
 - In response to Mr. Lebo's question concerning further discussions on fire, Chair Dougherty stated that the Board would schedule additional opportunities with the public.
 - Chair Dougherty called upon Director Allen Parrish to address questions raised by Mr. Lebo regarding EMS collection fees. Mr. Parrish stated:
 - EMS generates approximately 56% of its operating budget from service fees and grants; the remaining balance comes from the county's general fund and other.
 - The EMS billing collection rate is approximately 53% in Bradford County.
 - The industry EMS collection rate is approximately 50%
- Tex Johnson
- Gary Faircloth
- W.C. Rhoden
- Mitchell Gunter
- Billy Rehberg
- Jenannie Baker
- Scott Roberts
- Kate Ellison
- Tommy Tatum (comment card not provided)
- Jamie Clemons (comment card not provided)
 - In response to Mr. Clemons questions, Chair Dougherty recognized Mr. Sexton to provide clarification concerning the engagement of consultant Christopher B. Roe and BMO. Mr. Sexton confirmed that the Board voted to engage with the consultant again to provide legal advice and recommendations on how to move forward with funding options. Mr. Sexton advised that there will be an opportunity for the public to know what their specific assessment will be for their property before the Board makes a decision on imposing an assessment.

(May 6, 2021 Special Meeting)

iv. DISCUSSION OF BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

(Chair Dougherty deviated from the order of the agenda when he addressed Discussion of Board of County Commissioners)

- Cost to engage a consultant.
 - Mr. Sexton responded by outlining the proposed deliverables from consultant Christopher B. Roe and BMO: Phase 1, which has been completed with the exception of some minor updates; and Phase 2 – Implementation. The consultant, at no additional cost, will be able to advise the Board on available options to fund fire operations.
- In-house resources to collect and provide data/analysis on funding fire operations.
 - Mr. Sexton responded that due to the complexity of a fire assessment, he would not recommend implementing a funding source without the engagement of an expert on the subject matter.
- Review fire assessment methodology from surrounding counties.
 - Mr. Sexton replied expressing concern with comparing ourselves to other counties due to differences that impact an assessment such as population, parcel size and budget.
- Board responsibility to provide public safety including fire protection.
- Make available to the public cost information on fire assessment.
- Affordable and fair taxes to citizens and businesses.
- Impact fees and infrastructure.
- Funding needed for fire operations.

Chair Dougherty recognized Director Allen Parrish to address questions and comments previously made by the public and the Board.

Mr. Parrish addressed public comments regarding privatization of fire rescue services by stating the cost to privatize would require a reasonable amount of tax subsidy in addition to the current budget. Mr. Parrish recognized efforts made by Sheriff Gordon Smith to secure a SAFER grant, which was unsuccessful; however, he indicated that his Department would reapply in the fall. Mr. Parrish acknowledged Sheriff Gordon Smith's success in securing \$800 thousand in appropriations funding to assist the Heilbronn Springs Fire Department, a project of which is being managed by the Fire Rescue Department.

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(May 6, 2021 Special Meeting)

v. MOTION, SECOND AND VOTE.

It was **MOVED** by Commissioner Andrews and **SECONDED** by Commissioner Thompson to **REENGAGE CHRISTOPHER B. ROE OF BRYANT MILLER OLIVE.**

DISCUSSION: No discussion.

Chair Dougherty conducted a roll-call vote:

Commissioner Spooner: Aye

Commissioner Thompson: Aye

Commissioner Andrews: Aye

Vice-Chair Riddick: Aye

Chair Dougherty: Aye

THE MOTION CARRIED 5-0

- 2. COUNTY ATTORNEY REPORTS – WILL SEXTON.** No reports.
- 3. SHERIFF REPORTS – GORDON SMITH.** No reports.
- 4. CLERK REPORTS – DENNY THOMPSON.** No reports.
- 5. COMMISSIONERS COMMENTS.**

Vice Chair Riddick:

Vice Chair Riddick inquired about a \$75.00 assessment fee that was placed on an election ballot after the 9/11 terrorist attacks to help fund the volunteer fire department.

- Chief Ben Carter replied that an assessment fee of \$45.00 was placed on an election ballot scheduled for September 11, 2001, the same day terrorists attacked the United States. Chief Carter indicated that many people didn't leave their homes that day as they were watching the news concerning the terrorist attacks. The assessment fee of \$45.00 did not pass.

Commissioner Spooner:

Provided comments expressing the importance of scheduling a future budget workshop to discuss data collected on options to fund fire operations.

Commissioner Andrews: No comments.

Commissioner Thompson: No Comments.

6. CHAIR COMMENTS.

Chair Dougherty responded to questions made from the audience concerning impact fees. He stated that the Board currently has in place an Impact Fee Moratorium and that each year the Board evaluates whether it will continue to impose said moratorium.

(May 6, 2021 Special Meeting)

ADJOURN: There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 8:24 P.M.

Minutes approved by BoCC at the Regular Scheduled Meeting on June 17, 2021.