Santa Rosa County
Emergency Services Advisory Committee
May 25, 2004
2:00 p.m.

MINUTES

Members present:

Gerry Goldstein
John E. Reble
Chris Rucker
Tony Simmons
Don Vanderryt

Members absent:

Joe Diamond
Lew Oliver

Staff present:

Sheryl Bracewell
Deb Grinde
Dave Ling

Persons to Appear
None

Review of Reports and Statistics

Reviewed Analysis of Emergency Calls for the month of April. Special attention given to those calls labeled "No Response."

Fire Hydrant Reports
Have received two (2) reports to date including Navarre Beach VFD and the City of Milton Fire Department.

Correspondence and Additional Information
None

Old Business
MSBU Fire Districts Annual Audits

Chief Reble provided details of his own investigation of the audit function due to the fact that, after the presentation of Mr. J. Haniford, Office of Management and Budget at the April meeting, this committee was left with the impression that the audits of the VFD budgets are not very comprehensive. There was some concern that the oversight of the VFD budgets is inadequate. The committee also felt that the media was provided the same impression.

Chief Reble invited James Ward, Chief Deputy of Administration, Santa Rosa County Clerk's Office to this meeting to dispel the impact of the viewpoint that was provided to this committee at the last meeting regarding the VFD budgets.

Mr. Ward reviewed with this committee, copies of the most recent completed audits that were distributed to each member. The photocopies included notated irregularities and discrepancies.

Mr. Ward went on to explain the processing of the MSBU funding, budgets and audits.

- There is no pre-audit; there are no pre-approved expenditures
- An audit is completed approximately one (1) year later
- There is no audit for fraud
- Every receipt is verified to the check; the audit assists the VFD with balancing their checkbook
- The audit is always completed on an annual basis

Mr. Ward also indicated that the clerk's offices checks each and every transaction because they are aware that the department's are strictly volunteer and they may not have the expertise necessary to balance their books.

C. Rucker questioned whether the number of the exceptions is average or not. Mr. Ward responded that they are average numbers and normal types of errors.

G. Goldstein questioned whether Mr. Ward was familiar with three (3) particular types of audit levels. Mr. Ward responded that he is not familiar with those.

G. Goldstein questioned Mr. Ward regarding the use of credit cards and local charge accounts by the volunteer fire department members. Discussion ensued regarding exceptions. Mr. Ward explained that when no documentation accompanies the invoices it is noted. He also explained that if anything that occurred were out of the ordinary, action would be taken. The audits have uncovered no improprieties, but only errors caused by inexperience. Mr. Ward stated that any inappropriate activity would be reported to Mary Johnson, Clerk of Court, to an auditor that specializes in fraud, and also to the state attorney's office for further action.

All results of the audits are forwarded to each department, to H. Walker, County Administrator and one is kept on file, as Mr. Ward noted they are all public record documents and available to the public.

Mr. Ward noted that all fire departments are in compliance of the ordinance.

G. Goldstein questioned what one improvement the auditors would like to take place, if possible. Mr. Ward suggested that each department note the remarks made about each exception and take action to reduce those exceptions as opposed to having them reoccur again and again, e.g. sales tax.

C. Rucker questioned the large bank balances indicated in each of the district's accounts. Discussion ensued and Chief Reble explained that the transfer of funds does not occur for several months after the start of the fiscal year and that the districts need to hold moneys in reserve in order to cover large one-time payments and premiums. There are time constraints to the districts when they must wait for collection of those MSBU funds. C. Rucker conceded, too, that some contingency funds should be in the accounts for emergency purposes, including repairs to equipment.

Agenda approved as submitted for this meeting by a quorum (5 members) at this time.

Minutes approved as submitted for meeting held on April 28, 2004.

George Lowery, East Milton Volunteer Fire Department
Mr. Lowery appeared to address the fire department budget issue. He stated that the fiscal year for the MSBU districts is the same as the fiscal year utilized by the county, that is October through September. The districts do not receive the MSBU funds until approximately January or February. Funds are set aside in order to cover payments they are committed to, including a quarterly truck payment in the amount of fifteen thousand dollars ($15,000.00), fuel, etc.

