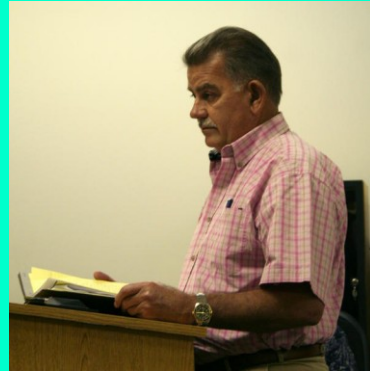


Fowlers Bluff VFD

Written by Staff

Photo by Mark Scohier

Dr. Bob Mount of the Fowlers Bluff Volunteer Fire Department Board addresses the Levy County Commission on Tuesday.



After 2 hours of discussion, Levy County Commissioners voted 4-1 to reject a proposal from the City of Chiefland that would have circumvented Fowlers Bluff's efforts to reestablish its fire department. The vote came at the commission's regular Tuesday meeting.

Since April, Chiefland and Fowlers Bluff have been in disagreement over a contract for fire service protection that would have allowed Chiefland Fire Rescue to provide service to Fowlers Bluff and District 6. In providing service under a contract with the county, Chiefland was hoping to collect fire assessment fees usually given to Fowlers Bluff. The money would have helped pay for new firefighters for Chiefland.

Recently, the city successfully negotiated a similar contract with Otter Creek. In August, a frustrated city commission began discussing options to avoid dealing directly with Fowlers Bluff on the matter.

"In the discussion we have about this, there will probably be a number of smoke screens ... that have nothing to do with the issue at hand," said Chiefland City Attorney Norm Fugate.

The issue, according to Fugate, is that the Fowlers Bluff Volunteer Fire Department is not a functioning fire department.

But FBVFD Board President Bob Mount said Fowlers Bluff has assembled a fire department and has even found a fire chief, David Florence.

Florence told the commission he has five firefighters, including himself. Two have basic firefighter training, he said. Two others have more advanced training and one is qualified as a first responder.

Chiefland Fire Chief James Harris said, " Folks, this is a very delicate issue ... I'm asking you to look at this and do the right thing."

Harris, who addressed the commission several times, said FBVFD response times would be too slow to cover areas throughout District 6, Chiefland firefighters are

better trained, and FBVFD doesn't have the necessary equipment to handle calls. They don't have radios or pagers, he said.

Craig Miller, FBVFD board vice president, said that FBVFD doesn't have radios because Chiefland still has them. Miller then held up a large photo showing turnout gear and equipment thrown in a pile on the floor. It was, Miller said, some of the equipment returned to the FBVFD's station by CFR.

"This is what paid professionals did," Miller said.

Chiefland Fire Rescue also returned a pump truck owned by FBVFD, he said. But they never gave notice that it was being returned and it was parked in front of the station with the keys still in the ignition.

Miller said the added responsibility that CFR has taken on in the last year is decreasing that department's ability to provide adequate coverage. And allowing CFR to have control takes representation away Fowlers Bluff.

"We can't vote in Chiefland," he said. "Community is a big thing in this county ...We want to maintain this rural community, and we want to have a fire station. It just appears to me that we're being shoved down the road here."

Adding to the discussion, Mount told the commission that the call load to the Fowlers Bluff area isn't that big.

"Last year, we had 16 calls. And that was a big year."

In 30 years, Mount said, the area has had five structure fires. Most fires in the area are brush fires, and Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge provides mutual aid assistance, Mount said.

Commissioner Marsha Drew, of Yankeetown, who voted in favor of the Chiefland proposal, asked the other commissioners, "Can we prove they are a qualified fire department before we make a decision?"

Drew said she was in favor of CFR providing coverage because that department had proven to do a good job of providing service to Fowlers Bluff and District 6. Chiefland has been servicing the area for three years.

Commissioner Lilly Rooks of Rosewood said, "FBVFD has always had the best interest of the community at heart." She said she was confident that FBVFD would come forward if they were unable to provide adequate service.

"I think that they should be given an opportunity, like every other department in the county has been given an opportunity, to go forward," Rooks said.

County Coordinator Freddie Moody said that because the previous contract between Chiefland and Fowlers Bluff is set to automatically renew, Fowlers Bluff will still receive mutual aid from Chiefland. County Attorney Ann bast Brown confirmed Moody's statement. She said that the county had been notified by Chiefland that they no longer wanted to work with Fowlers Bluff, but, she added, a modification to the contract must be made.

"You can't just pick and choose elements of the contract," she said.

Rooks said Chiefland would need to present to the county an amendment asking to be taken out of the contract with Fowlers Bluff.

After the meeting, Mount said he was pleased about the decision.

"I'm very exuberant," he said. "It was good news."

Mount said FBVFD will spend the next few weeks getting their equipment, including radios, pagers and mobile phones, up to par.

Fowlers Bluff Volunteer Fire Department

