

Smiths Station Fire Protection Seeks More Funding

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SMITHS STATION — Changes are likely on the horizon for those in the jurisdiction of the Smiths

SSFPD held a town hall meeting Sept. 9 at Station 1 to discuss the need for an increased fire fee community.

According to Daniel Sexton, SSFPD deputy chief and public information officer, the current annual fire fee for a single-family habitable structure in the district — is not enough to meet rising costs and the growing needs of the community.

The fee is approved by vote, and the current fee that was established in 2012 is set to expire in 2023.

"It is not permanent funding," Sexton said at the meeting. "It is only temporary funding. In 2023, if we want to keep it even at the current level would require another vote."

The annual budget for SSFPD is about \$565,000, and fixed expenses alone already account for about 14,000 households to serve within the district, SSFPD's budget is well below that of other comparable jurisdictions. Nearby Phenix City serves about 14,700 households and has a fire budget of over \$6 million. Marietta serves about 14,000 households on the list at about \$646,000, but with only about 2,100 households in its jurisdiction.

Sexton said an issue with the current fire fee is that it contains no provision to differentiate between commercial and residential businesses are paying the same \$50 a year as each single-family household.

"There is an apartment complex in our jurisdiction that has 24 units in a single building, and they're paying the same fee," Sexton said. "... It's very unfair in that situation, and it really does hurt our income."

Volunteer firefighters currently take on the duties of SSFPD, but with the physical and timely demands of the job, it's not always feasible.

to recruit new volunteers.

"We have, so far this year, had about 1,965 calls as of today," he said. "The vast majority, over three people. ... That's not sustainable. It's going to burn those people out."

The goal is to be able to hire nine paid full-time firefighters to start, all working a traditional AB would put at least three firefighters on duty at any given time. Sexton said hiring a few part-tin during vacation or sick days.

"Eventually, we'd like to increase that in the next few years to six all every day, but we can't do if we don't offer competitive benefits," he added.

An increase in the fire fee would also help Smiths Station reinstate its ambulance service, which service was discontinued earlier this year due to a lack of staff and funds.

"We want to reinstate the ambulance, and we need to reinstate that ambulance now," Sexton said many emergency calls to not have ... that primary ambulance."

East Alabama Medical Center has an ambulance stationed there "most of the time," he added, but entire county and are not always available in the moment they're needed.

Sexton said hiring nine full-time firefighters and three medic/EMT crews alone would cost SSFPI current budget.

SSFPD will also need to replace engines, gear, equipment and Station 1, as well as rebuild Station things. That will cost an additional \$5.2 million.

"All of that doesn't have to be done today, but I would say all of that needs to be done in the next

Sexton said a new fire fee will likely have to be approved by vote in a special election, like it was voted down every time" it was put on the ballot for general elections.

"I think that part of that was probably people not understanding what they were voting on," Sexton said the wording also may have caused confusion.

The new proposed plan for an increase includes a small monthly fee in addition to the annual \$16 fee.

According to the presentation, the Lee County Commission will continue to assess and collect the new monthly fee, set at \$16, will be offset by a credit of about \$4.17 — which will add up to cover the fee when it expires, so residential customers will end up paying about \$11.83 per month with this new system.

Customers will be able to pay online, by mail, by phone or through an auto draft from their bank account. Under the new regulations, payments cannot be accepted at the fire station.

For those with financial hardships, a form will be available online at www.fire.smithsstational.gov or at the flea market. The form must be completed and mailed to SSFPD. The board of directors will then decide if it is appropriate," according to the presentation.

"If there are questions, we're happy to try to address those," Sexton said.

For more information, or to watch the full town hall meeting, visit <https://www.smithsstational.gov>
