

WASHINGTON COUNTY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

August 31, 2023, 9:00 a.m., Commission Board Room

1331 South Blvd., Chipley, FL 32428

DISTRICT 1
Alan T Bush

DISTRICT 2
David Pettis, Jr.

DISTRICT 3
Tray Hawkins

DISTRICT 4
Wesley Griffin

DISTRICT 5
David Corbin

I. PROCLAMATION

A. Call to Order - Chairman Hawkins

B. Invocation – Jeff Massey

C. Pledge

This portion of the meeting was done during the previous special meeting at 8:45.

Present – Commissioners Bush, Pettis, Hawkins, Griffin, and Corbin. Also in attendance were Clerk Bell, Deputy Clerk Brantley, County Administrator Massey, and Attorney Milton.

II. AGENDA ITEMS

1. Discussion Regarding Fire Services – Justin Leach, Fire Services Coordinator addressed the board regarding the 5-year plan he put together. During the first year, the plan is to put on three full-timers 24/48. This will put them at Sunny Hills with coverage 24/7. This will prevent the volunteers from having to respond in the early morning hours for something such as a fallen tree or a fallen power line. The annual salary would be \$49,220.00 in addition to benefits, which would total \$79,840.00. The annual total is \$239,000.00. None of this can be done without a commitment from the board to establish an ongoing revenue source. The revenue can be implemented by a fire assessment fee, MSBU tax, or earmarked sales tax, with the fire assessment fee being the best option. There needs to be something in place so that the employee's job is not interrupted due to a lack of allotted funds.

The employee plan is for one 24/48, and two SAFER staff during the day. From 8 – 4, there would be three. There would be three shifts alternating staff.

Commissioner Hawkins said that he wanted to know if they could legally have one staff on shift.

Justin Leach said that it can legally be done. The individual is not going to enter a structure fire without anyone there but there is nothing that says they cannot spray water from the outside.

Commissioner Hawkins added that they could put lights on a tree and utilize their lights to stop traffic and so on.

Justin Leach said that it is all about taking some of the burden off the volunteer firefighters.

Modifications will have to be made to the station for a 24-hour shift. Discussions have been held with a couple of building inspectors. In the first year, there is a way that the station sprinkler would not have to be done.

Commissioner Hawkins said that he would like to take it one step at a time. Get everything ready this budget year, such as the station and equipment moving forward.

Justin Leach said that a meeting was held with the unincorporated fire stations last Saturday and the need for newer equipment and manpower were the top two things mentioned.

In the second year, the plan would be to get more of a compact fire engine outside of the two from the appropriation funds and apply for an AFG Grant or apply for appropriations to build another station for Five Points. The station has holes in the roof, and mold, and is completely run down.

It is understood that years ago the property was given to Five Points. If the station ceases to exist the property reverts to the original owner.

Commissioner Hawkins asked if there is adequate property at the B.J. Collins Recreation Center if the board chose to go that route. It is around 3/4 of a mile from the current station.

In year three, the plan is to do an additional SAFER Grant for three full-time firefighters. The SAFER Grant pays for the staff for four years. For an additional four years, it would pay for these five people. As growth continues different positions will form. One position that would be requested is a training captain position, which would ensure that all stations comply with training. Other positions would be other professional services. The positions do not require retirement to be paid on them.

The goal for the fourth year is to update all the stations, which would include generators, exhaust units, sprinkler systems, and day heaters. This would allow for firefighters to be located at any station.

The goal for the fifth year is to break down everything that was done in the first four years and lay out the next five years.

There is no need to be in a battle with EMS. It would create a bad environment. The county is only as good as its emergency services.

Commissioner Hawkins asked if it would be better to utilize this year to prepare for next year. There is a budget line item in the budget and can only be removed by board approval.

Justin Leach told the board that he applied for a \$28,000.00 grant for a sprinkler system for Sunny Hills. Notification of the grant determination will not be until the end of September.

Commissioner Hawkins asked Justin Leach if he was looking for an MSTU.

