

Santa Rosa County  
Emergency Services Advisory Committee  
May 24, 2006  
2:28 p.m.

MINUTES

**Members present:**

James Chalmers  
Stephen Cozart  
Joe Diamond  
Werner Panchenko

**Members absent:**

Tony Simmons  
Don Vanderryt

**Staff present:**

Brad Baker  
Deb Grinde

Delay in starting the meeting was due to lack of a quorum. The meeting started at 2:28 p.m. upon the arrival of J. Diamond.

Vice Chairperson S. Cozart opened the meeting by advising this committee of the letter of resignation submitted by Chief John Reble. S. Cozart took the opportunity to commend Chief Reble for leading this committee since its inception and for serving and guiding both this committee and the community in the area of emergency services. S. Cozart made mention of some of the points made in the letter and expounded on some of the concerns with further discussion.

He stated that Chief Reble was appointed by the Santa Rosa County Firefighter's Association and that the Association has not appointed a replacement at this time. Their intention is to meet with the Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) regarding their concerns prior to making the decision to replace Chief Reble in this capacity.

In addition, S. Cozart informed this committee that T. Simmons had verbally submitted his resignation to Commissioner Salter and will no longer serve on this committee.

**Public Comment**

S. Cozart pointed out that the Board of County Commissioners' meetings allow public comment through the course of their meetings while the ESAC does not provide for public comment throughout the meeting. He stated that this is not a rule and should be taken under consideration by the new Chairman. He indicated that the activity must not be abused and that the public may not interfere with the business of the committee or the process itself. If such activity occurs more stringent rules may be put in place to regulate the process.

Agenda approved as submitted for this meeting with the following exceptions:

H. Walker, County Administrator, requested that those items that he might assist with, be rotated toward the front of the agenda. Item 8 will then be moved up to Item 4. S. Cozart would like to insert an item between B & C to include discussion regarding a quorum due to the fact that there are two less members of this committee. Agenda approved as amended. Motion made and carried by this committee.

Minutes for meeting held on April 26, 2006 approved as submitted.

**New Business**

Purpose of ESAC, Future Focus Addressing the purpose and future focus of the ESAC provides an opportunity to accomplish things. We acknowledge that the process can be grinding and at times exhausting. We need to regain the excitement that this committee had at its inception. The input provided by this committee is valued and appreciated, and can be utilized as a resource by the BOCC. Although this committee has no authority, recommendations can be provided within the emergency services arena. The BOCC depends on the information provided by this committee in order to make good decisions. It seems, sometimes, that we treat the symptoms and not the disease.

Upon identifying problems it is this committee's responsibility to provide solutions for those problems. These solutions should then be presented to the BOCC as a recommendation by this committee.

We need to take the time to look at the foundation of the committee and determine whether we are doing the best that we can do. It is possible that we are doing the best we can do; if that is not the case, we need to get back on track and suggest changes for improvement by becoming a workshop committee again.

At this point S. Cozart requested input from other members of the committee. W. Panchenko: Reviewing the budgets and audits has been advantageous. It's been known that monies and items have certainly been stolen. And it is not a good thing when a grand jury determines that a loss of \$5,000 is not worth pursuing. It concerns me that things disappear and I don't see any action being taken. As the fire districts request more and more MSBU funding they must be held accountable for the funds they already have in hand.

I am happy that we have approached the water purveyor issues. It is evident that the state had mandated exactly what the water purveyors responsibilities are to the fire hydrant systems.

S. Cozart led a discussion regarding the department's budgets and accountability for those funds. He stated that the MSBU ordinance indicates that the county was not interested in being in the fire business at the time the ordinance was written. He indicated that it is possible that the ordinance should be reviewed and a determination should be made as to whether it should be changed or amended at this time.

J. Diamond stated that the East Milton VFD has a new chief and that many changes are starting to occur. He has seen many improvements since the committee (B. Baker) has explained the purpose of many of the functions of the budgets and the audits, e.g. not paying sales tax, keeping sales receipts, etc. The attention that is being provided by this committee is facilitating corrections to their reporting methods.

J. Diamond stated that the MSBU ordinance probably does need to be addressed at this time.

J. Diamond reiterated the fact that statistics regarding the number of firefighters on the responding trucks are necessary and acknowledged that the county may require more sophisticated software to implement this. Responses during the daytime will become a problem.

We have looked at the fire rate structures for the MSBU funding and have determined that those rates should be more equitable using the two Walmart stores as an example.

