

Draft

**BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
CALLED MEETING** February 16, 2023

**ALEXANDER COUNTY
STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA**

PRESENT:

Scotty Abernathy, Stony Point Fire
Roger Brown, Ellendale Fire
Mark Earle, Fire Marshal
Eugene Earp, Alexander Rescue
Ben Faulkenberry, County Attorney
Coty Fox, Vashti Fire
Whitney Daniels, Wittenburg Fire
Michael Farthing, Bethlehem Fire
Chad Fisher, Bethlehem Fire
Greg Foster, Taylorsville Fire
Tony Fox, Wittenburg Fire
Rusty Graham, CVCC
Gary Herman, PIO
Jennifer Herman, Finance Director
Kent Herman, Commissioner
Garrett Huffman, Assistant Fire Marshal
Dennis James, Sugar Loaf Fire
Chad Jolly, Bethlehem Fire

Matt Jordan, Taylorsville Fire
Tim Keever, Hiddenite Fire
Trick Lee, Alexander Rescue
Charlie Marshall, Taylorsville Fire
Melanie Millsaps, Emergency Services
Scott Mitchell, Hiddenite Fire
Marty Pennell, Chairman
Ronnie Reese, Commissioner
Matt Scoggins, Sugar Loaf Fire
Ashley Starnes, Bethlehem Fire
Jamie Starnes, Clerk to the Board
Phillip Starnes, Stony Point Fire
Randy Walker, Wittenburg Fire
Mark Warren, Vashti Fire
Ray Warren, Hiddenite Fire
David White, Ellendale Fire
Larry Yoder, Commissioner

A joint Alexander County Board of Commissioners / Chief's Meeting was held on Thursday, February 16, 2023 at 7:00 PM in Room 103 of the CVCC / Alexander Center in Taylorsville, North Carolina.

CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Pennell called the meeting to order at 7:00 PM.

INVOCATION & PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Commissioner Reese gave the invocation and Commissioner Herman led the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag.

OPENING COMMENTS

Chairman Pennell thanked everyone for attending, noting that the main topic of discussion tonight was the training facility but that this was also an opportunity to address other issues if needed. He was thankful to have open dialogue with fire departments concerning the safety of our citizens.

Commissioner Herman agreed and stated that he had requested this meeting in order to get several questions related to the training facility answered and make sure everyone was on the same page before moving forward.

TRAINING FACILITY DISCUSSION

Scotty Abernathy, Stony Point Fire Chief, supported a training facility with college involvement due to certification requirements for firefighters. He discussed benefits of collaborating with CVCC such as sharing construction costs, tracking of certification paperwork, and liability coverage for any unforeseen injuries while training, also noting that without an agreement with CVCC, either the County or fire departments would incur the cost of instructors for classes.

Eugene Earp, Alexander Rescue Squad Sergeant and Training Officer, stated that, although ISO ratings did not affect rescue squad agencies, the Alexander Rescue Squad supported the training facility and intended to utilize it. He was also in favor of college involvement and felt a facility located on County-owned property would be ideal.

David White, Ellendale Fire Chief, agreed with comments made by Chief Abernathy and Mr. Earp, noting that Ellendale Fire Department's by-laws required 18 hours of certification training through a college each year.

Ashley Starnes, Bethlehem Fire Chief, said that a training facility in Alexander County had been discussed for at least 30 years and that Bethlehem would support it regardless of location; however, he mentioned that Bethlehem Fire & Rescue had 4 acres that could be used in lieu of the fairgrounds property if there was interest. He also preferred college involvement but stated that certification classes could be held through CVCC without a partnership agreement for a training facility.

Rusty Graham, CVCC Fire Protection Technology / Emergency Management Programs Director, discussed a new ISO 9 Program designed to maximize ISO credits for fire departments in Catawba and Alexander Counties. A key part of the program requires a facility for training but the only one available is located at the CVCC main campus in Catawba County. Mr. Graham could not speak on behalf of senior leadership regarding CVCC's potential financial contribution toward a training facility in Alexander County but felt the current CVCC / Alexander Center would be the best location due to adequate restrooms, lighting, and access to a water source. He also clarified that CVCC would provide an instructor regardless of location and/or partnership status.

Scott Mitchell, Hiddenite Fire Chief, supported a training facility with or without college involvement but agreed that the CVCC / Alexander Center site would be ideal, especially since the County owned the property (a requirement for CVCC to fund construction of a burn tower).

In regards to hesitancy with locating the facility within town limits, he advised that smoke generated would be minimal, comparable to burning leaves.

Commissioner Reese mentioned the Board's concerns related to smoke and water runoff, not only because the CVCC / Alexander Center is located in town, but also its proximity to a landing zone and the potential new courthouse site.

Rusty Graham reiterated Scott Mitchell's comments about minimal smoke created by burn towers, also pointing out that most training would occur after business hours and that only 200-300 gallons of water would be used, creating little runoff.

Matt Jordan, Taylorsville Fire Chief, was excited to be this close to a training facility becoming reality, noting that his department trained several times each month and would definitely use it. He also supported CVCC involvement but felt one point of contact should handle scheduling and coordinate classes. This should simplify the process and prevent fire departments from having to jump through hoops to utilize the facility.

