

Fire/EMS Funding Committee Report

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Two months ago our county commissioners voted to form a committee of local elected officials, city and county employees, fire chiefs and a member of the public in order to study possible funding methods to address the critical financial needs of our local Volunteer Fire Departments and EMS.

County Judge Fischer, with input from other Commissioners present at the May 25, 2022, Commissioners meeting, appointed 11 individuals to a committee tasked with studying possible sources for enhanced funding of Lee County EMS and the nine Volunteer Fire Departments in Lee county.

At the initial committee meeting on May 31, 2022, it was decided that four avenues of possible funding for fire and EMS would be investigated:

- 1) Adoption of the Fayette county model for funding VFD's by annually dedicating \$.02 of the county general fund property tax rate specifically to VFD's
- 2) Possibly forming an Emergency Services District (ESD) for the county
- 3) Possibly forming a new organization under the Public Utility Model (PUM) to fund EMS
- 4) Making no changes and continuing to contribute to both EMS and VFD's from the county general fund as in the past.

Also at that meeting it was decided to appoint me, as a sub-committee of one, to do all research and present my findings to the committee at a series of four weekly meetings. They notified me of my appointment on Thursday afternoon, with instructions my first presentation was to be the next Tuesday morning. Thankfully, I had been researching this issue for several months and had a running start on preparation.

Fayette County Model

Funds generated under this program are allocated based on dedicating \$.02 of the county general fund property tax rate specifically to VFD's. Based on tax year 2021 general fund taxable values in Lee county the total funding amount to be distributed to VFD's under the Fayette County Model comes to \$287,738.31.

The committee discussed various pro's and con's of the Fayette County Model. Significant among the favorable attributes are the potential increase in sorely needed VFD funding and the easy to understand basis for calculating the funding. A downside of the program is the fact that this funding mechanism will not adequately address both the operational and capital investment needed by our VFD's. At best, it is a stop-gap measure to bridge critical VFD needs over the next few years as this program will not provide a long-term funding solution for this urgent public need.

Emergency Services District (ESD)

Briefly, an ESD is a taxing entity authorized under Texas law to levy up to \$.10 per \$100 property tax and to also collect a portion of any unused sales tax levy available in their jurisdiction. There is currently \$.015 of sales tax levy unused in the non-incorporated areas of Lee county. At an election the public will approve or deny formation of the ESD. If it fails the issue cannot be put back to a public vote for one year.

The ESD option could, by far, provide the most funding for fire departments or the EMS among the options the committee examined.

Public Utility Model (PUM)

The Public Utility Model is a non-taxing and generally non-government method of funding high performance Emergency Medical Services in the US. Funding is often provided via voluntary contributions by users of public or private utilities. It is similar to the small add-on's you find on Texas vehicle registration forms or fishing licenses, the user can opt out or voluntarily include a donation specifically directed to EMS.

The upside to a PUM is that it provides the very highest quality ambulance service money can buy as response times are critical to patient outcomes. The PUM structure could perhaps be used in Lee county to substitute for much or all of the county's current and future contributions needed to upgrade our local EMS service, especially in the north part of the county where growth is fastest and response times are far beyond optimal at present.

One idea floated use the PUM idea to add a voluntary amount to the electric service provided in our county. Bluebonnet Electric Co-op and the City of Giddings might agree to automatically put a small voluntary donation amount on their monthly billings, collect the amounts earmarked for EMS and forward the funds to a Lee county PUM, perhaps retaining some amount for their administrative cost of doing so.

You will no doubt be reading in local newspapers more about these funding ideas in coming weeks as the Lee county commissioners court debates the 2022-23 budget.

This concludes tonight's training, Back to net control, this is KI5HHI.