Justin Leach said yes. No fire department can live solely off of grants. Grants are used to improve what is already occurring.

Sunny Hills is growing and the closeness of the houses that are being built could cause connecting fires.

County Administrator Massey said they are currently looking into different funding sources.

Commissioner Hawkins said that all information needs to be noted when coming before the board with a suggestion for a funding source and the county attorneys should be involved.

Commissioner Pettis asked if any chiefs were in opposition to the plan.

Note – There were no comments from the audience.

Commissioner Griffin asked what the franchise fee tax was set aside for.

Commissioner Hawkins guessed that 80% went to offset the sheriff and EMS.

Commissioner Hawkins said that an MSTU is statutorily obligated to meet the requirements of an MSTU, just as the MSBU in Sunny Hills. The MSTU is specifically set up and earmarked for EMS/Fire Services/First Responders. It cannot be used for any other services.

Commissioner Griffin questioned what the franchise fee could be used for.

Commissioner Hawkins said it offsets general revenue.

Commissioner Hawkins asked Floyd Aycock, Chipley Fire what percentage of Chipley firefighters work within 7 - 8 miles of the department. Over 50% of Chipley firefighter's calls are outside of the city. Chipley not having to respond to so many calls will be a cost savings for the department.

Floyd Aycock said 75%.

He informed the board that he was not aware of the plan, however, it is needed and he does support it. The city departments that are providing services outside need to benefit also. The issues are the same.

Commissioner Hawkins said the funding mechanism is not being changed. Any changes would have to come before the board. The intent is to offset Chipley being the only response to mutual aid.

Floyd Aycock responded to a comment that was brought up in a meeting before this one about the Chipley Fire Department. Chipley Fire Department's numbers speak for the amount that they receive.

Al Gothard, Sunny Hills Fire Department addressed the funding comment that he made in a previous meeting about the difference in funding for each department. It was not his intent to take anything away from the Chipley Fire Department. The department is great and it is good to know the support is there. The numbers mentioned were not correct. The point was to show the difference in the funding formula. Some of the departments on the south end receive very little and this would help.

Commissioner Corbin said that he is glad the plan was presented before the board as the board has requested. That would address the SAFER Grant coming to an end. The work needs to be spread out especially as the county grows.

2. Discussion Regarding Emergency Medical Services – Randy Truette, EMS Director told the board that in every meeting that has been held since budget discussions, everyone has agreed that every public safety agency needs to move forward. Washington County EMS is running more calls than ever. The objective is to get the residents of Washington County to the most appropriate

facility to treat their current needs. Someone waiting for an ambulance occurs daily.

The five-year plan is based on estimates, which depending on the growth of the county the plan may change.

The request before the board today is for a twelve-hour truck for peak call times and to look at making it a 24-hour truck next year. It is difficult to say how much the twelve-hour truck will generate. This truck is basically for relief. A conservative estimate is \$70,000.00 - \$80,000.00.

Commissioner Griffin said that he feels it is a need.

Randy Truette said that there are many outlying circumstances. Sixty nursing home patient evacuees from down south were recently transported to Graceville Hospital, and will all be transferred to Washington County.

Commissioner Hawkins said he and the sheriff spoke about EMS generating additional revenue and a plan to move forward with it. A number is not being requested to tie to it.

From 2021 to current the debt amount has moved from \$550,000.00 to \$1,600,000.00.

Randy Truette spoke on bad debt. They were righting it off. The collection was canceled because the law was changed on it. The hard collection on the bad debt was stopped which affected revenue. A right-off policy has not been installed. Under collections, the most bad debt that was collected was about \$2,500.00.

Commissioner Hawkins said when the debt was at \$550,000.00, was revenue coming in. What generated the spike?

Randy Truette said it is a smoke screen. Some of the money shown on the operations report was being transferred out to a third-party agency for collections, therefore, it was not recorded there. It was written off of his report but sent to an agency for collection. A certain part of the bad debt was being sent to a true collection agency; a credit reporting collection agency. The more the collection agency collects, the more the company makes. Most places do a 90-day bad debt, however, Washington County pushed theirs out to 180 days. After 180 days the debt is shifted to a third party that would do hard collections. There is no policy.

