

**Cumberland County Fire Chief's Association  
Minutes - September 20, 1999**

A special Board of Directors meeting was called to order at 7:00 PM by V. P. J.F. Hall at the Old Courthouse with 16 members present.

Due to the relief efforts in Eastern North Carolina, V.P. J.F. Hall recognized Fire Marshal Ricky Strickland.

Ricky asked the Chief's if they would be willing to support the relief effort in Eastern North Carolina. He said he had a friend in St Pauls that would be willing to give us use of his trailers to put at fire stations around the county to help with items needed to help sustain the Quality of Life in that area.

A motion was made by James Hall, to help with the relief effort, 2ND by John House, motion carried.

Ricky to contact the newspaper, TV and radio stations of our intentions and the locations of the trailers and what items are needed for quality of life.

Roll call was called with 15 members. Eastover was late. 16 members

J.F.Hall opened the meeting with prayer.

J.F.Hall recognized Stoney Point Fire Chief Freddy Johnson, Lake Rim Fire Chief John House and Westarea District Fire Chief Mark Barnes.

Chief Johnson began the discussion on the article in the newspaper dated September 5, 1999. He stated he was disturbed by the fact that this was not discussed in a special Board of Directors meeting before it went to the newspaper. He stated that he would not talk about another station.

Chief House stated he agreed with what Chief Johnson said.

Chief Barnes stated that we have no control over what the newspaper printed. He felt hurt by some of the remarks made about him and the department by Robert Lee. This article was the fuel needed to keep Mr. Lee going.

Chief Kevin Herndon stated he got flak from his Board of Directors concerning this article and that he is sorry it came out this way before the Chief's could discuss it in their own meeting.

Chief Mike Middleton stated that money that is in the bank is Capital outlay. Because of annexation he will have to build a new station to maintain his ISO Rating. He also stated that where development is, that's where the tax money comes from.

The question was asked "who started this article"?

J.F.Hall stated he was contacted by the reporter who wrote the article and asked some questions.

J.F.Hall stated as far as Bethany was concerned, they don't want someone else's money. He stated he was Not in favor of county wide fire department, that mutual aid is the best thing we have going. If there are areas that need improvement, he would like to see it.

Chief James Hall mentioned more Bulk Purchases on items that everyone uses.

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Chief Roddy Bullard stated you can't buy apparatus without chrome and stainless steel. If you talk to WFNC personnel you just give them fuel to make news whether it good or bad.

Chief Johnson stated they needed to draft a letter.

A motion by Chief Barnes, that we not respond to the newspaper article on September 5, 1999, and related articles. 2ND by Chief McIntyre. Motion carried, 16 members voting.

A motion was made by Chief Barnes, that we draft a letter to Commissioner Talmage Baggett, that the Chief's Association is united and wish no change in the funding system. 2ND by Chief Middleton. Discussion followed.

Chief Barnes ammended his motion on the letter to state that the Chief's Association is united and committed to excellence in the fire service for and of Cumberland County. 2ND by Chief Middleton. Roll Call vote: For: 0 Against: 16 motions fails.

Chief Bill Bullard stated we needed a PIO committee to handle incidents like this. President Hall stated he was the committee chairman to handle it. No one should give out information without going through the association.

Motion to adjourn the meeting made by Chief Barnes, 2ND Chief Middleton, Motion carried.

Meeting adjourned at 8:40 PM

Respectfully recorded and submitted by,  
Terrence P. Rielly, Secretary CCFCA



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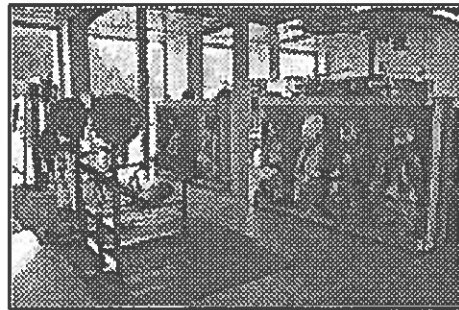
Sunday, September 5, 1999

## Firefighting funds uneven

### Cumberland County fire district struggle to find a better, more equitable way to provide service

By Scott Travis  
Staff writer

The Stedman Volunteer Fire Department struggles to pay for basic necessities. About half of its \$100,000 yearly budget pays for a new fire truck. It has no full-time employees. It relies on Christmas tree sales and other fund-raisers to help pay the bills.



