

**WORKSESSION OF THE FLORENCE COUNTY COUNCIL,  
TUESDAY, JANUARY 7, 2014, 7:30 A.M., CONFERENCE ROOM,  
ROOM 802, COUNTY COMPLEX, 180 N. IRBY STREET,  
FLORENCE, SOUTH CAROLINA**

**PRESENT:**

James T. Schofield, Chairman  
Waymon Mumford, Secretary-Chaplain  
Mitchell Kirby, Council Member  
Russell W. Culberson, Council Member  
Roger M. Poston, Council Member  
Kent C. Caudle, Council Member (entered at 7:45 a.m.)  
Willard Dorriety, Jr., Council Member  
Jason M. Springs, Council Member  
K. G. Rusty Smith, Jr., County Administrator  
D. Malloy McEachin, County Attorney  
Connie Y. Haselden, Clerk to Council

**ALSO PRESENT:**

Suzanne S. King, Administrative Services Director  
Kevin V. Yokim, Finance Director  
D. Malloy McEachin, Jr., County Attorney  
Samuel K. Brockington, Jr., Fire/Rescue Services Coordinator  
Gavin Jackson, Morning News

**ABSENT:**

Alphonso Bradley, Vice Chairman

A notice of the worksession of the Florence County Council appeared in the January 6, 2014 edition of the **MORNING NEWS**. Copies of the agenda were faxed and emailed to members of the media and public requesting such documents, posted in the lobby of the County Complex, at the Doctors Bruce and Lee Foundation Public Library and all branch libraries, and on the County's website ([www.florenceco.org](http://www.florenceco.org)).

Chairman Schofield called the worksession to order. He stated the first order of business was discussion of fire services and proposed Ordinances No. 17 and 18-2013/14. He stated this was a very important issue and Florence County had some of the most courageous and dedicated individuals he had ever seen. Taking care of that volunteer base was of paramount importance. He said there were three main reasons for 'opening this can of worms': 1) financial accountability; 2) operational accountability; and 3) tax fairness – equitable tax funding county-wide.

Fire/Rescue Services Coordinator Sam Brockington presented a power point presentation on fire services in Florence County and an overview of the impact of the proposed ordinances. Mr. Brockington stated he currently held copies of the proposed ordinances initialed by the seven fire chiefs in Florence County to express their agreement.

He stated budgets had already been drafted for the seven fire departments, with the assistance of Finance Director Kevin Yokim. The study conducted by ESCI pointed out that in Florence County, citizens living in municipalities pay \$82 per person for fire protection but pay \$45 per person in the rural areas. In South Carolina, the average is \$82 and in the nation it is \$131 per person for the provision of fire protection. The County was currently paying approximately \$4 million for the seven fire departments. Millage for fire districts range from 8 mills to 39.5 mills, factoring in the bonds that were due, the average millage rate was just over 20 mills. The proposed new level would be between 20 to 25 mills. In West Florence, 8 mills costs \$32 on a \$100,000 home, but 40 mills in Johnsonville costs that same person \$160. The cost of 25 mills on a \$100,000 home would cost \$100. Citizens would save on average over \$900 in insurance with the proposed improvements/enhancements that would be possible under the proposed ordinances.

Mr. Brockington stated the first thing Council needed to do was to have fiscal control. The second thing was equalize funding – fire protection should cost the taxpayer in Hannah-Salem the same it does in Sardis-Timmonsville. Then the fire departments needed to be funded on a level playing field because a fire truck costs the same amount regardless of location. The plan of action was to create the Florence County Fire Fund, work diligently with County Attorney Malloy McEachin, Attorney Ben Zeigler and Mr. Yokim to discuss all aspects of the plan. This would abolish six (6) districts that fund seven (7) fire departments. Budget would be based on need. A countywide standard operating procedure would be adopted. An organized monthly training plan for all districts would be a must as part of the standard procedures.

