

SOUTH WALTON FIRE DISTRICT BOARD OF FIRE COMMISSIONERS

Meeting Minutes – May 11, 2020

*****PENDING APPROVAL*****

Commissioners Present (via video conference): Brian Christenson (left the meeting at 4:32pm), Tom Cooper, Charlotte Flynt, Mark B. Foley, Maurice Gilbert, Rick Talbert

Commissioners Absent: Mike Stange

Call to Order: 4:09 p.m.

Commissioner Gilbert announced a quorum was present.

Chairman Gilbert read into the record a National Emergency Medical Services Week Proclamation, proclaiming May 17 – 23, 2020, as Emergency Medical Services Week in South Walton in honor of the men and women whose diligence and professionalism keep the community, citizens and visitors safe. Chief Crawford stated that this year's proclamation has a special meaning as we are all currently dealing with a pandemic.

On a motion duly made by Commissioner Talbert and seconded by Commissioner Christenson, the Board unanimously approved the minutes of the March 9, 2020, Board of Fire Commissioners meeting. There were no April 13, 2020, Board minutes due to meeting cancellation.

Secretary/Treasurer Report: Commissioner Flynt read the March 2020 cash report into the record.

Attorney's Report:

On a motion duly made by Commissioner Christenson and seconded by Commissioner Cooper, the Board unanimously approved Attorney Youell's March 2020 billing statement.

On a motion duly made by Commissioner Flynt and seconded by Commissioner Christenson, the Board unanimously approved Attorney Youell's April 2020 billing statement.

Fire Chief's Report:

Chief Crawford reviewed the Emergency Response Report which included Beach Safety Responses.

As a result of the Covid-19 shutdown, SWFD facilities have remained closed to the public and many of SWFD support staff have been working remotely since March 23, 2020. In an effort to minimize the number of staff physically present at any one time, support staff will be returning to the administrative offices in a tiered fashion by telecommuting on some days and physically reporting on others. A timeline for reopening the SWFD administrative office for "in person" services will continue to be evaluated.

As a result of the Covid-19 shutdown, SWFD postponed its internal promotional testing process. Staff is hopeful testing will be rescheduled towards the end of June. SWFD continues to restrict all non-mission critical training and travel for employees until such time as we can safely resume these activities.

Staff is closely monitoring the economic fallout resulting from the Covid-19 shutdown. Chief Crawford stated that he will continue to keep the Fire Board apprised on revenue impacts to the Fire District.

Chief Crawford announced that, even though funded within the FY20 budget, he has elected to postpone filling the positions of one Training Chief and one Plans Examiner until SWFD has a better understanding of the economic impacts from the economy shutdown. These positions continue to be critical for SWFD.

SWFD will be providing paramedic personnel to support the Florida Department of Health drive thru Covid-19 collection testing site at Van R. Butler Elementary School beginning May 14, 2020,

On April 19, 2020, SWFD crews responded to a report of multiple vehicles on fire in the area of 7th Street in Santa Rosa Beach. SWFD crews were able to extinguish the fire and prevent it from spreading to an adjacent home on the same property. This fire was determined to have been caused by arson and an arrest was made.

South Walton had several significant wildfires within the past two weeks. The first incident occurred on May 2, 2020, in Pt. Washington State Forest which grew to approximately 200 acres. The Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services has identified persons of interest and their investigation continues.

On May 3, 2020, another wildfire occurred north of TerraMar Apartments on Highway 98 burning approximately 20 acres. SWFD crews were able to position themselves so that no structures were damaged. This fire was determined to have been caused by vagrant campers in the woods. The Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services has identified persons of interest in this case and it remains under investigation.

On May 6, 2020, South Walton experienced a catastrophic wildfire that originated north of the power lines on Mussett Bayou Road. This incident ultimately consumed 343 acres and resulted in the complete loss of 34 structures with 15 additional structures receiving moderate damage. The impacted neighborhoods are located along Thompson Road and the cross streets of Delbert Lane, Woodshire Drive, Anchors Lake Drive, and Boone Lane as well as North Anchors Lake Drive near the Santa Rosa Beach Golf Club. The fire was determined to have been caused by illegal non-permitted pile burning. The Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services has identified a person of interest and their investigation continues.

Chief Crawford informed the Fire Board that one of the structures destroyed in the Mussett Bayou fire belonged to SWFD Communications Operator Amy Thomas. SWFD staff continues to work with labor leadership, County Emergency Management, and with SWFD Chaplains to assist her with immediate and short-term housing / financial needs.

Chief Crawford stated that he was incredibly proud of the actions of all SWFD men and women during these fire events with many taking extraordinary risks to themselves to stop the destruction and extinguish the fire. Chief Crawford shared that, based on the trajectory of the fire, SWFD was successful in mitigating damage to an additional 1,657 rooftops that were directly in the southern path of travel of the fire. SWFD is very fortunate that there were no public or firefighter injuries reported and there was no loss of life from this incident.

The Florida Division of Emergency Management with the Florida Forestry Service (FFS) requested a Fire Management Assistance Grant (FMAG) from FEMA which was

subsequently awarded. The eligible reimbursement costs are for direct response to the fire starting on the declared date of May 6, 2020, until such time as the FFS declares the fire out. As the direct impacted fire department, SWFD will receive 75% Federal and 25% Local cost share reimbursement. The reimbursement for all Mutual Aid and State Missioned agencies supporting SWFD's response will come through FDEM at 100% eligible costs.

