



**CITY OF OKEECHOBEE, FLORIDA
CITY COUNCIL AND COUNTY COMMISSION
JUNE 25, 2020, JOINT WORKSHOP
SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION**

I. CALL TO ORDER

The Joint Workshop was called to order on June 25, 2020, by Okeechobee Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) Chairperson Burroughs at 6:00 P.M. held at the Okeechobee County Historic Courthouse, Room 270, 304 Northwest 2nd Street, Okeechobee, Florida 34972.

Those in attendance were noted as follows: Mayor Dowling R. Watford, Jr., City Council Members Wes Abney, Monica Clark, Bob Jarriel, and Bobby Keefe (via telephone), County Commissioner Chair Terry Burroughs, County Commissioners Bryant Culpepper, Bradley Goodbread, Kelly Owens, and David Hazellief, City Clerk Lane Gamiotea, City Attorney John Fumero, City Administrator Marcos MontesDeOca, County Attorney Wade Vose, County Administrator Robbie Chartier, and County Deputy Clerk Jeff Shain.

II. COMMENCEMENT

The invocation was offered by Mayor Watford. The Pledge of Allegiance was led by Commissioner Goodbread.

III. AGENDA

Chair Burroughs yielded the floor to Mayor Watford, who provided a summary of the progress made at the task force meetings [the group consists of Mayor Watford, Chair Burroughs, City Attorney Fumero, County Attorney Vose, City Administrator MontesDeOca, and County Administrator Chartier]. The summary highlights, a copy of which has been attached to the official minute file, was also presented on a slide presentation. The joint recommendations for the fire service agreement are based on current services provided by the County. The City would pay the County to provide fire suppression, rescue operations, mass casualty, incident response, major disaster, and fire prevention services within the City.

The City desires to use the current County fire assessment rate as the basis for a fee calculation for the first year. The Council will need to decide to cover the cost and be included in the County's current fire assessment rate study. This will determine the true fire assessment rate for City properties. Any fees collected, such as inspection fees, will go to the City to offset costs. Equipment such as fire trucks, bunker gear, etc. will be provided to the County at no cost. The County will maintain vehicles at no charge to the City. The Council will also need to decide whether they will allow the County to store fire apparatuses at the existing City facility and for how long. The City desires to have a five-year agreement; the BOCC needs to officially make a decision on this. The method in how to track and evaluate the County's performance would be determined after applicable computer software has been implemented by the County. County staff is currently researching the various types of software available to provide these reports.

The City will determine whether they will pay for transferred firefighters to attend Paramedic school. The County has proposed taking seven City fire personnel (six Paramedics and one Inspector). The Council wants all employees protected so the County will be deciding whether they will take all City fire personnel and use them as attrition presents itself. The Council will have to address paying for the additional employees until attrition takes place. City Pension Options: employee could stay in City pension plan or choose to enroll in County plan. The process to handle salary, vacation/sick accruals/current balances are being negotiated by both Administrators.

The Fire Union will have to agree to the proposal (Interlocal Agreement) to complete the process as an amendment to the current contract, specifically on the topics of seniority, rank and probationary periods. In conclusion, Mayor Watford noted he would be remiss in his duty to the City Council by not sharing the discussion of requiring a dual referendum by the task force. Each entity's Attorney will need to provide their individual legal opinion on how to handle the issue.

Chair Burroughs opened the floor for comments. Commissioner Culpepper stated the decision should go to a referendum since it is up to the voters to decide this. He was concerned with increases to residential property insurance premiums stating the lower income range residents will be affected greatly. Then countered, when commercial tax rates are lowered, it helps the commercial property owners. He asked for all to stop and think about how many people will be affected the most by having to pay more. In conclusion, he questioned what the people were going to end up with.

Council Member Abney asked for clarification on how certain fees will be remitted to the City to offset costs of services rendered. Chair Burroughs confirmed the intent is for the County to collect the fees and reimburse the City for inspections and so forth. Council Member Jarriel asked what the time limit would be for the County to store fire apparatuses in the existing City facility. Mayor Watford responded, the Council will have to make that decision, as well as other options such as housing the County fire personnel. The assumption is the building would be utilized until the County can build a new facility.

Commissioner Hazellief did not want to address the specific issue of a five-year agreement when asked by Council Member Jarriel, stating only the highlights should be discussed. Commissioner Goodbread noted his two main issues are: no City resident gets hurt and the services do not fall on the County to fund.

Discussion ensued until it was confirmed there were several issues needing to be addressed by each entity. From those decisions, costs would be further refined and provided at a future workshop.