EMS contracted with a law firm on motor vehicle crashes. In many cases, by the time EMS has their reports done, the hospital has billed and there is only a certain amount of money there and the hospital gets most of it. Therefore that is written off or billed to the patient.

Sheriff Crews addressed the board regarding the pursuit of bad debt collections saying that he was not sure if an individual could be brought before a judge regarding these situations. Everybody does not pay for the service. There is also an issue with abuse of the EMS system. Patrol deputies also experience the same thing. No matter what the call is, each one is answered. This needs to be researched. What is the next step after the debt has gone through the billing company and the debt company?

Randy Truette said that the collection agency was not paying off, however, the billing company is doing a great job.

If someone is willing to pay cash upfront, they receive a 40% discount.

Commissioner Hawkins asked what the shortfall was for EMS to put the second shift on.

County Administrator Massey said a conservative number is \$70,000.00 and then \$130,000.00.

Commissioner Hawkins said the grant is in the sheriff's budget, which he and the sheriff have discussed. It will stay in his budget for 911 services.

Sheriff Crews said that since that discussion one thing that has come up is they asked for more 911 money. Budgeted is over \$500,000.00. If that comes through, that is budgeted items already through the sheriff's office, which is over \$550,000.00.

Commissioner Hawkins said that he has \$175,000.00 for computer maintenance and \$18,100.00 for accounting and payroll. There may be some other items included.

Sheriff Crews said Inspired, Smartcop, and the communications center were discussed. On the sheriff's budget, that should hopefully give the county back over half a million.

Commissioner Hawkins said it should come in early October. It will cost \$130,000.00 in additional revenue to balance the budget. The insurance savings was \$56,000.00. He confirmed the negative from Johnnie Pettis, Finance Director as \$38,000.00.

Commissioner Hawkins said that he feels certain the funds from DEO will come in. He asked Mr. Massey if he felt the same way.

Through the state appropriations and qualifications, \$194,000.00 will come in as revenue at the beginning of October from the grant through DEO that will offset the sheriff's salary. The money will not be moved out of the sheriff's salary. The revenue sources from general revenue will be offset by grant revenue.

Could cash carried forward be utilized this year to offset the budget and regenerate it with revenue once the grant comes in?

Clerk Bell said that is what the committee agreed to.

Commissioner Bush clarified that there was a budget shortfall and that cash carried forward would be used to offset that. As long as it is not recurring, that can be done. The same increases of \$526,000.00 for EMS and \$512,000.00 +/- for the sheriff's office will remain in place.

Commissioner Hawkins said essentially the budget is not being balanced with cash carried forward. It is being balanced with revenues that have been pledged but they have not yet received in this budget season. The budget will be balanced.

It would be a good idea to receive a report from EMS and the sheriff to see what the plan is to move forward with AR to make it better. If not, write it off.

Randy told the board that he and Seamus have had multiple conversations with billing companies.

Seamus O'Neill said they were told that most write off annually.

Randy Truette said that they have to put a write-off policy in place with them. Every effort has been made to collect the revenue before it is labeled bad debt.

Sheriff Crews said before anything is done he would like to talk with County Attorney Milton about the ones that are abusing the system, if the board is okay with that.

Commissioner Bush said the Florida Association of Counties may be a source of information regarding how other counties have been successful with their collections.

Recess – 10:16 – 10:33

3. 2023 – 2024 Proposed Budget – Jeff Massey presented budget highlights.

Retirement Contributions

The budget includes increases for retirement in the regular class, special risk, senior management, and elected officials. There have been annual increases. The increases affected the budget across the county.

Salaries

All department budgets will be increased by 5% in Regular Salaries and Wages. The board approved this item this morning in the special meeting. This is getting the county closer to the 2026 requirement of \$15.00.

