

Fire Contracts

Public Hearing Comments/Questions

February 19, 2019

- 1. Where are the funds coming from to pay for the approximately \$1.2 million as outlined in the budget amendment? What does “reserves” mean?**

The funds are coming from the unrestricted reserve account within Jasper County. These funds are the difference between assets and liabilities in the General Fund. The “reserves” mentioned during the Council meeting are also known as the Unassigned General Fund Balance. Essentially, they are like a “savings” account for the County to fund unexpected or unappropriated expenditures, or emergency expenditures like damage from hurricanes. The fact that the General Fund Balance is “unassigned” means that it is not set aside or reserved for a particular purpose, but rather can be reallocated by County Council action as matters arise. The City of Hardeeville also has funds set aside in what they used to designate as the Unreserved General Fund Balance, but is now designated as the Budget Stabilization Fund that can be expended by City Council under similar circumstances. In this case, County Council has decided to use some of these reserve funds to assist in the one-time purchase of capital assets such property, equipment and apparatus to improve the fire services within the contract areas. Because the funds being spent are from the reserve account, this will not cause a tax increase or fee increase to the residents of Jasper County.

- 2. Why doesn't the County just make the effort to spend those \$1.2 million to improve and staff fire stations in the unincorporated areas of the County?**

The Fire Rescue Department has identified and developed a long term repair and maintenance listing for all the stations in the unincorporated areas. We will be working through the budget process to address these facility needs and upgrades. The \$1.2 million in funds being used from “reserves” are not suitable to be used to assist in staffing stations, as the reserves are used for one-time expenditures and not annual operating expenses. A long term plan is also being developed to assist with improving staffing at the fire stations in the unincorporated areas.

- 3. Why hasn't the County been transparent in its dealings with the City of Hardeeville and the public on the issue of the fire contracts?**

The County has worked very hard to be transparent in its communications with the City of Hardeeville and the public. The County Council has met multiple times with the City Council members, both in public meetings and private, executive session meetings to discuss the fire contracts. In addition, County and City staffs have met several times to discuss the fire contracts. These meetings have been held both before the decision was made by County Council, and afterwards. In these meetings, the County Council has been forthcoming of its intentions, but has been willing to listen to counter proposals from the City of Hardeeville. Through all the discussions and communications, the result of the process involved a policy decision that Jasper County Council felt was most appropriate for all the citizens of Jasper County.

As far as communicating with the public, once the County Council made the decision to not renew the fire contracts in November 2018, there were over 3,000 flyers distributed to every affected business and residential address within the two contract areas, a press release was distributed to all the media outlets and information was posted to the Jasper County website. Since November 2018, the County only received two phone calls from affected residents/businesses asking questions about the change.

4. The City of Hardeeville Fire Department already provides good service. Why change from that?

Jasper County agrees that the City of Hardeeville provides good service and has provided good service to the current contract areas over many years. However, the fire contracts were originally intended to only be temporary, as a means to assist in providing fire protection to certain areas in which the County could not at that time, as well as assist the City with its costs of service until its tax base increased. The County is now in a position to assume those service delivery areas. With the growth within the City of Hardeeville, Council thought it appropriate for the City to concentrate on ensuring good service delivery to their residents, with the County doing the same. We have offered to continue to work and respond together on larger fire incidents in the future, even with the assumption of the contract areas.

5. You have asked to have Hardeeville Fire Department continue to assist you with Automatic and Mutual Aid. Why?

Just so everyone understands, here are the definitions of automatic aid and mutual aid.

Automatic Aid – Aid from one fire department that is given to another that is automatically dispatched upon receipt of an incident. There is no delay and the resources dispatched are part of the normal, first response assignment.

Mutual Aid – Aid from one fire department that is given to another that is requested during an incident based on the need for additional resources. This is typically during larger, more complex incidents that overwhelm the original fire department and they require additional resources.

Even with assuming the fire contract areas in the Hardeeville Rural District and the Cherry Point district, there may be a need where additional fire protection resources are needed for an incident. It is a national model within the fire service for fire departments to assist each other on incidents. This can be done as part of the normal response through automatic aid, or during larger incidents through mutual aid. It just makes sense for fire departments to share and pool resources in these situations. There have been several incidents over the last few weeks where having additional fire resources available in the immediate Hardeeville area would have been beneficial. Jasper County currently has automatic and/or mutual aid agreements with Hampton County, Bluffton Fire District and Beaufort County EMS. The City of Hardeeville currently has agreements with Bluffton Fire District and the Levy Fire District. Once Jasper County has fire resources in the contract areas, it makes sense to establish these agreements with the City of Hardeeville as well.

6. Why is Jasper County only staffing their fire apparatus in the contract areas with 2 firefighters instead of 3 like Hardeeville?

As with most fire and EMS organizations today, the vast majority of incidents that departments respond to are medical incidents. Fire calls do happen, but with less frequency. Jasper County will be staffing its fire apparatus in the contract areas with 2 people, but it will also have 2 people on the ambulances that are available to respond to fire incidents when they are available. With this configuration, the ambulance can respond to medical calls with nationally recognized staffing of 1 paramedic and 1 EMT on the unit. There is then still a fire unit available to respond to the lower incidence of fire calls that occur. When they are available, the ambulance would also respond to the fire incidents providing 4 people available to work at the incident. Jasper County feels that this is a reasonable, cost effective model to provide both services. This model is not unique in the fire service or the area as to how to staff both fire and EMS units.

7. Is building of the fire station on Stiney Road and opening the fire station on Mead Road a duplication of services and costs?

Jasper County always looks to operate as fiscally conservative and responsible as possible. These stations will be constructed and operated as fiscally conservative as possible. The addition of these two fire stations is needed to address providing protection to the unincorporated areas now served by the fire contracts. These stations will have their own service districts which will allow the City of Hardeeville fire stations to be available and serve residents within the city limits. Yes, these stations will be close to each other, but they will be serving two different areas apart from the City of Hardeeville. These two additional stations will provide fire protection resources within Jasper County that will allow the fire units to respond anywhere else in the County, if needed, due to a large incident. They could respond up into the Tillman area, the Marsh Cove area or the Town of Ridgeland. These two stations will also be able to provide additional fire protection resources to the City of Hardeeville when needed or requested. It is anticipated that this would be reciprocated with automatic aid and mutual aid agreements with the City of Hardeeville.

The siting of fire stations is typically based on demand, hazards involved and travel time. Some are closer together than others. As an example, the City of Hardeeville has plans to build one of its new stations on Hampton Pointe Loop Road to service the Hampton Pointe and East Argent areas. This station will be approximately 2.5 miles from the existing Hardeeville Argent Boulevard fire station.