C. Rucker commended the East Milton VFD on their money management skills.

Gene Broxton, 5237 Garnet Drive, Pace, Pace Volunteer Fire Department
Mr. Broxton, who serves as the treasurer of the Pace VFD, also appeared to address the questions regarding the fire department budget. He explained that the Pace VFD does carry over a fairly large sum of money. However, they have three (3) payments that total greater than two hundred thousand dollars (>$200,000.00). That only covers two truck payments and a portion of their insurance premiums.

Mr. Broxton feels that they are meeting the expectations of the citizens of Pace. They are looking toward a new station that will be shared with the Sheriff's Office. However, that will also generate a cost to the district. Mr. Broxton went on to explain how some of the financial matters occur in the Pace VFD. Copies of the tax certificate are not always at hand. There is a treasurer's report submitted at each monthly meeting. There is a request for approval to pay the bills and a CPA audits the funds on a monthly basis.

Chief Reble commended the Pace VFD on an outstanding job in the matter of their budget and ensuing audits.

G. Goldstein stated to Mr. Broxton that this committee has not questioned any expenditures of any VFD. He further stated that information was not presented in totality to the committee regarding the budgets of the MSBU districts. ESAC has not and does not intend to be involved in each district's monetary business matters. G. Goldstein also stated that he does not believe that the information provided to this committee was totally accurate. It was, in fact, not accurate. He stated that the documentation provided today indicates that there is accountability within the system.

Chief Reble noted that there is no lack of accountability. Discussion ensued regarding the misconceptions, the mistaken beliefs and the characterization that there is a lack of accountability within this county. Determined that the ESAC committee's concern for the funding or lack of funding brought these issues to light. G. Broxton described the mechanism of drafting a budget when, in fact, the clerk's office has his documents from the previous fiscal year approximately five (5) months into the current year. He indicated that there is room for improvement in this method of generating a proposed budget.

D. Vanderryt questioned where this controversy is coming from. G. Goldstein read from an article in the Press Gazette dated May 12, 2004. G. Goldstein then requested that a reporter from the Press Gazette who was sitting in the audience approach the podium.

Deborah Nelson, The Press Gazette, Milton, FL

Ms. Nelson advised the committee that the article in question was an editorial that was based on an article that she wrote. The information in her article was gathered at the previous ESAC meeting held on April 28, 2004 during which J. Haniford addressed the committee. Conversation between G. Goldstein and D. Nelson ensued regarding the issues raised in the editorial. C. Rucker requested a point of order. Chief Reble pointed out that the information in Ms. Nelson's article was accurate and Ms. Nelson stated that the editorial was an opinion piece. Further discussion occurred including the mechanics of budget preparation, information reported in the newspaper, etc. Ms. Nelson indicated that her facts were verified and also stated that the availability of more information will provide more accurate reporting. C. Rucker apologized for members of the committee admonishing the Press Gazette for publishing an unpopular opinion.

Nick Anderson, Assistant Chief, Bagdad Volunteer Fire Department
Mr. Anderson appeared in order to make several points to the committee.

Thanked the committee for its presentation to the BOCC regarding the requested increase to MSBU funding regardless of the outcome
Made presentation of budget issues, including the preparation of the same and audits to the budgets as known by the districts
Bagdad VFD does have copies of the tax certificate of exemption, they do use charge cards and they pay very close attention to their expenditures
Suggests that the ESAC committee make a presentation to the public through the media regarding the fact that the fire districts are accountable
Further discussion ensued regarding the budget issues. Chief Reble read from the county ordinance 90.23 and noted that each district will execute an agreement as a budget. Chief Reble reviewed the requirements of this ordinance in detail with Mr. Anderson.