Staff photo by Laura E. Rogers

The Lake Rim Volunteer Fire Department can afford extras like weight-lifting equipment and a Chevrolet Tahoe for its chief to drive.

Twenty miles to the west is the Lake Rim Fire Department, one of the wealthiest in the county. The department employs 13 full-time people, who work around-the-clock shifts. The department's board of directors pays Chief John House a \$40,000 annual salary and recently bought a \$30,000 Chevrolet Tahoe for him to use.

Most of the funding for both departments comes through the same means — a fire tax of 10 cents per \$100 of assessed property.

Some see the contrast between rural departments such as Stedman and urban ones such as Lake Rim as proof that Cumberland County needs to find a new way to pay for fire protection. They would like a countywide fire department. All fire-tax money would go into the same pot and be distributed based on need.

#### Equal service |

Proponents of change argue that everyone in the county pays the same tax rate, so they should receive service of equal quality. But suggestions of change are met with resistance from many fire chiefs, who cringe at the thought of turning control of their department over to a county agency.

The fire districts already have one mechanism to help narrow the gap between the rich and poor departments. Everyone who lives in a county fire district — outside a municipality with its own fire department, such as Fayetteville, Hope Mills and Spring Lake — pays a half-cent property tax, 60 percent of which subsidizes poor fire districts.

But some say this money, which usually amounts to less than \$20,000 for each department, is far from enough.

"I do think there's an opportunity for improvement," said J.F. Hall, chief of the Bethany Fire Department. "Some of the areas that get more money have a heavier fire load. But probably the balance could not be as far offset as it currently is."

Bethany received just over \$100,000 in county funding during 1997-98 compared with \$840,275 for Lake Rim.

Bethany responded to 188 calls last year, Stedman 116 and Lake Rim 900. These include both fire and emergency medical calls. Firefighters are trained to assist in medical emergencies.

#### More revenue |

Lake Rim covers an area around the western part of Raeford Road that is densely populated with homes and businesses. The department, which opened in 1961, used to be one of the small rural departments. Now, it collects more than 10 times as much revenue as some rural departments.

"Ten years ago, we didn't have any more than \$200,000 to run the department," House said. "Fortunately, people chose to move to this side of town."

The more people move in, the larger the tax base becomes. That's why the more urban areas such as Lake Rim, Stoney Point and Lafayette Village collect tax revenues of \$400,000 or more. Sparsely populated areas such as Stedman, Bethany, Wade and Beaver Dam are lucky to collect \$100,000. Having an industry in a fire district increases the tax base.

Hall said low funding hurts the ability of his and other small departments to buy new equipment, train employees and hire firefighters to cover day shifts when most volunteers are working.

Despite the funding discrepancies, many of the poorer fire departments still have fire ratings that are as good as wealthier ones. Fire ratings can determine how much residents and businesses pay for fire insurance.

#### Ratings factor |

The ratings, determined by the Department of Insurance, are based on a number of criteria, including water capacity, quality of equipment and response time.

A rating of 6 or lower provides the best rate for a homeowner. Eleven out of the 18 county fire departments -- including Stedman, Bethany and several poorer ones -- have a rating of 5 or 6.

The departments also have a mutual aid agreement. Units respond to emergency calls in other fire districts if needed.

Still, Hall said many of the wealthier departments have more money than they need.

He said some affluent departments buy equipment and stockpile it.

Hall said his proposal could save the county fire departments money,

because the county could buy equipment and vehicles in volume. Some departments already do joint purchasing, but too many times they can't agree on what they want, he said.

Stedman might be able to get more money if the county changed the way money was allocated. But Chief Bill Bullard won't say whether he supports such a change.

"It's a hard question to answer," he said. "I can sit here and say yeah, I'd like to have more money, but this is the way it was set up. Regardless of whether I think it's fair or not, I have to play by that rule."

Hall's idea has the support of James Hall, chief of the Cumberland Road Fire Department and president of the county Fire Chiefs Association. The two are not related.

