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GOALS OF THE FIRE DEPARTMENT AND EMS DEPARTMENT VISION STUDY COMMITTEES

The Fire Department and EMS Department Vision Study Committee was tasked with creating a vision of what the Fire department and EMS department could be in the future some 5, 10, 15 years from now.

This committee was to research, study and report on the following issues, including but not limited to:

1. Levels of service
2. Volunteer and/or staffing needs
3. Equipment needs
4. Station staffing & locations
5. Budget/taxing requirements to reach recommended levels of service.

SERVICE VISION

The committee developed five "service goals” that the Fire and EMS departments should strive to achieve at all times. Regardless of the option selected, the Fire and EMS department should always:

1. Have and utilize working, up-to-date equipment and vehicles that are not necessarily “state of the art” in the industry, but function properly when needed.

2. Have vehicles and apparatus on a replacement schedule and have a funding source ready to replace this vital equipment when they need to be replaced.

3. Have trained personnel, either full-time, part-time or volunteers. The County makes concerted effort to improve staff retention that focuses on:
   a. Training and continuing education
   b. Competitive pay/benefits
   c. Improve facilities, dayroom and living quarters

4. Offer good response time. The number of minutes required to respond to a fire or 911 call is vital to health and safety of our citizens. Baker County will meet or exceed the average response times compare to our surrounding agencies.
5. Develop a feedback communication method so the department can hear from the community and other sources on how they’re doing and how to improve services.

The citizens of Baker County should be able to see these service goals and improvements on a daily basis. The committee developed the proposed options included in this report while keeping these service goals in mind.

OTHER FIRE/EMS DEPARTMENTS CONTACTED

The committee conducted research with other city and county fire departments in Florida to compare and contrast the Baker County Fire department and EMS department. The following agencies were contacted:

1. Bradford County
2. Jefferson County
3. Gilchrist County
4. City of Fernandina Beach
5. Suwanee County
6. Nassau County
7. Madison County
8. Taylor County and City of Perry
9. Florida Association of Counties

RECOMMENDED OVERALL PROGRAM CHANGES

The committee decided on a few “overall program changes” that are needed in Baker County regardless of the options proposed in this report. The following should be implemented as soon as possible:

1. Include the Town of Glen St. Mary in the Fire Assessment. Glen St. Mary has approximately 211 units within their jurisdiction that is currently not included in the fire assessment. Potential revenue from residential and commercial = $8,400.

2. The fire assessment ordinance should be reviewed and updated to include vacant land that is classified as non-agricultural. Current assessments are only for:
   - Flat rate for residential
   - Rate per square foot for commercial
Vacant Land is excluded from the current assessment

County should look at vacant land that is not classified as agricultural per Florida statute 193.461. “Classified” is different than “zoned” agricultural. A benefit is derived when a fire on vacant land is contained so it won’t spread to adjacent improved properties. Recommend charging the vacant non-agricultural classified lots at a “Flat fee per parcel”.

3. The EMS department should be funded by an EMS special assessment, as approved in 2009 when the Board of County Commissioners approved the concept of establishing an EMS assessment. To date, no amount has been authorized, and all funding for EMS continues to be derived from Ad Valorem Taxes.

The EMS assessment is fairer to all property owners and a more equitable tax than ad valorem taxes because each property owner including City of Macclenny will pay the tax and receive EMS Services when needed. When the EMS assessment is established by the Board, the ad valorem tax applicable to funding the EMS department should be reduced by the same proportion. The EMS assessment should be authorized as soon as possible.

AFTER THE FIRST INITIAL INCREASE, RECOMMEND A SLOW ASSESSMENT INCREASE OVER TIME

In order to fund any of the options described in this report, an increase to the existing Fire and EMS special assessment will be required. The Committee understands that a large, drastic increase in the fire assessment may cause financial difficulties for some residents and businesses. We foresee the largest assessment increase occurring in the first year to get the program kickstarted. After the first year, we recommend a slow, steady increase to the Fire and EMS assessment over the next ten years until all goals are reached.