J. Diamond stated that we must consider how the fire districts that are funded by the MSBU ordinance will afford paid firefighters whenever that becomes necessary. I am a firm believer in volunteer firefighters. However, there will come a time when we must utilize paid firefighters for the daytime hours.

He stated that things change; the old days are gone. A good example is the traffic volume and congestion since Hurricane Ivan.

Training is another issue that should be brought to the table. The 160 training is mandated and must be monitored in order to be compliant.

J. Diamond stated that we have made a major improvement in taking the steps necessary to know where we stand regarding fire hydrants within the county. He believes that we need to get back on course in making improvements to the emergency services within the county.

S. Cozart took the opportunity to reiterate the fact that progress has been made by this committee. There has been a substantial improvement in the statistical reports and especially the "No Response" categories. B. Baker is doing a fantastic job of mediating issues with each of the fire districts. Our volunteers are great and yes, we will need to address the daytime response issues especially if we decide to maintain a two-tier system within the county.

J. Diamond wanted to stress the fact that night time calls may have three (3) trucks responding with full crews. When structure fires occur during the daytime and business hours it is critical.

James Chalmers stated that the purpose of the ESAC is to bring recommendations to the BOCC. The fire districts have indicated that more funding is needed; however, accountability is necessary first. It's very difficult for the volunteer fire districts to track their funds. Training workshops for the fire districts will improve their reporting greatly. Paying firefighters will cause them to review their budgets in the first place. Much of their equipment including their trucks is extremely old. They will need to review what they are paying for and what they are financing. Grouping their purchases together will generate saved monies. J. Chalmers state that it is important that the Firefighter's Association be represented here at this meeting. This committee is working for the districts and attempting to meet their needs. We are here to help them and replacing Chief Reble is a critical part of helping them help themselves.

J. Chalmers also reiterated that it is necessary for the fire districts to understand the need for paid firefighters in particular during the daytime hours. They will need to have the funding available to pay some firefighters. He stated that another important issue is the fact that a two tier system is absolutely necessary in a county that is greater than one thousand (1,000) square miles.

If they are having a difficult time we need to provide them with assistance.

S. Cozart stated that we need to be a resource to these departments. We don't intend to meddle in their business. Instead we want to be able to help them with their needs. He stated that restructuring the financing is something we need to review. It may not be feasible with the current structure but may be possible in the future.

S. Cozart stated that the MSBU fees on per house and vacant lots may be better managed.

We must remember that the BOCC will ask questions of us regarding all of these issues and we must be able to provide accurate answers.

B. Baker remarked that he has seen many improvements. He stated that it takes time. He will need some additional time to address each MSBU district. These districts want to do things the right way but may not have been provided the necessary direction to accomplish these things. They are becoming more aware of and receptive to our assistance.

He stated that the fire chiefs do not need the additional tasks of analyzing their finances. Those responsibilities should be left to their boards of commissioners which will free up their time to fight fires. We need to emphasize that community participation on the board's part will leave the firefighters more time to fight fires. In addition you cannot stack the board with firefighters. It would become one-sided and more involvement by the community will provide checks and balances. B. Baker stated that the water purveyors are responsible for the fire hydrants within the county. However, since not all of them are following through on their responsibilities we will assist them in accomplishing their responsibilities.

B. Baker also stated that his goal as a liaison is to bring their concerns to the ESAC committee.

H. Walker addressed this committee by stating that this committee is right in that the ordinance dates back to 1990. The ordinance is 15-16 years old and most likely needs to be reviewed and/or modified including the basis of the funding.

We realize that the daytime coverage is lacking. We realize that the volunteers need to fight fires, track the training and keep track of the checkbook. It may very well be that the structure of the boards needs to be reviewed also. H. Walker stated that adding B. Baker is comparable to a down payment on the fire district situation and is devoted to helping the districts. Mr. Walker is extremely pleased with his accomplishments to date.

H. Walker stated that we are on track... but that change will be a struggle. It is possible for the system to collapse with all the changes in our society and we must be prepared to handle it.

This ESAC committee has an immediate and extremely important function. The issues are incredibly important and we must count on the Fire Fighter's Association in order to accomplish our objectives.

Mr. Walker stated that he is committed to getting more involved with this committee.

J. Diamond stated that he believes that volunteer and paid firefighters can work together. He does not think that Escambia County would be a good model to follow, but that there are many, many successful systems throughout the U.S. that do work together.

