

Response to Ms Thompson's questions regarding the Washington County Fire Dept.

**Question 1-5**

In 2009 a corporation was formed by concerned residents which offered to provide fire service to Washington County and was called Sunny Hills Volunteer Fire Rescue Inc. Johnny Johnson was named the Chairman of that corporation. In 2010 by action of the BOCC, the Washington County Fire Dept. was created and I was appointed Chief. At that time, the corporation continued to exist for fund raising purposes. Sometime later the corporation was dissolved.

**Question 6 regarding FD minutes:**

I was never instructed to keep minutes of fire department meetings or training by anyone at any time. State Statutes do not require minutes of meetings or training. The only requirement per the Fire Marshalls office is that training be documented as to the subject area, members present and length of training. Those records have been kept and are on file at the Washington County Fire station. They were inspected at a recent visit by the Fire Marshall's office and ISO representative and were approved by both parties.

**Question 7 regarding email?**

This question was in regards to an email which was not attached to the questions I received from Ms Thompson and I am unable to respond.

**Question 8 regarding Christmas gifts for Washington County Fire Fighters of jacket and flashlights:**

Jackets and flashlights were purchased in 2010 for the active fire fighters of the WCFD. These jackets became part of the firefighters uniform and contained reflective strips for firefighter safety on scenes. This is an accepted practice/purchase in our county and was approved by then Public Safety Director Roger Hagan. Flashlights were purchased for a few firefighters who had received identical jackets from their employment with Washington County EMS, Bay County Fire and PC Airport Fire. Items purchased for volunteers to wear is an accepted practice in our county and many employees in numerous departments currently wear personalized shirts, jackets, caps, etc.

**Question 9 regarding donations of food and clothing items**

The Washington County Fire department received clothing from Cato's, food from a food drive at Dollar General and toys from Dollar General during a Toys for Tots drive. ALL clothes and food from the food drive were donated to the clothes closet and food pantry at the First Baptist Church in Sunny Hills. The toys were given to the First Baptist Church in Chipley for distribution to local children.

**Question 10 regarding Laptop, Tablets and Case:**

The Washington County Fire purchased a Tablet to send call run reports electronically to the EOC and to receive and answer emails. From 2009 until the purchase of the Tablet, I was using my personal computer and internet service to complete these tasks. I was informed by then PSD Roger Hagan that I needed to purchase a county device due to public records law. Once the Tablet was purchased it was discovered that it was unable to accommodate the configuration of the call run reports as designed by the EOC. For several months there was a collaboration between several parties of the county ( EOC staff, IT department, and myself) to get the Tablet to accommodate the run reports. Again during this time, I used my personal computer to create and file call run reports. After sometime had passed, it was suggested to me by county staff to purchase the laptop which I did. Both purchases were approved by then PSD Roger Hagan per county policy.

**Question 11 regarding paying volunteers for work**

On three occasions after approval from former PSD Roger Hagan and via a purchase order, the WCFD paid Cy Brown, a volunteer with our department to weld an engine aluminum ladder rack, a skid plate attached under the Brush Truck, and to build a cart to protect and move the Extrication pump on a fire scene. Mr Brown is a certified master welder and was highly qualified to do the work. Mr Brown also supplied the materials for all of the work he completed so his labor was minimal. I believe the total amount paid was approximately \$300-\$400.00 for all three jobs. Mr Brown was the only volunteer ever paid for work at the station.

**Question 12 regarding building materials, lumber and plywood**

Building materials bought were for lockers and shelves for the Washington County Fire station. When the station was built in 2010, no areas were included to store extra gear, boots, helmets, etc and no shelves were placed in the bay area of the station. Presently, costly gear is having to sit on the floor which puts it at risk for water damage. I requested a purchase order to purchase wood to build lockers and shelves. I was approached about a person doing community service work who could build the storage areas for me and I asked for the purchase order in October 2012, however that person was unavailable and the work did not begin. A couple of firemen later agreed to volunteer their time to build the storage units and that building is going on now. All items were bought on a purchase order and approved by PSD Roger Hagan and again by Mr Joyner in 2013. Ms Thompson's question of whether this is a need or a want is inappropriate. It was a decision made by myself as the Fire Chief of the dept.

**Question 13 and 14 regarding excessive fuel costs:**

The Washington County Fire owns three vehicles which includes an Engine, Brush Truck and Tanker. The fuel costs presented were inaccurate and I discussed this with Mr Hagan when the report was created by Connie at EOC. I have sheriff's office dispatch logs and call run reports to verify the inaccuracy. Actual call totals for the year given on the report were 47 instead of the 25 reported. There was also 47 hours of training using the trucks that was never considered. I believe Ms Thompson was comparing our dept to Chipley whose call run area is very different in nature. In addition to running calls requiring significant traveling distances from our station, we regularly run mutual aid calls (11 of the 47 above were with GHFD, Wausau FD and Vernon FD) whose coverage area extends far outside the WCFD call run area. Ms Thompson also questioned \$600.00 of unleaded fuel for one year for gas cans. Our trucks include two pumps, two generators, two chain saws and extrication tools all of which use unleaded fuel. At a minimum of \$3.00 per gallon we would have purchased 200 gallons for one year or 17 gallons per mth or about (3) 5 gallon cans per month.