ANNUAL REVIEW OF FIRE AND EMS ASSESSMENTS

Fire and EMS special assessment revenues should be reviewed on an annual basis (similar to setting the millage rate), to determine if the budgetary goals and the overall vision are being reached.
The increase in revenue dollars from new development should also be taken into account when considering a Fire or EMS assessment increase.

We recommend the Fire/EMS committee meet annually in March of each year to review current assessment revenue, to make changes to priorities, and make recommendations regarding the amount of assessment to the Board of County Commissioners.
VISION OPTION #1 – Merging County Fire and EMS into one Fire/Rescue Dept.

What should the department look like in the future?

VISION:

The most efficient model for providing EMS and Firefighting Services in a small county, such as ours, is to have one employee who can do two jobs and pay them accordingly, rather than having two separate employees doing separate jobs.

a. This is accomplished by combining EMS and Fire into one agency, as every county in Florida’s First Coast, as well as Putnam, Suwanee, Jefferson, Gilchrist, and Alachua have done. It is also being considered in Bradford, Union, and Madison Counties.

b. Recommend manned fire stations with firefighter and EMS personnel; in Sanderson, Glen St. Mary, and Cuyler. These three manned stations would have a minimum of two (2) firefighters or (Firefighter/EMT, Firefighter/Paramedic combo) per station.

c. The balance of the fire stations will be volunteer-manned as needed.

d. EMS transport continues as currently.
Vision Schedule

Year 1-4:

- If merging of the departments is implemented either now or in the future, we recommend looking at the top administrative duties and consider re-organizing the department to have an efficient administrative staff.
- Purchase surplus fire trucks to replace the oldest in the fleet, ensuring replacement parts are still available from the truck manufacturer for up to 5 years. If the current fire stations won’t fit the larger surplus trucks, consider purchasing a metal garage, or a tarp to cover the surplus fire truck until funds are available to remodel the fire stations.
- Begin a savings account for a new fire truck to be purchased in five years. Keep the 5-year savings account as a steady budget item so fire trucks can be replaced on a rotating basis of every 15-20 years.
- Purchase one replacement command/quick response vehicle. Begin a savings account for a new command vehicle to be purchased every ten years.
- Many Baker County firefighter volunteers have full-time jobs in the day, and are mostly available in the evenings and on weekends. Over the last 10 years the voluntary staff has dropped from 128 to 40 which is a 72% decrease. We recommend the County invest in two full-time firefighters during the daytime hours. Promote or hire two full-time firefighters (Firefighter/EMT or Firefighter/Paramedic) to work during the day Monday-Friday for 8 hours/day. One of these employees will be available to conduct fire inspections and generate fire inspection revenue to the County, therefore providing a cost offset to his/her salary. Daytime hours are needed to assist the Fire Chief, who is the only full-time employee, on fire calls.
- During the evenings and weekends, volunteers can assist the Fire Chief.
- Increase operational supplies (uniforms, training, fire gear, etc) to match the increase in staffing levels.

Year 5-9

- Promote or hire four additional Firefighter/EMT, Firefighter/Paramedic positions to operate one fire station 24/7. Total of 6 employees.
- Increase operational supplies (uniforms, training, fire gear, etc) to match the increase in staffing levels.
• Add officer classifications to existing Fire/EMS staff. These officers could be tasked with the following areas of responsibility: Logistics, Training, and Quality Assurance.

• Renovate/replace the Sanderson fire station to include sleeping quarters for Fire & EMS personnel, and minimum 3 bay garage for one fire truck and one ambulance, with extra one bay for growth in the future.

• Renovate/replace Glen St. Mary Fire Station. Continue cooperation with Town of Glen St. Mary to get their input on a new GSM station. If not possible at the existing location, consider relocating the station to County property within the same area.

• Replace one ambulance every five (5) years. Explore 5-year lease options: lease with no ownership and replace the ambulance every 5 years; or lease financing with ownership after 5 years.

Year 10+

• Hire additional EMT only, Paramedic only, FF/EMT and FF/Paramedics as the County grows and adjusts to this merged department.

