

St. Lucie County Fire District News Release



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Voters to Decide on Fire Assessment

St. Lucie County, FL – Voters in Port St. Lucie, Fort Pierce and St. Lucie County will soon determine how best to keep residents and property owners safe from fire emergencies. On Wednesday, the St. Lucie County Fire District’s Board of Commissioners agreed to put a non-ad valorem assessment, not to exceed \$50 per single family home, on the August 2016 ballot as a county-wide referendum.

The District’s fire services are currently paid for through property taxes and those revenues are capped at 3 mils. This funding was adequate until the recession and expanded homestead exemptions dramatically reduced property values. In 2006, the District received \$57 million in property taxes. By 2010, that revenue had dropped to about \$36 million – a loss of more than \$21 million. Despite cuts to staffing, benefits, capital improvements and vehicle replacements, and using reserve funds to balance the budget as the economy slowly improves, that funding gap for the District still exists today.

Meanwhile, as property tax revenues fell, demand for services steadily increased. In 2006, the District responded to nearly 35,000 emergency calls. By 2015, that number had grown to over 48,000 – more calls than were handled by Indian River County Fire

Rescue and Martin County Fire Rescue combined. On average, the District's calls for service have increased by 4.8 percent annually for more than 20 years.

"Our number one priority has always been to provide the highest quality fire and emergency services available anywhere," said Fire Chief Buddy Emerson. "During the recession when our operating revenues dropped, we took every possible savings measure so we could continue to effectively respond to emergencies - to save lives and protect property. Our employees gave back millions of dollars in negotiated wages. We pushed back needed vehicle replacements and extended the maintenance cycle of our fleet to the degree that some of them are nearly 20 years old."

Chief Emerson said that the District also delayed filling open positions, froze other capital purchases, and utilized its reserves. "After many difficult years, the economy is slowly recovering and now it is our responsibility to address some of these longstanding issues -- especially our aging firefighting equipment," Emerson added. "In order to provide the service, we must maintain a completely dependable fleet staffed with trained professionals. This small assessment is the most reasonable way for us to ensure the District will remain among the most effective in the State."

Fire Board Chairman Rufus "Butch" Alexander said, "I agree with the Fire Chief. This issue is really about the safety of our community. We always have to be ready to respond when people and property owners need us the most. This is the best option to make sure that we can."

For more information on the assessment, please visit our website at www.slcfcd.com