House, the Lake Rim chief, said he would like to see the small departments get more money – but not at the expense of his department.

The Lake Rim department has been built to serve the needs of the community, he said. He questions whether an administrator would know his department's needs as well as district residents.

"Just because someone has a four-year degree in finance doesn't mean he can tell me whether my fire truck should be replaced," he said.

Mark Barnes, chief of the Westarea Fire Department, also worries about what might happen if Westarea – which includes the Linden, Carver's Creek and the Rosehill Road station known as Westarea 10 – became part of a countywide system. He said people might be less willing to volunteer.

"There is a potential to have a negative impact if we become this very large conglomerate that doesn't have linkage with the local community," he said.

Even some of the poorer districts don't want to see the system change. The fire chiefs at Godwin-Falcon and Beaver Dam, two of the lowest funded fire departments in the county, said they are satisfied with the way they are funded.

"We're getting enough to operate on," said Richard Bullard, chief of the Beaver Dam fire district. "People cause fires. We don't have that many people, so we don't have that many fires. That's sort of the way it works."

But Blanche Anderson, who lives in Beaver Dam, said she believes the department could use some extra help. Her grandson is a volunteer firefighter with the department.

"They do this on a volunteer basis and don't get much support or recognition," she said.

Anderson said if the department's funding was in line with other departments, her fire insurance bill might go down. Beaver Dam has a fire rating of 9, which is one of the worst in the county.

The owner of a \$100,000 home in a district with a 9 rating may have to pay \$550 a year for insurance. If that homeowner lived in a district with a 6 rating, the rate would be as low as \$361.

Richard Bullard said his department will work to get the rating down, regardless of funding.

James Hall said some fire chiefs from districts large and small "come from the old school" and resist any kind of change.

He agreed with J.F. Hall that some departments have more money than they need. So they buy luxury vehicles for their chief, put expensive chrome plating on fire trucks and keep hundreds of thousands of dollars in their accounts, he said. For instance, Lake Rim has about \$600,000, which has been saved over the years. Lafayette Village has more than \$700,000.

"That's a little excessive," said Tabatha Pankey, who lives in the Lake Rim district. She said fire departments should spend what they need, and the rest should go for other needs in the county. But House said Lake Rim has managed its money well. If the county was ever late sending the fire department its money, the department would dip into those savings to help keep the department operating.

Robert Lee, who lives in Linden, said he believes the Westarea department is too extravagant with taxpayer money. The department this year hired Mark Barnes at a salary of \$55,000. Barnes also has unrestricted use of a new \$26,000 Chevrolet Tahoe.

"They run that outfit like a country club," Lee said.

Barnes said his salary and benefits are not out of line for someone who oversees three fire stations in a large district. He said the fire stations are adequate but nothing like a country club.

But he said he wishes he did have extravagant fire stations with big screen televisions and other frills, because he might have an easier time drawing in volunteers.

Supporters of a countywide fire system say that it has worked well in New Hanover County. The volunteer fire departments there are funded by a 3½-cent tax that people in the unincorporated parts of the county pay. An administrator allocates the money based on need.

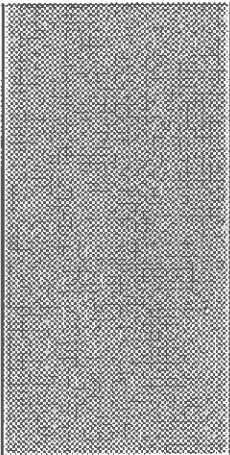
Phil Kouwe, fire services administrator for New Hanover County, is pleased with the system.

"If we had individual fire districts, we'd have haves and have nots," Kouwe said. "Some districts would be able to afford very good service and others might have trouble keeping the utility bills paid."

Although some argue that a rich community shouldn't have to subsidize a poor one, this is actually done all the time in other aspects of government, Kouwe said. A sheriff's department doesn't provide less protection to poor parts of the county, he said. And a city fire department typically provides equal protection to affluent and blighted parts of town.