G. Goldstein questioned how the Bagdad VFD actually makes a presentation for additional funds for those items that are not anticipated in an annual budget routinely based on the MSBU funds, e.g. what if a major piece of equipment absolutely needed to be replaced. Discussion followed regarding the method used to determine where funds would come from, including taking advantage of any available grants. There is no mechanism to actually request funds from the county for any additional expenditure not planned for within the existing budget. The only alternative would be to borrow money from a bank. To Mr. Goldstein's question there is no budget line referred to as "off-budget financing or off-budget requests." Mr. Goldstein also noted that every budget reconciliation from the clerk's office notes that each department utilized all funds received from the County pursuant to the budget approved by the County. Mr. Goldstein then asked Mr. Anderson how they planned for growth. Committee member T. Simmons then added that the fire districts simply cannot plan for growth. He also noted that when the rapid growth in Santa Rosa County is discussed at no time are there any provisions for Emergency Services mentioned and that there needs to be some planning for the future.

MCI Grant Status Update
South end fire districts had requested support from the county to pursue MCI equipment by matching funds for a grant. A similar grant was approved for the central and northern areas of the county. The matching of the funds has been approved and the equipment has been ordered. It had been determined that the equipment for the south end will be stored in the south end. The equipment for the central and northern areas of the county will be housed at Rural Metro.

T. Simmons suggested that equipment designated for the northern end of the county be stored there. They have a vehicle that has already been designated for the storage of MCI equipment and would prefer that some of it be stored closer to the northern area of the county. Further study of the subject will be taken at the next meeting in order to equally address the needs of all fire districts.

Fire Hydrant Maintenance, Water Supplies, etc.

Have received only two (2) responses on this request of the districts. Chief Reble will address the issue at the Santa Rosa County Firefighter's Association meeting in order to get a better response from the departments.

New Business

Commissioners attendance at station tours
T. Simmons suggests that the county commissioners, administrator, etc., be invited to attend an ESAC meeting and/or a station tour in order for them to have a better understanding of the needs of the fire districts. Suggestion made that a letter be prepared inviting them to attend on behalf of the ESAC committee.

Utilizing inmate work crews for station maintenance
T. Simmons inquired whether it would be advantageous to utilize inmate work crews for things such as yard work, maintenance, etc at each of the fire stations. He suggested that it would free up some time for the volunteer firefighters and could also be a cost savings. Chief Reble agreed and volunteered to approach the appropriate departments regarding this issue. He suggested that since they already perform some of these functions for both the city and the county, that it may be feasible for these activities be added to their current responsibilities.

D. Vanderryt suggested that we also consider using the services of those people who must perform "community service" acts. Chief Reble will also look into the feasibility of utilizing those people.

Public Forum

Richard Collins, 8600 Chumuckla Hwy, Pace, FL
Mr. Collins is of the opinion that the county does not want the fire districts to plan for growth; he gave examples of several planning meetings that he attended and indicated that he feels the BOCC does not feel that the Fire Departments do not need to be notified.
G. Goldstein questioned Mr. Collins regarding the number of districts that Mr. Collins stated did not submit budgets. Mr. Collins was unable to recall and indicated that he got the figures from J. Haniford. Mr. Collins also stated that good changes are starting to occur in Santa Rosa County.
G. Goldstein requested that Mr. Collins correct any information that he sent out with inaccurate information.

Gene Broxton, Pace Volunteer Fire Department, Pace, FL
Responded to Chief Reble's question of all fire departments represented in the audience regarding their involvement in any planning processes within the county. Mr. Broxton indicated that they have been contacted in some cases, including an inquiry regarding 600 homes, and have responded to those inquiries. Mr. Broxton stated that the county does not attempt to contact the fire department about their needs regarding new housing areas.

G. Goldstein questioned Mr. Broxton regarding the placement and/or notification to the fire department as to the placement of the fire hydrants. Mr. Broxton stated that the ECC/911 dispatch center employees advise the firefighters of the location of the closest fire hydrant. However, there is no actual notification to the department of the placement of new hydrants by the county or the water purveyors. They are aware of the fact that there should be a hydrant every one thousand (1,000) feet. Mr. Broxton feels that the water purveyor should advise the fire district of the placement. He also feels that the water purveyor should be responsible for the maintenance of the hydrants and not the volunteers.

Next meeting is June 23, 2004 at 2:00 p.m.

Meeting adjourned at 3:50 p.m.

Submitted by: D. A. Grinde