

# Automatic Mutual Aid Approved

An automatic mutual aid agreement for fire protection between Wilkesboro and North Wilkesboro was approved by the governing bodies of both towns this week.

The agreement means the Wilkesboro and North Wilkesboro fire departments will automatically be dispatched to assist each other with “working structure fires” in specifically defined areas of each town.

Under the agreement, a working structure is a fire present at a business or residential location on the interior or exterior of the structure. The agreement doesn’t say flames must be visible for it to be a working structure fire.

The two fire departments currently assist each other under unwritten agreements that don’t call for an emergency telecommunicator to automatically dispatch one when the other is dispatched. Instead, one fire department tells the Wilkes Communications Center by radio to dispatch the other fire department if its help is needed.

The agreement, with a contract and a map with boundaries showing where each department would respond in the other’s district, was up for vote before both governing bodies last month.

North Wilkesboro commissioners approved this agreement on Feb. 3 and Wilkesboro councilmen tabled it on Feb. 2.

Wilkesboro councilman Russ Ferree, chairman of an ad hoc joint fire committee that drafted the agreement, asked the Wilkesboro council to table it on Feb. 2 because its boundaries showing the automatic mutual aid response area in Wilkesboro weren’t what Wilkesboro officials requested.

## **New map**

Members of the ad hoc committee, including the fire chiefs and town managers of both towns, have met since then and developed a new boundary map that suits both parties.

The new map only changes where North Wilkesboro will automatically respond within Wilkesboro.

North Wilkesboro will no longer respond to the Tyson Foods, Mall Square or Lowe’s Corporate office properties, but will respond to the Ken Acres neighborhood in Wilkesboro.

The Wilkesboro Fire Department requested these changes, and Wilkesboro Fire Chief Jason Smithey drafted the map itself following the meeting. The map also includes where Smithey will request that surrounding volunteer fire departments automatically be dispatched, but there have been no official talks between Wilkesboro and those departments.

No changes were made to the language of the contract, except to refer to the new map as “exhibit 1.” (Previously, there were two maps labeled “exhibit 1” and “exhibit 2” that showed the response area in each town separately.)

Though North Wilkesboro commissioners already approved the agreement Feb. 3, they needed to approve the amended version, including the new map, on Tuesday for it to take effect. They approved it unanimously, after briefly discussing what happens next.

North Wilkesboro commissioner Leo Baugham asked Fire Chief Jimmy Martin if the North Wilkesboro Fire Department intended to establish mutual aid response agreements with surrounding volunteer departments, as Smithey’s map demonstrates in Wilkesboro.

Martin said he would negotiate with those departments, and anticipated the process should move quickly because the agreement with Wilkesboro can be used as a template.

Town Manager Larry South added, “The goal is to have automatic mutual aid with all departments.”

Commissioner Bart Hayes said, "I applaud staff for handling this exactly the way we thought it would work out. I'm glad you came to an amicable agreement, and hope you have a template to work with."

### **Concern in Wilkesboro**

Monday night in Wilkesboro, councilmen unanimously passed the agreement for automatic mutual aid with North Wilkesboro, but some expressed concern with the impact future agreements with volunteer departments might have on the Wilkesboro Fire Department.

In a work session prior to the meeting, Councilman Andy Soots said that in the past week, two Moravian Falls firefighters have asked him if a mutual aid agreement is being signed between Wilkesboro and the Moravian Falls department.

"It is now, and always has been, if you're called and you need to go, there's no question," Soots, a retired firefighter, said. "Automatic mutual aid, I've always had a problem with. The person making the call isn't on the scene."

He added, "I just think it's too much traveling, sending more people on the road, travel expenses and more equipment."

Smithey clarified that the only mutual aid agreement on the table is the one with North Wilkesboro, "But I've stated multiple times that we could be signing with surrounding departments," he said.

Mayor Mike Inscore said he was concerned with the fact that due to staffing level differences, the Wilkesboro Fire Department will likely respond to a fire more quickly than a volunteer department if the two are dispatched automatically, even within the volunteer department's own territory.

"My goal is not to have any of the volunteer departments become a little lax, knowing that we have staff on site that will respond as quickly as possible, and allow them to have a false sense of security," he said. "They have the first responsibility and are calling us as a backup. As long as we keep that first and foremost in mind, I'm in favor of it."

Smithey told Inscore he understood his point, but said, "knowing the nature of fire departments and emergency services, they will respond as quickly as possible. Period."

Councilman Mike Testerman said if Wilkesboro makes agreements with surrounding volunteer departments, he's concerned about the large territory to which the Wilkesboro Fire Department will be automatically dispatched.

"It looks like we're picking up a whole lot more coverage than we've ever thought about having," Testerman said. "I plan to stay real close to Jason on what our run costs are."

He added, "I'm for this automatic mutual aid, as long as it doesn't break the bank."

Smithey said that mutual aid, automatic or not, is critical to the operation of the fire department.

"If we operated by ourselves, realistically, we would probably have to maintain a membership of 70 to 80 people. Right now, we have 50," he said.

He said the cost to recruit, train and outfit a new firefighter is about \$10,000, and it costs about \$2,000 to maintain each firefighter annually.

"Financially, it's much better for me to bring in another department for certain calls, than it is to maintain a roster of 80 people," he said.

Town Manager Ken Noland noted that the town can't know what automatic mutual aid will cost until agreements are in place.

"But as we do it, and get data and statistics, it will give you an understanding of whether it's good for the town or not," he said. "We need to be sure there's a balance in our costs between what we're giving and what we're getting."

**Implementing the agreement**

Martin said he and Smithey will talk with Wilkes Communications about entering the mutual aid response map into its system, so the departments can be automatically dispatched to the appropriate areas.

"We want them to understand where the boundary is, so we don't get paged out unnecessarily," Martin said. He said the target date for initiating mutual aid response is April 1.