Although some county commissioners say they would like to find a way to narrow the gap between the rich and poor fire departments, they are hesitant to make changes. They said fire departments get defensive if anyone threatens to take away funding. Many already fear what will happen to them as Fayetteville pursues an aggressive annexation plan. Bonnie Doone and Cottonade have already been absorbed into the city. Lafayette Village is moving because its present location has been annexed into the city and is no longer part of a fire district.

Traditionally, the volunteer fire departments in Cumberland and other counties have been community centers — places for cookouts and community events, particularly in rural areas. They are also bases of



political power.

Commissioner Lee Warren said he believes solutions should come from the fire departments.

"That might be a little more palatable than if you have an elected official suggesting change," he said.

House said he will discuss the issue with other chiefs, even though he has reservations about changing the way departments are funded.

"I'm in favor of listening to other options," he said. "As long as I don't have to lay people off and send them home."

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Monday, September 13, 1999

## A Hot Issue

### Fire district cash gap isn't alarming, but worrisome

Some rural fire departments struggle with debt while others in the same county are so flush they hardly know what to do with the cash stacking up in bank accounts. And the "volunteer" in the name doesn't necessarily signal any willingness on the part of richer departments to share resources with poorer ones.

There is, of course, a practical solution: a single countywide fire agency.

But don't count on a rapid response when it comes to creating one. Practicality isn't always the preferred route when it tramples over tradition, politics, and the status quo.

A countywide system could assure every resident comparable fire protection, and perhaps for about the same cost.

A countywide agency buying equipment in bulk would get discounts not always available to individual departments. Fire insurance costs might be reduced for some residents in rural areas – or, at least, they might not see these costs rise as rapidly. A fire department's equipment and response times are two of the factors that go into insurance company rate formulas.

But enough about the practicalities. A lot of folks are happy with their volunteer fire departments and they don't see a need to change. These departments have become community gathering places. Some are bases for community political power.

It wouldn't be a surprise if an ambitious politician hesitated before unnecessarily making political enemies over a little inconsistency in county fire protection.

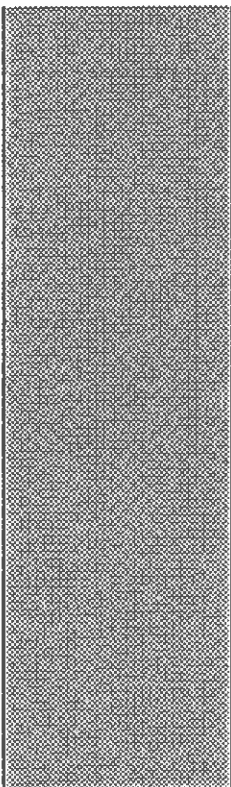
But a "little" inconsistency should be the definitive term, where the line is drawn, especially in regard to response times.

Westarea and Lake Rim departments, for example, can afford full-time firefighters and the best equipment because they are among the districts that collect tax revenues of \$400,000 or more. Fire departments in Stedman, Bethany, Wade and Beaver Dam have smaller tax bases to provide funding. They must rely upon fund-raisers and Christmas tree sales to pay the bills.

Obviously, smaller departments have fewer homes and businesses to protect than do the more densely populated Westarea and Lake Rim districts.

Nonetheless, departments rarely fight all fires simultaneously. A





department's equipment and quick response time would seem as crucial to a resident of the Beaver Dam district whose house caught fire as it would be to a resident of the Lake Rim district in the same situation.

The disparities between wealthier and poorer fire districts are not all-out emergencies. But it's a problem to watch. Last year, the county took over responsibility for the Manchester Volunteer Fire Department. A number of its volunteers were in the military, and not always available to respond to calls. Safety was the paramount issue there.

This is why county residents served by volunteer fire departments should pay attention. A concise written summary of equipment, training, response times, resources and expenditures should be posted, mailed, or made available to all in a district who ask to see it. This kind of information is too important to be left unread and forgotten in a file cabinet.

In the meantime, firefighters in wealthier districts should take Cumberland County Commissioner Lee Warren's advice. If these districts don't wish to change or to share their wealth, then they need to offer their own suggestions.

Should the financial disparities widen to the point where fire safety in some fire districts is seriously compromised, then the county will have no choice but to get practical.

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