H. Walker stated that we need to find the one system that works best for Santa Rosa County. In addition, Mr. Walker would like to know what our (ESAC) needs are.

R. Collins, Pace, FL:

- Stated that until B. Baker filled his position the fire districts had no 24/7 contact. They can now contact someone for help.
- Stated that the BOCC needs to rely more on the fire commissioner boards for each fire district.
- Stated that a listing of the board members for each fire district should be made available and that the board members should be approached, not the chiefs.
- Stated that it may be necessary to audit more often than on an annual basis. Mr. Collins suggested an audit be performed on a quarterly basis instead, or another variation may also work in order to increase the district's accountability.
- Stated that he believes the ESAC is here to help the fire districts. The fire departments have not felt that the county is interested in partnering with them. Offering specific help through B. Baker will help to get more things accomplished.

J. Diamond added that if the books are completed correctly in the first place with B. Baker's guidance, the accountability will improve with time.

Deborah Nelson from EscaRosa Press suggested that all fire department reports be made available to the public. She stated that the Sheriff's Office has a blotter posted that makes their reports available. This committee will look into the possibility of doing this.

#### **Date and Frequency of Meetings**

The current schedule was not mandated by this committee and so it can be changed. Suggestion was made that it be changed to a quarterly meeting. S. Cozart suggested that they be held every other month. J. Diamond suggested that the decision be postponed until such time that the two (2) open positions are filled. The decision will be postponed.

B. Baker reminded this committee that the June meeting has been set aside for the water purveyors. S. Cozart requested that we change the meeting schedule to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Wednesday of the month rather than the 4<sup>th</sup> Wednesday of the month. Motion made and carried. The first meeting to be held on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Wednesday is the July meeting. It will be held on July 19, 2006.

#### **Quorum**

It was also determined that a decision regarding a quorum for this committee will be postponed until the two (2) open positions are filled. It was suggested that the quorum be a percentage of members.

#### **Election of Chairperson**

J. Diamond nominated S. Cozart to step up as Chairperson of this committee. W. Panchenko seconded the motion. Motion carried and Stephen Cozart is the new Chairperson. This committee will elect a Vice Chairperson at the July meeting or when the open positions are filled.

#### **Persons to Appear**

None

#### **Statistics**

Reports for the month of April were reviewed and improvements noted. B. Baker noted that some restructuring has taken place. Discussion ensued regarding the effect of the restructuring can have on the responses. The two-tier structure suffers when the fire departments restructure their response systems.

#### **Correspondence**

Two emails were reviewed by this committee. The Avalon Fire District reports to the state. Consequently no further response from this committee is necessary. J. Diamond stated that the writer is invited to address the issue before the Avalon Fire Department board of fire commissioners.

S. Cozart stated that this committee has no public accountability. The email did not include a signature and, consequently, an anonymous email would not require any response.

The second was regarding the hiring of a firefighter at Skyline VFD. It was received on April 27 from the same email address as the first email. It was anonymous and will not require a response.

R. Collins, Pace, FL:

Stated that there may be a misunderstanding of what the ESAC's mission includes. These types of correspondence should not be directed toward this committee.

## **Old Business**

### Fire Hydrants

S. Cozart stated that his biggest concern is that we are attempting to assist the all water purveyors. He questioned what effect the reduction in the number of hydrants by the exclusion of one or more water districts will have on the outcome of the RFP, e.g. Pace, Midway, City of Milton Discussion ensued. B. Baker believes that the Pace Water System will come on stream once they have a greater understanding of the concept. S. Cozart is concerned that it will not be feasible due to the vast numbers of hydrants. W. Panchenko indicated that the savings would be per unit and not county wide. S. Cozart stated that we will need to see the numbers before a decision is made. W. Panchenko questioned whether certifications are required in order to accomplish this. B. Baker stated that specs were included. He could not recall whether the specs required certification and/or license. S. Cozart will investigate requirements. W. Panchenko stated his concerns regarding the few number of water purveyors in attendance at the last meeting. He hopes that more water purveyors attend this meeting. B. Baker stated that another letter will be sent out to inform them of the meeting.

## **Public Forum**

R. Collins, Pace, FL:

Stated that many citizens are not aware of what the fire departments actually do. He believes that the departments' activities should be included on a web site, that the media should be contacted so that the public is more aware. It is his belief that if the citizens do not know what is going on then they are more prone to disapprove of any activity that might increase any funding for the departments.

Meeting Adjourned – 4:06 p.m.

Next meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, June 28, 2006 at 2:00 p.m.