

Open Work Session
June 6, 2017
County Fire Services Commission

Mr. Wayne Strausburg, Director of Administration came before Council. Mr. Strausburg said the question in hand is whether or not the Executive and Council believe that an appointed body should be created to advise them on pertinent matters relating to fire and EMS services in the County. He said these matters might be, but not necessarily include, budgets and funding, territories and station locations, apparatus needs and deployment, interface with municipal companies, the receipt and review of financial statements, and the review of performance metrics. He said there are a number of different constructs across the state and across the country. He said he provided Council several weeks ago with the Queen Anne's County model, which is one of the most recently passed. He said he believes that if establishing a commission is deemed desirable and advisable, then a comprehensive discussion is warranted, and a workgroup should be established to do further research and form recommendations for consideration by the Executive Branch and the County Council.

Mr. Matt Holloway asked if the majority of the counties in the state have a commission or advisory board like this, to which Mr. Strausburg responded, in one sort or another, it is a mixed bag. Mr. Matt Holloway then asked if Wicomico County ever had one, historically, to which Mr. Strausburg responded, not to his knowledge. He said there is a section in the County Code, Chapter 39, that basically stipulates appropriations and conditions for those appropriations. It does not establish what he would call an advisory body.

Mr. Joe Holloway asked if this would be a volunteer commission, to which Mr. Strausburg responded, they have not gotten that far yet. Mr. Joe Holloway said the Chief's Association pretty much acts in this same capacity now. He then asked how would this commission be made up? He said he was sure there would be some input from some fire companies. He then asked would there be other folks suggested, to which Mr. Strausburg responded he has not really gotten that far. He said he thinks the question here is that the citizens of the County look to their elected leaders to ensure their safety. He said they do not have a construct right now where the elected leaders have any codified authority other than the budget itself. He said he thinks that is a gap in the construct, and he thinks that gap ought to be closed. Mr. Joe Holloway said he supposes the recent incident they had brought this on. Mr. Strausburg said it certainly made us all aware that the gap is present.

Mr. Kilmer asked if there was any State law that governs what they should do here, or do we have a lot of leeway? Mr. Strausburg said he thinks they have a lot of leeway, but he has not gotten that far yet. He said if Council and the

Executive believe they should move forward with discussing this, then certainly they will dive in and begin to do a deeper dive on research.

Mr. Dodd said just to elaborate on what Councilman Joe Holloway said, in this example given by Queen Anne's County, the membership would be the Director of the Department of Emergency Services, the County will appoint 14 members of the Council, and voting membership will include representatives as follows: two from the Fire Chief's Association, one from the Volunteer EMS provider, one volunteer ambulance committee member, which the County does not have, a nameless committee volunteer firefighter, somebody from the Health Department, somebody from the Sheriff's Department, somebody from the State Police, the EMS Operating Medical Director, and maybe five from the public. He said then there would be some non-voting members; this is just one example. Mr. Strausburg said this is an example and the reason he gave it to Council, is that it is the most recently formed commission that he could find. He thought that it provided a proxy that they could look at and say do we want to proceed with a commission of this sort. He said the construct of who the members are, he has not gotten that far yet. Mr. Dodd said he is not aware of any that have been given a stipend.

Mr. Hall said he is in favor of putting together an exploratory committee to look at this and come up with a proposal. He said that would be the next step, and then come back to Council with a basic recommendation. Mr. Strausburg said he thought that was logical, as that is the way they approved the Fire Service Agreement. They put together a workgroup, spent a lot of time with it, and came forward with what they collectively agreed was the best approach to their Fire Service Agreement with the City. He said he thinks that worked well, and he thinks they could follow that same example, if their desire is to do this. Mr. Hall said it appears that the Queen Anne's people did three independent fire service studies. He then asked Mr. Strausburg if he would entertain something along that line, to which Mr. Strausburg responded, I don't think so, as he thinks they have plenty of expertise in the County.