Medicaid County Contributions to Medicaid *started in July

\$435,184.00 for 2023-24 (\$421,986.00 for 2022-23)

Commissioner Bush said that when the county had to start contributing to Medicaid the state covered a portion and the county covered a portion. Is the county at 100%?

Chairman Hawkins said that he believes that point was reached last year.

Agriculture Center and Animal Control

Increase in Regular Salaries and Wages, FICA, Medicare, and Retirement Contributions

Board of County Commissioners/Administration

Other Contractual Services - Increased by \$90,000 to reflect the line item for the mowing contract. The first year it was paid from a non-recurring fund.

Building

Projected revenues increased overall by \$87,500

Salaries- Increased by \$90,188 for adding a Deputy Building Inspector. Funding was also included for an additional truck for the inspector. The department is self-funded.

Commissioner Hawkins included the board has approved the FTE for this. Has the position been advertised?

Wendy White, Human Resources said it will be advertised no later than Tuesday. The goal for the hire

date is set for October 1.

Johnnie Pettis said \$45,000.00 was added to the projected budget for a new vehicle.

Code Enforcement and the Planning Department

Increase in Regular Salaries and Wages, FICA, Medicare, and Retirement Contributions

Clerk of Court

The overall increase of \$22,073 is based on increased employee retirement costs and a 5% salary increase for non-court employees.

E911

Increase in Regular Salaries and Wages, FICA, Medicare, and Retirement Contributions. As of a change in the law effective July 1, grant funds can be requested to cover revenue that has been coming out of the budget. This was not reflected, because it has not come in. The grants are ready to be submitted.

Commissioner Hawkins suggested the board be prepared in the future that the sheriff's money that they have has been put down; only part of it is in the base. None of this is in the base. In the future budgets, it will slowly go downhill.

County Administrator Massey said a recurring funding mechanism will be put in there from now on at the state level. It will not be a one-time charge.

EOC/ EMPG/EMPA

EMPG Grant - The budget includes funding for new computers and there is an increase in regular salaries and wages, FICA, medicare, and retirement contributions.

EMS

The budget includes the addition of a new ambulance, which will create three new employees. It has been worked out to \$70,000 in revenue from the ambulance and \$130,000 in bad debt collections.

Fire Control

The budget reflects an increase of \$249,521.32 for 3 additional full-time employees.

Chairman Hawkins added that the funding can only be removed by board action. The funds can be carried over as cash carried forward.

Fire Operation Fund – The fund increased by \$58,000 due to the difference in a ½ Mil.

General Building Services – The \$100,000 that was included in the budget for the park improvement was moved to Mr. Swauger's budget to continue the park improvements.

Grants

The budget increased due to a 5% salary increase, 2 full-time employees, and retirement contributions.

Human Resources

Increase in Regular Salaries and Wages, FICA, Medicare, and Retirement Contributions

Library – Renae Rountree, Library Director told the board that she provided three options in her budget which were a 5% salary increase for staff, extra additional use service person, and use services and a facilities maintenance person. The amount of children using the library is increasing tremendously. The board should be aware that she will likely be back before them asking for the additional staff. Currently, there are only three library staff out of 13 that make more than \$15 per hour.

County Administrator Massey said the increases and decreases made by the library director balance out.

MSBU

The budget has a decrease of \$160,000 + due to letting the funds build before another project is done.

Property Appraiser

Wages and Retirement Contributions increase

Radio Communications

The transfer of \$50,000 from the general fund was removed and will be reevaluated next year. There are enough funds for cash carried forward in the account.

Commissioner Hawkins told Lynn Abel if something unforeseen comes up, request an amendment before the board.

Recycling

\$100,000 was put in the recycling budget for a new vehicle and dump trailer.

Sheriff's Department

Retirement, 5%

The other line items for the servers, computer equipment, and maintenance will be reimbursed through the grant that was discussed earlier. All the non-sworn employees will receive a 5% raise.

Supervisor of Elections

The request for an extra employee was removed. The total budget increase is \$110,000, which reflects the cost of three elections next year. The money should come back in the years when there is no election.