IV. PUBLIC COMMENT

City Fire Chief Herb Smith asked several questions related to replacing equipment, implementing a fire assessment, and how confusing the discussions are since the two departments operate on many different scopes. When the proposed changes are made, those differences can impact City residents more than what is realized. Another issue the Council will have to address is whether it is better to implement a fire assessment in the City to cover the cost of paying the County for the fire services, or continue to use the current millage rate. He continued, several are in favor of combining these services on the concept it will save the City taxpayers money. Those same individuals have also implied the Council could use the savings to beautify the City. He questioned the savings as the dollars used to fund his Department would be split between paying the County for fire services and City beautification costs.

City Fire Captain Lalo Rodriguez stated he would like to see the final numbers. He then asked "why should either entity stop at combining fire services, this is supposed to be about money back in our pockets, then one government is the best method, why even keep the City?"

Mr. Wes Williamson commented he understood this is a tough decision. The Economic Council's mission statement is "to create an environment that promotes prudent economic growth and improves the quality of life in Okeechobee." He noted his appreciation for allowing public comment each time this issue is discussed, and then recited the issues the Economic Council has outlined on a flyer to provide what they believe to be an estimated savings of \$600,000.00 per year for the City. These savings can be used to reduce taxes or whatever else the elected body decides. The issue for the Economic Council was to reduce redundancy, as this was not a good use of taxpayer's money. He urged the officials to move forward with the contract, and concluded by addressing the topic of requiring a referendum vote by the people. It is his opinion a referendum was not necessary since the Council and Commissioners were elected to make these decisions.

Mr. Josh Borgstrom, Firefighters' Union Representative, stated the Union is willing to negotiate to help the City Firefighters.

Mr. Noel Chandler (former City Council Member and Commissioner) noted his concern for every City Firefighter. He has always been an advocate for the employees and challenged the Council and Commissioners to take care of them.

Ms. Karyne Brass stated her opposition to contracting the fire services and strongly urged to keep the services at the City. She asked whether the Council and Commissioners were aware they will be known as the officials who began the disassembling of the City? She provided an example of the average amount a homeowner would save on their property taxes, approximately \$50.00 per year, and could not fathom taking away a valuable service for such a small savings. She noted the Economic Council's position has switched gears from a savings to the City to a new methodology, redundancy. It is being presented as the City is at fault. However, this can be remedied without giving up the Fire Department by allowing them to provide their own ambulance services. She continued, the Economic Council's major component makes sense. They have very few City residents as members. Combining the departments is for the sole purpose of benefiting businesses, not the residents.

Mr. Mack "Hoot" Worley, Director of the Economic Council, stated the Economic Council has no other motivation than to make it more economical for all. Every City resident is a member of the County as well. Should the Council decide not to get rid of the Fire Department, then they should budget the Department to be the same amount they would pay the County.

Captain Rodriguez questioned whether churches were going to be assessed in the City since the option of adopting a fire assessment was being considered, as they are assessed in the County. The Council is also in the process of appointing a committee to review the City Charter. The Charter does not have to be amended to abolish the Fire Department, but would have to in order to abolish the Police Department. He stated "when looking at saving taxpayers money or removing duplicated services by getting rid of a City Department, where does it stop? Is the Police Department next and is this why the issue of rewriting the Charter is being addressed at this time?" He repeated his previous statement in doing away with the City, "let everyone pay the County millage rate (8 mills) so everyone keeps their jobs."

Ms. Sandra Pearce stated she loves the City Fire Department, and thanked them for what they do. She does not want to see anyone lose their jobs. However, she has lived in the same place in the City and has paid two taxes for 51 years. She agreed with Captain Rodriguez's statement to have only one government.

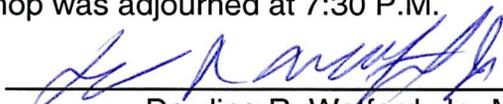
Commissioner Owens offered she was in the same position as Mayor Watford in not supporting the combination of the fire services. Based on information and research she has firsthand knowledge of, it is unlikely there is going to be a savings in this. She reached out to a long-time Fire Chief in another County. He made it clear this has to be a win-win for the taxpayers, employees, City, and County or it is not worth doing. To get there will be a large accomplishment, as she did not believe they were there, but hoped they would get there in the end should it continue moving forward. Council Member Abney stated he has never been for or against this, and wants to see what savings it could bring. Should it end up being a win-win for everyone, then he will be for it; it has to be clear that it is best for everyone, staff, firefighters, and taxpayers. Chair Burroughs said in closing, the objective is to do something right for the taxpayers, and for both the City and County employees. He appreciated everyone who attended. This will have to be a team effort to get done.

V. ADJOURNMENT

There being no further discussion, the Workshop was adjourned at 7:30 P.M.

ATTEST:


Lane Gamiotea, CMC, City Clerk


Dowling R. Watford, Jr., Mayor

Please take notice and be advised that when a person decides to appeal any decision made by the City Council with respect to any matter considered at this meeting, he/she may need to ensure that a verbatim record of the proceeding is made, which record includes the testimony and evidence upon which the appeal is to be based. City Clerk media are for the sole purpose of backup for official records of the Clerk.