

Towns To Study Fire Cooperation

The members of the new committee organized to study the future needs of the Wilkesboro and North Wilkesboro fire departments have accepted the offer of Stephen Allan and Solutions for Local Government to coordinate and complete the study.

The all-inclusive fee for the study will be \$25,740.

Attending the first two meetings of the committee were Wilkesboro council members Russ Ferree and Mike Testerman (a former Wilkesboro fire chief), North Wilkesboro Commissioners Bart Hayes and Bert Hall, Wilkesboro Fire Chief Jason Smithy, North Wilkesboro Fire Chief Jimmy Martin, Wilkesboro Town Manager Ken Noland, North Wilkesboro Town Manager Larry South, Gary Brown (a former Wilkesboro fireman) and Edgar Harris (a former chief of both the Wilkesboro and North Wilkesboro departments).

According to Noland, the cost of the study will be divided evenly among the two towns, the County of Wilkes, and the Wilkes Economic Development Commission (EDC).

The Wilkesboro council members approved the expenditure for the town's share at their July meeting Monday night. North Wilkesboro commissioners also approved the bid in a phone poll conducted by Town Manager Larry South.

County Manager John Yates said that the county board members will vote on the request at their next meeting. The EDC leadership volunteered to share in the expense since the study may help lower fire insurance rates for businesses in the two towns and thus make Wilkes more attractive for new businesses.

Testerman added, "There is a chance that the study, as well as the possibility of more cooperation between the two town departments, could help to lower fire rates in the neighboring fire districts."

The projected completion date for the study is Sept. 1. Noland said that the goal is to have Allan make his report during the joint retreat of the North Wilkesboro board and Wilkesboro council scheduled for Sept. 18.

To study the future

The purpose of the study is to determine the future paths of the two departments and to see how the two towns can collaborate with their fire coverage.

"The steps in the study will be fairly simple," said Noland. "First, there will be an examination of two departments and their cost structures. The members will study how the departments operate.

"Then we'll start looking at alternatives and options that are available to the two towns as far as staffing and equipment," Noland added.

"We are not looking at merging the two town departments," said Hall. "Our focus will be on how we can work together more efficiently.

"For example, if both departments are considering purchasing new equipment, we may be able to get a discount if we make a purchase together and buy in quantity. Also, we'll see if we could benefit by combining some of the training. "Also," Hall added, "at the request of Russ (Ferree), we'll look at the cost of not making any changes and leaving things exactly as they are."

Hall added, "We are not looking at changing or taking over any of the neighboring departments. We know that there have been rumors floating around to that effect. This concerns only the operation of the two town departments."

Wilkesboro staffing

In August 2009, the Wilkesboro council accepted a \$325,000 Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER grant from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The grant required a \$427,393 match from the town.

The SAFER grant was used to pay the salary of a full-time chief and three full-time firemen/engineers.

In 2011, Wilkesboro received a \$1.5 million SAFER grant to help recruit, train and retain volunteers in the department. That has allowed the town to pay volunteers to be on standby duty at the department, along with the full-time engineers. As a result, the response time, and the number of firemen responding to alarms, has increased.

This is the final year of federal funding for the grants, and the one purpose of the study is to help the town decide whether to maintain the current level of part-time staffing with local funding.

“One of the criteria for the funding is to decide by the end of the grant cycle how we will use and pay firemen on standby duty,” said Noland.

Noland told the council that he had also heard rumors about the town taking over departments in adjoining districts. “We want everyone to know that we are not trying to take over any other departments,” he said. “We are simply looking at improving cooperation between the two towns.”

North Wilkesboro is also facing a decision on naming a new fire chief. Niki Hamby resigned as chief in early April, and Martin, who had retired as a firefighter, was appointed as an interim chief.

Hamby, who is the full-time fire investigator for the Wilkes County Sheriff’s Department, was the department chief on a part-time basis.

South said at the time that the board had discussed hiring a full-time chief, adding “We will probably shoot to make a new chief a full-time employee. There are no plans, however, to add a fourth full-time fireman.

Like Wilkesboro, North Wilkesboro employs three full-time firemen/engineers on a 24 hours on/48-hour off basis so that a firemen will be on duty at all times to drive the “first-out” truck.