• Build Cuyler Fire Station

**Support Current Employees/Volunteers**

Baker County has employees and volunteers that love the County and want to succeed and be supported.

a. Current EMS employees should be encouraged to complete firefighter training and should be compensated upon completion. This increased compensation does not have to be a substantial increase, but an acknowledgement of the increased risk and responsibility.

b. Current EMS employees that don’t desire to become firefighters will still have a place in Baker County EMS.

c. Current Volunteer Firefighter employees should be encouraged to complete their FF 2 and EMT certifications and as positions come available, employed in the agency.

d. Those Volunteer Firefighters who don’t want to become Career Personnel with Baker County would still have a place in the agency, as they are our “force multiplier”.

e. The volunteer stations should be returned to a more community based approach, garnering local buy-in, rather than the current, regional approach to station meetings, trainings, etc.
How Much Does Vision #1 Cost The Taxpayers?

We’ve done our best calculations to determine how much Vision #1 will cost, as our taxpayers would pay for fire services through the fire assessment and EMS services through the EMS assessment. As one reader may prefer to read words, while others prefer looking spreadsheets, both forms are included on the following pages:

After 5 years, we estimate:

1) The annual Fire assessment to increase in the first year from current $30.50 to $61.00.
   In five years the fire assessment will be $85.00 = $607,541 which breakdown to:
   1. $315,000 salaries
   2. $100,000 set aside for fire station improvements or renovation or to build a new fire station. After 5 years, this account will have $500,000
   3. $192,541 equipment and operating

2) The annual EMS assessment to increase in first year to $48.00. After five years the EMS assessment will be $64.00.
   1. EMS Budget $1,453,908 (- $984,000) transport revenues = $469,907 needed in assessments. At 8,957 properties the EMS assessment is $48.00 per applicable property.
   2. In 5 years, salaries are estimated to increase to $573,248 or $64.00 per unit. The salary increase is needed to match comparative counties such as Gilchrist County in order to retain trained and valued EMS employees.
   3. EMS Expenses:
      • 1,134,908 salaries
      • $44,000 vehicles - 1/5th of 5 years lease payment for new ambulance.
      • $275,000 equipment and operating

   -OR-
   [See spreadsheet on next page]
### FINANCIAL IMPACT OF OPTION #1 FIRE/EMS COMBINED

#### FIRE:

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<th>Budget Amount</th>
<th># of Taxable Units</th>
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<td>YEAR 4</td>
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<td>YEAR 5</td>
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Always Need Trucks and Building Maintenance
Save for five years in a Restricted Savings Account

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Current Budget maintains a Chief's Salary and Benefits, some volunteers, and some maintenance on buildings and some maintenance on equipment.

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<tr>
<th>CURRENT BUDGET</th>
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<th>YEAR 2</th>
<th>YEAR 3</th>
<th>YEAR 4</th>
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<td>203,770.49</td>
<td>246,655.74</td>
<td>289,540.98</td>
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<p>| YEAR 1 | Start updating ALL equipment |
| YEAR 2 | Add an employee. Add maintenance on buildings. Buy Surplus Vehicle |
| YEAR 3 | Add maintenance on building. Update equipment. Buy Surplus Vehicle |
| YEAR 4 | Add an employee. Add maintenance on buildings. Buy Surplus Vehicle |
| YEAR 5 | Purchase brand new vehicle or building with Restricted money |
|        | Add an employee. Add maintenance on buildings |</p>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<th>Current Assessment</th>
<th>Budget Amount</th>
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<td>YEAR 2</td>
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<td>YEAR 3</td>
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<th>Budget Amount</th>
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<td>YEAR 2</td>
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<td>YEAR 5</td>
<td>64.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>675,877.00</td>
<td>675,877.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