Tourist Development Council

Increase in Regular Salaries and Wages, FICA, Medicare, and Retirement Contributions

Transportation

Transportation budget - Increased salaries(5%), taxes, and retirement based on industry pay scales.

Public Works

Capital-Capitalized – Decreased by \$1,223,012

A lot of equipment was sold, generating revenue. The equipment that can be sold is almost complete, therefore the funds come back out.

Shop

Part-Shop- Increased by \$72,000 due to the cost of parts increasing.

Tires-Shop – Increased by \$22,696 for new tires to sell equipment at auction. It will pay off at the sale.

Inmate Crews

Parks Repair/Maintenance – \$100,000 moved from building maintenance - park maintenance and repair.

Veteran's Affairs

Increase in Regular Salaries and Wages, FICA, Medicare, and Retirement Contributions

Staffing Plan Approval for 2023-24

98 + Full-time employees

Outside Agencies

Economic Development – The budget includes an increase of \$54,000 to \$75,000 due to the need for an EDC Director.

Council on Aging - Clerk Bell said the request was for \$28,000, which is included in the budget, however, the previous amount was \$18,000. Board direction is needed. It was not realized this was included as a committee recommendation.

Jane Dellwo said that technology and improvements were listed as the reason for additional funds.

Rena Rountree, Library said the executive director was recently replaced. The request was made before that because they were concerned about HIPPA Compliance. It is unknown if the new director wants this.

Commissioner Hawkins said if the new executive director wants this, they should come before the board and request a budget amendment.

This item will be left at \$18,000.

BAKER Act was adjusted to \$85,000.

Commissioner Bush asked if guidance had been received for the opioid funds the county was due to receive. Could the funds be used for some of the Baker Act expenses?

County Administrator Massey said it has to be for prevention, however, he does not have clear guidance on it. He was told to call Perry and Young.

Commissioner Hawkins asked Attorney Milton to speak with Les. Guidance needs to be in writing.

Clerk Bell said that some of the funds have been received.

County Administrator Massey said the county is growing, however, the revenues are not keeping up with the cost of needs. With the county growing ad valorem will start to increase.

County Administrator Massey said the board was awarded appropriations for Dumajack, which was \$600,000/\$700,000 short. The lobbyist said additional funds can be requested for phase 2.

Appropriations can also be requested for the improvements at the annex.

Commissioner Corbin said agreed to try to finish the one that they already have.

County Administrator Massey said that Representative Abbott and Melvin Engineering have a set of plans and costing for the Rural Infrastructure Project for sewer and water on Highway 77 in Sunny Hills. The feedback has been good.

County Administrator Massey agreed with Commissioner Hawkins, saying the funds for the above project will not be from appropriations.

Commissioner Bush asked what happened to Washington Street.

County Administrator Massey clarified that he was asking about Hartford. Funding was thought to be had from the TRIP project through DOT, however, it fell through, however, another avenue is being pursued.

That is the only piece between Highway 77 and Highway 231 and it meets the east-west corridor.

Commissioner Bush said it would be interesting to know what the traffic count is, which may be beneficial when applying. It is significant in the evenings.

Commissioner Corbin mentioned that he receives a lot of calls about the area.

County Administrator Massey said they did deed transfers and everything to acquire the right of way needed to straighten out the curve on the road and a lot of the design is done. It is being worked on.

Commissioner Bush said they had discussed finishing Elkcam out to there but that would be a significant cost even though the county has everything they need to finish from the end of pavement to the intersection of Orange Hill and Buckhorn.

It is best to have a project that is ready to prevent requesting extensions from DOT.

County Administrator Massey advised the board when appropriation money is received if work isn't done expediently costs will go up and with appropriations, you cannot ask for additional money.

Commissioner Hawkins asked if he was referring to Davidson Road.

County Administrator Massey said yes, and Crystal Lake. There are challenges with all of this.

Commissioner Bush said that in the programming office, it messes things up when they commit money to a county and it is not delivered timely. They have to redo their budget.

III. ADJOURN

