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Fire department consolidation could happen by 2020

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By Pam Brannon
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news@gulfbreezenews.com



Scarborough

They know they will have monthly planning meetings and where. They know what their new name will probably be. But other than that, the three fire departments planning to consolidate in the south end of Santa Rosa County are not yet sure exactly how this consolidation will work. Midway Fire, Holley-Navarre Fire and Navarre Beach fire districts' fire chiefs, fire commission representatives and the fire districts' union representatives all met last week at Midway Fire to discuss how the process will move forward.

"We think that 2020 is a realistic timeline to have the consolidation completed and up and running," Midway Fire Commission Chair Dave Szymanski told those in attendance. Szymanski took the lead at the meeting, with most representatives who attended offering suggestions and comments throughout. They discussed issues such as the legislative process for the merger, consolidation timelines, a website setup, feasibility study costs and ways to split them among the three departments and a new name for the entity, as well as where and when the planning meetings should be held.

The quickest decision was about where to hold the meetings, with everyone suggesting Midway Fire host the meetings each time. It was also quickly decided that, especially for the next six months, during the main planning periods, the meetings be once a month and on the fourth Tuesday of each month at 9 a.m.

Szymanski said Midway Fire would be willing to set up a new website and pay for the domain name for the new consolidation effort. The possible name was discussed, with everyone agreeing on South Santa Rosa Fire Consolidation. That website will be set up before next month's meeting.

When the issue of putting together an RFP (Request for Proposals) for someone or some agency to do a feasibility study on the consolidation was raised, Missy Scarborough, office manager/ bookkeeper for Midway Fire District, said, "We need to better understand the three districts before knowing what we need to ask for in an RFP. We need to outline our goals, our needs, and provide financial budgets and five year plans so we know what to tell the people doing the study."

Scarborough said she spoke that morning for over an hour with the attorney who wrote the state statute on fire district consolidation to understand exactly what was needed.

Scarborough said each district is funded differently, and budgets are much different.

"We know that Midway has an annual budget right now of just under \$3 million, with Holley Navarre's budget at \$1.5 million before your latest referendum, and Navarre Beach is at \$700,000 a year. So we at Midway are double Holley-Navarre, right now." The cost of a consultant to do the feasibility study was estimated at \$35,000, or just over.

This was the second meeting of this consolidation group so far, and, again, one main topic was how to divide the cost of the feasibility study. Three options were offered — splitting the cost equally between the three departments; dividing the costs on a prorated basis. based on population; or dividing it on a pro-rated percent, based on budgets.

Scarborough said, "If we did it on the percentage of budgets, Midway would carry 50 percent of the cost, with Holley-Navarre paying more than Navarre Beach."

Representatives of Navarre Beach commissioners said, "It is more difficult for us to come up with even \$7,000 than you guys, since you have a lot more money than we do to start."

Fire Chief Ron Norton of Holley-Navarre Fire District responded, saying, "But that money is budgeted for payments like fire trucks and personnel costs and insurance. We don't have that much money lying around, either."

Midway Fire Chief Jonathan Kanzigg said, "Our fire trucks are not paid off, and personnel costs eat up a lot. The budgets are larger, but the money is budgeted and dedicated for expenses."

When Kanzigg said, "We need to take this back to our boards and discuss the best way to divide the costs of this. I am sure my Midway Fire Commission Board is going to say they would like to see it split evenly three ways," all the other department representatives laughed. To which Scarborough said, "We all know, realistically, from the reactions and discussions we have had already, it is obvious that splitting the costs three equal ways is not going to fly. It is just not going to happen. So Midway is going to end up with 50 percent of the cost, probably."

She also pointed out that Midway and Holley-Navarre are governmental agencies, set up through the state statute, and their commissioners are elected. Navarre Beach Fire is set up through the county as an MSBU, so everything has to go through the county in order for Navarre Beach Fire to be able to consolidate.

The question of possibly using Impact Fees to help with the feasibility study was raised.

However, Scarborough told the group, "The Impact Fees statute is very clear. You can only use Impact Fees toward growth projects. For this study, in case it didn't go anywhere after the study was complete, Impact Fees could not be used. I don't know if you could apply Impact Fees after the fact if consolidation goes through for reimbursement, but I doubt it."

Scarborough said she has also spoken with the county's supervisor of elections and was told the cost to have this on a ballot would be \$100,000, but the cost for a special election for consolidation would be approximately \$150,000.

“Keep in mind, also, that whenever you do this, if it passes, you have to combine the current boards until the next election cycle. So, if you do this during a general election, you will have a board made up of 10-15 people for almost a year. If you do this during an earlier election, like a primary, you would only have the enlarged board for a few months.”

The next meeting will be at Midway Fire in the commission meeting room Tuesday, June 27, at 9 a.m. It will be open to the public.



Representatives from the three South Santa Rosa fire departments meet to discuss consolidation.



Firefighters and other interested parties listen to a tri-department consolidation discussion. The next meeting will be Tuesday, June 27, at 9 a.m. at Midway Fire Department.

**Annual budgets of
Fire Departments
eyeling
consolidation**

Midway	\$2.9 Million
Holley-Navarre	\$1.5 Million
Navarre Beach	\$700,000

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