YEAR 1  Begin EMS Assessment. Reduce ad valorem tax by equivalent $386,153. Set aside 1/5 lease payment $43,783.
YEAR 2  Raise assessment annually over 5 years to be equal comparison county (Gilchrist). Equipment maintenance.
YEAR 3  Raise assessment annually over 5 years to be equal comparison county (Gilchrist). Equipment maintenance.
YEAR 4  Raise assessment annually over 5 years to be equal comparison county (Gilchrist). Equipment maintenance.
YEAR 5  Raise assessment annually over 5 years to be equal comparison county (Gilchrist). Equipment maintenance.
VISION OPTION #2 – FIRE STATION LOCATIONS

The Committee proposes three (3) main fire stations to cover the County: in Glen St. Mary area, Sanderson and Cuyler. We recommend a replacement fire station that is a new double-wide modular home, and a 3-bay all metal garage for fire and EMS vehicles to be housed. The modular home/garage concept is the least costly and more versatile option. The purchase of land, modular home, and garage are estimated to be $500,000. (compared to a fire station similar to City of Macclenny at $1.2 million).

As all Baker County fire stations need rehabilitation or need to be completely rebuilt to accommodate sleeping quarters, a day room, etc, the Committee feels the new modular home and garage concept has advantages because more stations can be rehabilitated at half the cost of a permanently-built station. The modular home can also be moved along with new growth in the County. This concept has been used in other rural counties.

The picture above shows the three proposed manned Stations in Glen St. Mary, Sanderson, and Cuyler. A significant area of coverage within the 5 road mile requirement for better ISO ratings for Fire Insurance savings.

Other existing stations will remain volunteer stations to keep the ISO ratings down in these areas.
VISION OPTION #3 – Add An EMS Squad To Cuyler Area

The County should add one Advanced Life Support (ALS) squad to Cuyler. Having an EMS squad in Cuyler would decrease Fire and EMS response times to the north of the County. Until the EMS run volume reaches a need for a fulltime Rescue unit in this area, one ALS should suffice. **An ALS squad consists of two employees and one vehicle.**

VISION OPTION #4 – Working With City Of Macclenny Fire

Currently the Macclenny City Fire Department responds when called into the County response area. In addition, County Fire responds into the City of Macclenny when called. This informal arrangement should be ironed out in the form of an Automatic Aid Agreement between both agencies.

Both agencies should commit to effective training to ensure that city and county staff understand their roles and responsibilities when they respond together on a call.

The idea of an Outside the Protected Area agreement (OPA) was discussed in which the City of Macclenny Fire Department could provide a coverage area of up to 5 miles past the Macclenny city limits. At the committee’s request, the City offered a scope and cost proposal to be included in this report. An approximate 5-mile OPA would require the City to hire additional fire staff and purchase a new tanker truck. If this option were implemented, the cost for this increased coverage is $350,000 - 400,000 per year to the County. Many questions and concerns were raised from this committee, especially the added cost to the County. The County should continue to keep this option as a possibility as revenues and the County grows and changes.

The diagram on the next page is a “proposed” coverage idea. Any combination of other ideas can be discussed with City of Macclenny if this option were approved to be undertaken:
VISION OPTION #5 – EMS and Transport Outsourcing (Privatization)

The concept of outsourcing the EMS and Transport Department was discussed at several committee meetings. Without the ability to request for a formal proposal, it was difficult to garner exact cost comparison information and many other factors, such as limited number of private providers that offer EMS 911 services in the State of Florida. Our neighbor to the west, Columbia County, transitioned to a private EMS provider 6 years ago, and has since transitioned to a different provider in October 2016.

Although we believe a private provider performs the necessary duties adequately as required by their contract for Columbia County, the need for paid fire personnel in Baker County overshadows the possibility of saving money on the EMS side. Currently Columbia County has a separate paid Fire Department, which was established in 2006, and since Baker County currently doesn’t have a paid Fire Department, the upstart cost to pay full-time fire personnel will be even more significant.

Columbia County sold all their EMS vehicles and equipment to the outsourced company as part of the transition. The private outsourced company now owns all the equipment. In the first year, the company rented the stations for one dollar, and now leases the property at fair market value. (The properties must be maintained at the county’s expense).

