

**STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA
MCDOWELL COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
SPECIAL SESSION – April 15, 2024**

Assembly

The McDowell County Board of Commissioners met in Special Session Marion Community Building 191 N. Main St. Marion, N.C. on Monday, April 15, 2024, at 5:30 p.m.

County Commissioners Members Present

David N. Walker, Chairman; Tony Brown, Vice-Chair; and Lynn Greene

Members Absent

Chris Allison and Patrick Ellis

Others Present

Mayor Steve Little, Bob Boyette, City Manager; City Council Members, Ashley Wooten, County Manager; Sena Allison, Clerk to the Board; Alison Bell, Finance Officer; Will Kehler, EMS Director and Ray McDaniel, Marion Fire Department Chief

Call to Order

Mayor Little called meeting to order at 5:45 p.m. The members said The Pledge of Allegiance.

Meeting

The Mayor began with the introduction with stating there are not as many volunteer firemen since Covid. This put a need for the Marion Area District that puts a huge impact on the Station, that has to pay for staff without the volunteers. He spoke on the need for enough full-time firemen to meet the standards of the department, as well as how they are not just firemen but first responders in emergency calls as well. Chairman Walker added how the Board values the working relationship with the Council, and to form a partnership to develop the needs of the emergency departments.

Bob Boyette started with how Ray McDaniel will be speaking on the general staffing situation that is currently what the department is working with and to give an incident that will relate to the necessity for funding in regards to legalities and safety.

Ray McDaniel began with stating anytime they are able to get any funding, it is always vital to saving people's lives, whether that is rescue equipment or any form of vehicles the different departments need. Mr. McDaniel stated he is speaking tonight on staffing, and how NFPA and OSHA have always regulated the departments. He said OSHA is fixing to change

the standards as to what Fire Departments adhere to - through the NFPA. Their issue is having enough staffing on the scene. They spent a week testing the department through the NC Fire Chief Consulting, where it was determined they are severely understaffed.

Mr. McDaniel told how they are faced with the decision of what to do with their limited staff when they are called to duty as NFPA says they should have 2 in (two going in with a hand line to put water on the fire), 2 out (one safety and one Commanding Officer) in which they do not have and it makes each call more critical. He gave some examples of using other departments to help run their trucks, went over a particular fire with chemicals that could explode with calls to several crews from other departments as they did not have the staff to cover. At that time, the City Manager cited our Fire Department being out of compliance with OSHA, and the consultant firm recommended from the current 3.33 staff level per shift, to get to a 5 staff, or at the least of a 4 staff level per shift. Mr. Boyette went over the hand-out that was given to each member of the meeting, Marion Fire Department Funding Needs and Marion Area Fire District Tax Value and Tax Rate for the fiscal year of 2024-2025. A general discussion of how many volunteers are active with responders, the training they are required to have.

Chairman Walker asked what would be the outcome by OSHA if the fire department sent in understaffed firemen to a call, with a scenario where one of them were injured, in which Chief McDaniel said he along with both the Board and Council would be held responsible with the contract retained. He spoke on a mobile home fire that they responded to with only 2 firefighters to put out the fire and how either way the call is made, there is always liability with understaffing. Vice Chair Brown asked if other Fire Departments are facing this issue and Mr. McDaniels said yes and they all work together whether it is using each other's trucks, equipment or staff. Chairman Walker asked about grants and what the Marion Fire Dept. has done to try to lower the insurance rates, in which The Chief spoke on the competitiveness of acquiring grants, going out to every career event to speak to getting volunteers.

Mr. Boyette touched on a few AFG grants received for equipment, a vehicle exhaust system, air packs and thermal imaging cameras. He mentioned the city and county worked together on a \$500,000 funding that may be receiving for equipment. Chairman Walker reminded them of saving \$100,000 to the city and county on a chassis that needed to be switched, due to Vice Chair Brown suggesting a used one. Mr. McDaniel said Representative Greene had helped in getting \$500,000 for new trucks. Chet Effler spoke in regards to looking into the future for what the needs will be, in which VC Brown said they all needed to look at the protection of all departments, the groups liability and safety of the public. Commissioner Greene spoke on Police, Fire and EMS working together to protect all the other departments and the citizens. Mayor Little spoke on exposure of liability in being out of compliance and how no one wants a life lost. Vice Chair Brown cited he personally sees this need as overwhelming, and is on board to assist, however the long- range need on how to take care of the other Fire Departments are a concern. His opinion is to move forward with the request today. Mr. Effler suggested getting a plan together as to not get so far behind in the future of Fire Departments. Chairman Walker stated the importance in demonstrating any needs are met by receiving a 5 to 10-year presentation on equipment, personnel costs and staffing and to be able to show to citizens what the need is and how it will be addressed. The Chairman stated he is supporting tonight's request with the outline of the plan he is asking for future costs and needs. Mayor Little asked for last comments in which Commissioner Greene made a motion the Board grant

the request by the Fire Department, with a second by Vice Chair Brown. The motion passed by a vote of 3-0.

The City Manager stated they will come up with their 50% share as well. Chet Effler suggested the Utility Committee come up with a study or proposal for Emergency Services for 5-15 years as to not to be put in this situation again. Mr. Boyette and Mr. Wooten were thanked by Mayor Little.

Chairman Walker recognized Will Kehler and asked for his assistance in the plan as well, as he is the best Director in the State.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 7:06 p.m.