Coty Fox, Vashti Fire Chief, was in favor of a training facility as well as the ISO points that could be gained from it. He also agreed with Mr. Jordan that fire departments should be able to easily schedule and use the facility when needed.

Whitney Daniels, Wittenburg Fire Assistant Chief, supported a training facility regardless of location, but preferred working with CVCC who could assist with funding and materials.

Greg Foster, Taylorsville Fire Training Captain, assured the Board that a training facility in Alexander County would be used frequently, especially when considering that a fire truck must be taken out of service for approx. 15 hours to participate in training in adjoining counties. He also supported CVCC involvement as well as funding that the college could provide to the project.

Matt Scoggins, Sugar Loaf Fire Deputy Chief, supported a training facility in Alexander County with CVCC involvement, which would allow easier access to training opportunities. He discussed the difficulty in recruiting volunteers, noting that most firefighters worked a full-time job and could only volunteer on a part-time basis.

Chairman Pennell asked if anyone had knowledge as to why a training facility never became a reality in 30 years of discussion. Matt Jordan felt lack of communication was one reason, noting that meetings between fire departments and the Board of Commissioners to discuss issues had only began last year. Ashley Starnes stated that lack of property was another hurdle that delayed the project and Commissioner Yoder added that lack of funding had always played a role.

Commissioner Reese thanked fire departments for their service to the community, noting that the opinions voiced tonight would assist the Board in making informed decisions and creating the best training facility possible.

Commissioner Yoder agreed and advised that specifics related to the training facility would be considering during upcoming budget discussions and become effective with the 2023-2024 budget year.

FIRE DEPARTMENT FUNDING & OTHER ISSUES

Charlie Marshall, Taylorsville Fire Assistant Chief and Board President, spoke about challenges for fire departments in small towns and counties such as limited funding sources, rising equipment costs, and lack of volunteers. He compared Taylorsville Fire's annual budget (\$320,000) with Newton Fire Department (\$4,745,000), pointing out that Alexander County frequently loses volunteers to larger department and municipalities who offered paid positions. Due to the number of calls Taylorsville Fire runs each year (1,033 in 2022), he hoped the Board would consider additional funding for paid staff (similar to that currently provided to Hiddenite and Ellendale Fire Departments) due to the positive impact on response time. Mr. Marshall informed the Board that the Taylorsville Town Council, whom he and Matt Jordan met with recently, would like to discuss funding options for Taylorsville Fire with the Board of Commissioners as well as a long-term plan for fire services.

Commissioner Reese reviewed yearly funding to each fire department (including fire taxes and County General Fund appropriations) since 2018, which he felt should indicate that the Board was committed to fire departments.

In relation, Chairman Pennell stated that Alexander County had increased funding to fire departments by over \$1 million since 2018, which includes this year's \$63,000 allotment year to supplement funding until revaluation was completed, an amount that was discussed with and agreed upon by fire chiefs prior to implementation. He could not speak for actions taken by prior commissioners, but felt this Board had shown its support and opened communication with fire departments, only to hear complaints about funding.

Commissioner Herman stated that, according to State officials, Alexander County fire departments were doing well on their ISO ratings but could benefit from having another station in the northern part of the county. In addition, General Assembly approval to allocate ¼-cent of the Article 43 sales tax for fire departments looks promising. However, he expressed concerns with recent lack of response from a department during daytime hours, noting that he understood difficulties in recruiting volunteers but stressed the importance of responding to all calls.

Chairman Pennell and Commissioner Reese agreed. Commissioner Reese said he had no tolerance for failure to respond to emergency calls and that the Board was trusting fire departments to spend additional funds to address these types of issues.

Eugene Earp questioned whether the Fire Commission that was appointed in 2021 could assist with future issues related to funding, projects, and planning.

Matt Jordan replied that the Fire Commission only met briefly after being appointed. He also stated that, being passionate about funding, he would always fight for his department but hoped he

had not offended the Board by any comment made. He stated that fire taxes had only been increased by one penny in 25 years and he hoped to continue working with the Board for solutions.

Ashley Starnes added that lack of and cost to acquire property for a training facility was another reason the Fire Commission stalled, a problem that has also hindered Bethlehem Fire & Rescue's efforts to build another station.

Coty Fox discussed how helpful the \$63,000 appropriation from the County had been to address response time in the Vashti fire district. Thanks to daytime staffing made possible by this funding, two homes were saved earlier this year due to quick response. Vashti also has hopes for a second station to better serve the community outside the 5-mile Vashti fire district boundary.

Chairman Pennell reported that he would be speaking with a CVCC Board of Trustees member tomorrow as well as meeting with the Chairman of the Taylorsville Town Board in the next several days.

CLOSED SESSION – N.C.G.S. 143-318.11(a)(5) CONTRACTUAL

Chairman Pennell made a motion to enter into Closed Session at 8:28 PM to discuss contractual matters pursuant to N.C.G.S. 143-318.11(a)(5). Commissioner Herman seconded the motion, which passed unanimously.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business, Commissioner Herman made a motion to adjourn at 9:43 PM. Commissioner Reese seconded the motion, which passed unanimously.

Marty A. Pennell, Chairman

Jamie M. Starnes, Clerk to the Board