The Fire/EMS committee feels that if an outsourced company didn’t work out and Baker County had already sold its vehicles and equipment, the ability to re-establish the Baker County EMS department will be lost. In addition, the County loses cost-control over operating expenses because the outsourced company will offer up a budget the County may or may not be agreeable to. However, the County still retains control of the EMS billing rate that could be adjusted to meet the budget demands.

The committee feels: 1) The County would lose its flexibility to make necessary cuts to the EMS budget during economic downturns, and 2) the biggest reason not to privatize is private EMS companies don’t offer certified Firefighters as part of their contract, and the major part of this Vision plan includes the usage of current and future EMS employees as dual certified Firefighter EMT or Paramedics so the County can take advantage of using staff with the ability to perform multiple duties.
VISION OPTION #6 – Collection of EMS Insurance Revenue

Baker County has a 60% recovery rate in collecting money billed to private insurance. Other private ambulance companies, such as Century Ambulance have a much higher recovery rate. The Committee recommends the County draft at written policy to make sure the patient’s insurance is recorded, copy of insurance card taken, filed up front, and collected as soon as possible.

The Committee recommends re-bidding the bill collection contract to find a different insurance collection agency.

If not successful, the County should consider bringing the billing and collections in-house to increase the revenue recovery rate. Bringing the bill collection in-house would require hiring a part-time or full-time employee at $29,760 (includes salary + benefits). Consider putting the EMS billing services under the Finance Department.
**FINAL THOUGHTS**

1. The County should apply for firefighter grants whenever they become available to assist in funding firefighters or equipment.
   a. S.A.F.E.R Grant – Staffing for Adequate Fire & Emergency Response Grants to fund 75% salaries and benefits for additional firefighters for the period of two years and then 35% salaries and benefits for the third year. During the grant period the County should develop a method to fund the salaries after the SAFER has expired in Year 4. (Other agencies have been awarded $71,000-400,000).

   If the County is successful in obtaining grant funding for firefighter staffing, County will analyze the funding to recommend the appropriate fire assessment for the three year grant term to strategically plan on fully funding these salaries in Year 4.

   b. AFG – Assistance to Firefighters Grant – This grant provides funds for the purchase of firefighter equipment. (Other agencies have been awarded $24,000-300,000).

2. When new developments are proposed in Baker County, the Board should consider working with the developer to put in a fire station, add a fire truck garage, donation of land, or other apparatus in their agreement that will benefit the newly-developed area with fire and EMS services.

**CLOSING STATEMENT**

The Fire / EMS Vision committee wishes to thank the Baker County Board of County Commissioners for allowing us to present this analysis and options to you. The committee was quite diverse and offered a wide assortment of opinions and ideas in creating this Vision Plan. Although this committee understands we won’t make the final decisions, the options presented are available for your consideration. Some options may be implemented alone, while others can be implemented in combination or in addition to other options.

If decisions are made to implement these options, actions such as holding community meetings, talking to the voting public, posting newspaper articles, etc. will be essential to inform the public about these changes. We feel the public needs time to know and understand what the increased costs are for, and the improved changes they’ll see as a result of these increased costs prior to approving an annual assessment. The Fire/ EMS vision committee is prepared to assist the Board with any communications, if needed.

As the economy or environment changes, the Fire/EMS Vision Committee is dedicated to meet on an annual basis to develop changes, adjustments, or alternatives to this vision. In March of each year, prior to the County’s annual budget calendar, the committee will
review the current assessments, review staff’s recommendations for changes to the assessment, and make a committee recommendation to the Board. Our main concern will always be to preserve the health, life and safety of the citizens of Baker County.

Thank You

Baker County Fire EMS Vision Committee members:

Trevor Nelson, Chairman  Jim McGauley
Jack Baker, Vice-Chairman  Juanice Padgett
Ray Bailey  Sharon Padgett
Kennie Downing  David Richardson
Chief Buddy Dugger  Phil Rhoden
Bill Lowery  Videll Williams
Chief Steve Marfongella