In response to a question from Councilman Dorriety, Mr. Brockington responded that South Lynches would eventually need to come under the County Fire Service, however South Lynches was created by the Legislature which made it extremely difficult to move them under the County umbrella at this time, coupled with the fact that South Lynches also served a portion of Williamsburg County. Mr. Zeigler was working with the County and South Lynches to work toward changing that, but it would require a legislative act. Mr. Brockington stated that within five (5) years South Lynches would no longer have the millage necessary to operate and that under Act 388 it could not raise the millage.

Councilman Dorriety stated he would like to see a budget prior to moving forward with this item on the regular meeting Agenda. He stated he felt that if any of the districts currently had any reserves and they had unpaid bonds, any reserves should be used to cover the bond debt. He expressed concern that West Florence Fire District would end up picking up the \$1.3 million difference needed to cover the bond debt for the remaining districts.

Councilman Mumford stated he was hearing them talk about a tax increase and he asked when a millage increase would be before the citizens if that were to happen. Mr. Brockington stated that for it to take effect July 1<sup>st</sup>, it must be approved with the annual budget but the tax payer would not see it until the tax notices were sent out in October of this year. Councilman Mumford expressed concern regarding a tax increase when, during the process for the Capital Project Sales Tax, Council stated it would not raise tax millage for the projects on the referendum and he was concerned that the citizens would not view this positively. He was of the opinion that the timing was not right to implement a tax increase. Chairman Schofield stated he saw two issues in the tax: 1) equalization of the funding, and 2) increase needed to run and operate the fire departments. It would take approximately 18 mills to operate all seven districts. For the County, that would be considered budget neutral. For some fire districts, there would be a tax decrease but for others there would be a tax increase to balance it out.

Chairman Schofield stated fire departments were operating under a law that was created over 40 years ago. EMS, law enforcement, etc. operated under a more updated plan. EMS was not billing a different rate to respond to a citizen in Johnsonville than it billed for a citizen in West Florence. Fire Departments were typically first responders and were responsible for responding to accidents so when a fire department in Pamplico pulled a victim from a vehicle, it didn't matter where the victim was from, the service was the same. However the funding for each fire department was different, even though the basic service was the same.

Chairman Schofield asked the attorneys for clarification on the district boards. The County appointed a 'Fire District Board' that for each fire district and each non-profit corporation representing the fire districts had a Board. When the County abolishes the fire districts and creates a County Fire District, what happens to those boards? County Attorney Malloy McEachin responded that the non-profit corporation boards would remain. Ben Zeigler responded that the law gave the County a choice. Either run the district as an administrative position, which the County would appoint an administrative officer to oversee fire service, or place a board to oversee the seven districts. The Ordinance before Council proposed that it would be run by an administrative position of the County (currently the Fire/Rescue Services Coordinator), but would function in concert with the two advisory committees, made up of members from each fire district. Department Boards would stay in place, but the District Boards appointed by Council would not.

Councilman Dorriety expressed concern that many subdivisions would opt to annex into the City if the County increases the millage.

Chairman Schofield stated the worksession today was to determine if Council was interested in moving the two ordinances forward on the January meeting Agenda. Chairman Mumford stated there were issues that needed to go before the General Assembly with regard to the provision of fire services before Council takes any further action. He would like to see Council postpone action on this item until next year.

After additional discussion, Chairman Schofield expressed his appreciation to members of Council for participation in the discussion. He stated he was not asking for a decision today, but the discussion was needed to determine Council's desire to move forward and to answer questions regarding the issue. He stated the item would not appear on the January Agenda and additional worksession would be scheduled for further discussions.

Chairman Schofield asked if any members of Council were supportive of the purchase of additional property to expand the National Cemetery, please notify him or staff so the appropriate documentation could be prepared for the January meeting Agenda.

There being no further business to come before Council, Councilman Culberson made a motion to adjourn. Councilman Kirby seconded the motion, which was approved unanimously.

**COUNCIL MEETING ADJOURNED AT 9:36 A.M.**