Mr. Matt Holloway said looking at the example from Queen Anne's, under the section for fire department formation, it says no new volunteer fire department or ambulance department may be organized without approval from the Commission and of the County Commissioners. He said in our specific example, what we have just gone through, that would not apply to Wicomico County, because that volunteer fire department is already in existence. They are just trying to relocate to a new service territory. He said the workgroup might want to put in language, because the County has shared volunteer and paid Salisbury stations. Mr. Strausburg said he thinks it is important that whatever they put together that they interface with the paid municipal companies. He said they

have to ensure there is cooperation between the paid and the volunteer companies.

Mr. Cannon said the example you gave Council with Queen Anne's County, it appears that their commission was made up of strictly volunteers fire, so it is very similar to what Wicomico County already has with the Fire Chief's Association. Mr. Strausburg said but it is codified and that is the difference. He said the manner in which they have been operating is not codified any place, so what is being suggested is they do that; they codify it. Mr. Cannon clarified when Mr. Strausburg says codify to the public, this is as opposed to just allowing them to come to an agreement. This makes it more formal and binding by codifying it, to which Mr. Strausburg said, correct. Mr. Cannon then asked Mr. Strausburg how does he think they might tie in funding and things like that. Would it be necessary for this commission to include that in the content? How might they do the funding in emergency services? Mr. Strausburg said he has not gotten that refined, and he is not looking to be the person who creates this construct. He said he thinks the workgroup like they had for the Fire Service Agreement should be where they take the lead, as these people are the professionals, and we certainly have to listen and take their guidance. He said he believes they have a gap in the system, and he thinks it is important that they close that gap. Mr. Cannon said he thinks that too. He thinks that is one thing that came from this whole thing through the Fire Service Agreement and through the issue with Station One. It seems relatively disjointed right now, as far as true authority is concerned because you have the Fire Chief's Association recognizing the volunteer company, and you had the Council saying they do not know if they want to fund it at this time. He said he thinks the County goes through the process of putting together a commission and making things more in stone as far as how the processes are supposed to be handled and how to get from point A to point B, and coordinating that with all of the volunteers, there should be cooperation with the municipalities and the towns as well. Mr. Strausburg said and they may not make any changes at all, but it certainly warrants a pretty robust discussion. Mr. Matt Holloway said he thought it does, and he has always had an issue with a group obligating the County to expenditures that is not a codified organization. He said he thinks this will address that issue.

Mr. Cannon said territories too seem to fall into a real mesh. There is always that discussion where is their territory going to be, is it going to be inside the Bypass, outside the Bypass, there was no real definitive answer. He said it almost seemed as soon as they finished the Fire Service Agreement, they had their first conflict as to where some of the territory might or might not be.

Mr. Kilmer asked if the Council should tell them if they want to move forward with something like this, to which Mr. Strausburg responded, yes. If Council agrees that they should form a workgroup and move this forward, then they can come back

to Council with their suggestions as to the composition of the workgroup and move forward. Mr. Cannon said he believes any formal appointment of a committee would have to be approved by the Council. It is a little varied across the board, but if a formal committee needs to be appointed, he thinks the Council has to approve that committee. Mrs. Hurley said she would check the Charter to verify that. Mr. Cannon said earlier in the year, they were thinking about putting together a particular committee for one thing or another and that topic came up. Mr. Strausburg said from a practical standpoint, if they are going to proceed on something that is this important, and possibly design a Commission that will be reporting to the Executive and the Council, then he thinks at the start of that process, the Council and the Executive should be comfortable with the workgroup they put together. Mr. Joe Holloway asked if Mr. Strausburg has reached out to the Fire Chief's Association about this, to which Mr. Strausburg said, no, not formally because he did not have the authority to do so. Mr. Dodd said he has heard for many years that the County should have some form of commission, so it is worth talking about. All councilmembers agreed to have a workgroup formed to research and make recommendations for a County Fire Services Commission.

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John T. Cannon, President



Larry W. Dodd, Vice President, District 3



Ernest F. Davis, District 1



Marc Kilmer, District 2



John B. Hall, District 4



Joe Holloway, District 5



Matt Holloway, At-Large



Laura Hurley, Council Administrator