Chief Crawford shared observations that several of the homes that were destroyed in this fire appeared to have a direct link to the landscape material surrounding the homes. Chapter 5 of the Walton County Land Development Code currently states:

All landscaped areas shall be finished with a natural topping material that may include, but is not limited to, the following: groundcover planting, hydroseed, or mulch (organic or inorganic) of at least two (2) inches in depth. Chief Crawford further stated that these materials are easily combustible when combined with the volatile firestorm conditions observed during the recent fire and rendered structures with added vulnerability. When conducting post incident damage assessments, it was evident where fire embers created long range downwind spot fires within pine straw flowerbeds adjacent to homes and then resulted in ignition to the structures. Many of the homes are rendered completely destroyed and Chief Crawford feels strongly that that these structures very likely would have survived this fire event with little damage with alternative fire-resistant landscaping. The grass lawns around these homes remained green with only burnt flower beds to tell their story. Commissioner Cooper stated, "There are no words. The crews were amazing. I am very thankful for the job our men and women did to save lives and property." Commissioner Talbert concurred with Commissioner Cooper and stated, "It was surreal being on the property owner side of a fire. The men and women of SWFD were poised under fire".

As the South Walton community continues constructing new homes within what the fire service refers to as the wildland-urban interface there are simple mitigation strategies that can and should be employed to assist homeowners with further protecting themselves from fire. SWFD remains willing and interested in assisting the South Walton community in adopting simple engineered protections and defensible strategies. Chief Crawford further stated that the county land development code should be amended to allow for alternative ground covering materials which are both aesthetic and can provide for greater resistance from fire.

Since the March Fire Board meeting, SWFD had two (2) tenured employees retire - Sergeant John Bunnicelli retired following 23 years of service and Firefighter Michial McHenry retired following nearly 19 years of service to the District. SWFD plans to honor their service when social distancing measures are able to be relaxed. As a result of Sergeant Bunnicelli's retirement, SWFD promoted Firefighter Dawson Beale to Sergeant. A small pinning ceremony has been scheduled for May 22, 2020. These retirements have created openings for two new firefighters which we plan fill from our hiring eligibility list in June.

SWFD's ambulance replacement capital project funded within the FY19/20 budget is on track for delivery in September. This timeline can still fluctuate depending on when they return to work at the plant and any other Covid related parts shortages.

Chief Crawford reminded the Fire Board that pension plan participants will be nominating a trustee position during the month of June with an election to occur in early July.

Chief Crawford also reminded the Fire Board of the annual requirement for all elected officials to complete and submit the "Form 1" Statement of Financial Interests which is due on July 1, 2020.

Chief Crawford reported the FY19 Fee for Service (FFS) distribution has been finalized. Due to the increase in provider participation there was a 7.45% haircut to each provider's settlement amounts. SWFD anticipates receiving a settlement in the amount of \$132,951.92 for EMS services provided during the period of July 1, 2018 to June 30, 2019.

The 2019 SWFD Annual Report was included in the board packet. Chief Crawford thanked staff for presenting a professional document reflecting all activities from 2019.

District Chief Daniel LaTour will be performing some of Assistant Chief Hughes' day to day responsibilities during his absence due to approved leave. Additionally, a few SWFD Lieutenants that have been working toward becoming eligible to advance to the District Chief position will assist in filling District Chief Latour's shift responsibilities. Staff is confident this will not only provide for sustainment of daily operations but also provide each of them with valuable experience.

Chief Crawford reminded the Fire Board that the next firefighter pension board meeting is scheduled for Monday, June 1, 2020 at 2:30pm. The pension board and their counsel are currently evaluating whether to conduct this meeting virtually or in person.

The next regularly scheduled Board of Fire Commissioners meeting is scheduled for Monday, June 8, 2020 at 4pm.

Committee Reports: None

Unfinished/Old Business: None

New Business: Fire Chief Ryan Crawford presented a Board Action Item for Consideration of Fee Reduction for April 2020 – Private Beach Contracts whereas Staff recommended that the Board authorize the Fire Chief / Administrator to negotiate with representatives of Rosemary Beach Property Owners Association and Sandestin Owners Association for terms of financial relief by a reduction of beach safety services for the month of April 2020 while all Walton County beaches remained closed as a result of the public health emergency. The parameters of this relief would be required to remain cost neutral to the Fire District. In addition, staff also recommended a delegation of authority for Chairmen Gilbert to execute addendums for each existing contract providing for the onetime reduction in monthly service fees for Rosemary Beach Property Owners Association and for Sandestin Owners Association. Any negotiated fee reduction would only apply to services provided for the month of April 2020.

Commissioner Cooper recused himself from the discussion and vote. Commissioner Cooper submitted a signed Form 8b due to being retained by Sandestin Owners Association.

On a motion duly made by Commissioner Talbert and seconded by Commissioner Flynt, the Board unanimously approved the action as presented.

Public Comment:

Commissioner Talbert expressed his concern regarding a recent issue whereas a member of the public entered an SWFD Lifeguard Tower to make a statement for political advancement. Chief Crawford informed the Fire Board that the Beach Safety Director is working with Walton County Tourist Development Council on new signage for the towers.

Commissioner Flynt asked the Fire Board to refer back to their previous discussion on Walton County's Land Development Code. Commissioner Flynt expressed her concern for communities built extremely close to unmaintained wooded areas. Commissioner Flynt suggested that SWFD also address the fuel on the ground as a result of property owners being restricted from maintaining their underbrush. i.e. controlled burn, bush hogging, etc.

The Fire Board directed Attorney Youell to draft two separate letters to address landscape coverings and underbrush maintenance in the Walton County Land Development Code. These letters shall be presented at the June Fire Board meeting to be held on June 8, 2020.

Roll call votes were practiced during this meeting.

Adjourned: The meeting adjourned at 5:02 p.m.