**One recent example of actual gas purchased was a structure fire on Edison Place. At that fire all three trucks ran for 4 hours. After the fire was extinguished, our Engine then traveled to Chipley (approx 35 miles roundtrip) for a pump test where the Engine ran for 1 hr. All three trucks were fueled by our volunteers after the pump test and it took \$86.70 (Engine) \$65.01 (Tanker) and \$51.74 (Brush Truck) for a total of \$203.45 for one call and an Engine pump test on a single day.**

**Question 15 regarding purchases to AI's residence:**

I am unaware of any purchasing being sent to my resident and I verified this with Connie at the EOC. Connie and past PSD Roger Hagan instituted a policy at the inception of the WCFD that all purchases would come to the EOC for verification and to be put on the inventory records if applicable and I have followed that policy.

**Question 16 regarding air card and laptop**

The Gothards **do not** currently use any internet or the laptop computer for personal use. Ms Thompsons insinuation that the "laptop is most likely taken home" has no basis. The laptop remains in the station or in my truck where it can be secured and is available on calls. I or one of the VFF can use the laptop on scene to begin a call run report and with the air card can actually send that report as soon as the call ends. Mr Hagan conferred with Mr Gainey when the air card was purchased for the WCFD and determined it was the best and most economical way to provide internet for our dept. It was approved by Mr Hagan and purchased by Mr Gainey per county policy

**Question 15 regarding county cell phones**

Per county policy and due to public records laws, I was approved to be issued a county cell phone by Mr Hagan and it was purchased by Mr Gainey as the Fire Chief of WCFD. Mr Hagan chose the cell phone plan that was assigned to this phone and which included roaming anywhere outside of Florida. Current cell phones issued by the county include the same plan. There is currently no county policy requiring personal calls be reimbursed. As the Fire Chief for the WCFD I am on call 24/7 and have never had charges created for extra minutes of usage.

Other information:

I have 31 years of experience in the fire service including numerous hours of training and instructor certifications which I bring as Chief of the WCFD. I am also a licensed Florida EMT. I personally traveled to North Alabama in 2009 to purchase our Engine and am constantly traveling to other areas in NW Florida and SW Georgia to obtain equipment for our department at no cost to the taxpayers of Washington County. I have never asked for mileage reimbursements or to be compensated for my time from the county and I have **never used anything bought with taxpayer dollars for my personal use**. Accusations by Ms Thompson of personalized presentation helmets and frivolous spending is simply not true. Fire helmets purchased by our department are for fire service use and the only personalization is for the designation of Washington County Fire and rank. Every purchase order issued to the Washington County Fire dept has been approved and signed by the former PSD or former County Manager per county policy. All purchases made have been to ensure the safety of our firefighters and to provide a high quality response by our volunteers. Our department exceeds any other rural department in training hours and safety is our major concern. We have obtained equally as much and in most instances more equipment and gear than other fire departments in our county (who have been here for many years) in the three years we have been in operation. Although we receive less money than several other departments in our county, we have been able to do so because of careful, strategically planned spending. I believe, contrary to Ms Thompson's insinuations, that our dept DOES in fact set the example and standard for the rest of the fire departments in our county. We have a high quality, highly trained department which the residents of Washington County can be extremely proud of.

## Statement by WCFD Chief Al Gothard

The Washington County Fire began in 2009 with two trucks and no fire station. The current station was built in 2010 and now includes three trucks and 17 volunteers of which 10 are FF1 or FF2 certified, one is in fire class and five others are waiting to begin FF training. Volunteers also include four EMT'S, 1 paramedic and 1 in paramedic school. All 17 (100%) are EVOC certified. The department has never had unanswered calls when paged.

Despite a recent Fire Marshall's office complaint review, an unplanned ISO inspection and 18 separate groups of public records requests where every purchase by our department since 2009 has been inspected, there has been no finding of wrong doing by either myself or our department at any level. In addition, 4 County staff recently completed an inventory audit of the department where all fixed assets were accounted for.

I was surprised to hear recent insinuations and accusations made by Ms Thompson against the Washington County Fire Dept and myself. Her comments are misguided and irresponsible and she would do well to speak on subjects where she is properly informed. These insinuations and accusations clearly have no basis and have cost the taxpayers of this county a considerable amount of money only to be proven false.