

Emergency Workshop Paramedic Funding and Raises

Commission Board Room
Dixie County Courthouse
214 NE Hwy 351, Cross City, FL 32628
July 21, 2026 – 5:00 PM

The Board meetings are audio recorded. The public can hear and participate in the meeting via conference call by dialing 1 469-551-3616 and enter code 908825494#

COMMISSIONERS

Mark Hatch, District 3, Chairman
Jody Stephenson, District 1 – Not present
Daniel Wood, District 2
Jamie Storey, District 4, Vice Chairman – Not present
David Osteen, District 5

STAFF

John Jenkins, County Manager -- Not present
Roy Bass, Assistant County Manager
Martha McCaskill, Administrative Asst/Grant Coordinator – Not present
Chana Watson, County Attorney
Barbie Higginbotham, Clerk of Court
Brenda Royal, Chief Financial Officer
Christie Zander, Deputy Clerk

CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Hatch called the meeting to order.

INVOCATION AND PLEDGE TO THE AMERICAN FLAG

Chairman Hatch led the Invocation and Commissioner Wood led the Pledge to the American Flag.

Purpose of Workshop

To discuss Fire/EMS budget conditions, paramedic staffing shortages, compensation, and related revenue and collection issues for the current and upcoming fiscal years.

DISCUSSION

A. Fire/EMS Budget Status and Paramedic Pay

Presenter: Fire/EMS Chief – Darian Brown

Key points:

- The department is losing paramedics to surrounding counties and hospitals due to higher pay and benefits.
- Current firefighter/paramedic starting pay is approximately \$56,400, compared with:
 - Marion County: \$75,000
 - Levy County: \$66,000
 - Other neighboring counties and private providers: higher hourly or annual rates in most cases.
- The county is currently down approximately eight paramedics and one EMT, with additional departures expected by August 1, 2026 which may:
 - Force closure of a station, and require downgrading engines/ambulances to BLS status and potentially reducing to two ambulances countywide.

B. Call Volume and Service Impact

- Annual call volume has increased from about 3,500 to an estimated 5,800–6,000 calls this year.
- Additional ambulances were added to meet increased demand, but staffing shortages threaten the ability to keep these units in service.

C. Proposed Pay Adjustments

- The Chief recommended an approximate \$1.50/hour raise (or in the \$1.00–\$1.50 range) for current paramedic staff to improve retention and remain more competitive with neighboring counties.
- The proposal is primarily aimed at retaining current staff rather than attracting new hires before the next budget year.
- Preliminary internal calculations indicate:
 - Savings from current vacant paramedic positions through the end of the fiscal year of roughly \$116,000.
 - The cost of the proposed raise for the remaining months of the fiscal year could be covered by these savings, though this does not resolve broader revenue shortfalls.

D. Budget Constraints and Shortfalls

Discussion led by Chairman Hatch, Finance staff, and Chief Brown:

- Current projections indicate combined Fire and EMS shortfalls approaching \$900,000–\$1,000,000, depending on:
 - Actual EMS collections, fuel and operating costs.
- EMS collections:
 - Historically around 65% collection rate, which is considered strong for an in-house billing operation.
 - This year, collections are below budget, with major impacts from:
 - High fuel costs, and residents' limited ability to pay co-pays/balances after Medicare/Medicaid reimbursements.
- The county has previously required transfers from General Fund to support Fire and EMS and is cautious about increasing ongoing obligations given:

- Property tax changes / homestead or other tax relief measures that may reduce revenue in future years.
- Historical experience with the SAFER grant, where failure of a ballot measure led to layoffs when grant funding ended.

E. Fire Assessment and Carryforward

- Discussion of existing fire assessment levels:
 - Original assessment was around \$40; current assessment is approximately \$125.
 - Board members noted that the Board has previously increased assessments to sustain services.
- Finance staff reported approximately:
 - \$371,680 remaining across combined salary/overtime/FICA/retirement lines.
 - Around \$250,000–\$258,000 carried forward in Fire funds, partly used to cover prior shortfalls.
- Some capital and equipment projects (e.g., re-chassis of ambulances, squad truck replacement) are being deferred to free up funds and manage cash flow.

F. Collections and Community Economic Conditions

- Ms. Mary Goodrich asked about using savings from vacant salaries to provide at least a small raise (e.g., \$0.50/hour) to paramedics in the short term.
- Chris McKenzie asked about the size of the collections shortfall and whether additional work with North Florida Economic Development or similar programs could be used to help fund salaries.
 - Chief Brown and Board explained:
 - High share of Medicare/Medicaid patients, where reimbursement is below actual cost of service.
 - Significant amounts must be written off each month.
 - The county is working with programs such as EMT supplemental reimbursement to improve revenue, but the process is complex and staff-intensive.
- Board members noted broader economic pressures (especially fuel prices) and how those affect both:
 - County operating expenses, and
 - Residents' ability to pay their medical/ambulance bills.

G. Staffing Structure and Administration

- The Chief described current command staff and billing staff structure:
 - Chief plus three chief officers (administration/operations, emergency management, logistics).
 - Three billing/clerical staff, one added during storm years and one planning to retire.
- The Chief advised caution about reducing command staff, given requirements for drug control and medical oversight, Emergency management responsibilities, and the size and complexity of current operations.

- The Chief also noted his planned departure/retirement in the coming months and indicated potential salary savings if his position remains unfilled for part of the next budget year.

H. Equipment, Grants, and Non-Personnel Funding

- The Chief reported success in obtaining **grants**:
 - Approximately \$28,000 in equipment (monitors, etc.) at no local cost.
 - A prior turnout gear grant of over \$600,000 for Fire.
- While these grants improve equipment and working conditions, they do not address ongoing salary and staffing needs.

7. Board Comments / Consensus

Summarize tone and informal direction (no formal vote unless clearly made).

Board Comments

- Commissioners expressed strong support for paramedics and staff and a desire to provide raises where financially possible.
- Commissioners also emphasized the need to:
 - Protect the county's overall financial stability,
 - Recognize upcoming revenue reductions tied to tax changes/ballot measures and avoid commitments that could later force layoffs.
- There was general acknowledgement that:
 - Retention pay increases may be necessary to keep ambulances in service, but further analysis of budget numbers and collections is required before final action.

ADJOURN

Motion to Adjourn by: Commissioner Wood. Seconded by: Commissioner Osteen

Motion carried unanimously. The meeting was adjourned.

PLEASE BE ADVISED *that if a person decides to appeal any decision made by the Board with respect to any matter considered at such meeting or hearings, he/ she will need a record of the proceedings, and for such purpose, he/ she will need to ensure that a verbatim record of the proceedings is made, which record includes the testimony and evidence upon which the appeal is to be based.*

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The Board meets the first Thursday of each month at 10:00 AM and the third Thursday of each month at 6:00 PM. Individuals that would like to be placed on the agenda should call Barbie Higginbotham, Clerk of Court, by 4:00 PM on the Friday Preceding the Board meeting, at (352) 498-1200.