

Cleveland City Firefighters Hold Town Hall Meeting

by Tonya Brantley

On Tuesday, June 23, 2009 The Cleveland Professional Firefighter's Association Local 3748 held a town hall meeting at Cleveland High School to explain their opposition to a city and county merged fire department. They called the meeting to offer their suggestions as to what they feel will provide the best fire protection for the residents of Cleveland.

With the approaching expiration of the current fire contract between the city and the county, there have been three options presented to address the fire protection situation within the City of Cleveland. They are: consolidation, a new contract with the county or no contract and remaining

inside the city limits.

The firefighters feel that the public has not been given all of the information as to how these decisions will affect city residents. They explained that the fire department's average response time to an emergency incident in the city is approximately 4 minutes from dispatch to arrival. However, under a consolidation plan, the level of protection would be diluted to 125 firefighters protecting more than 330 square miles of county and city as opposed to the 93 firefighters that currently protect approximately 24 square miles of city limits resulting in the quicker response time.

They also explained that city residents would lose the level of service received now

with no reduction in their tax rate and a possible future increase in taxes to update the aging fire equipment currently owned by the county.

A new contract would result in the Cleveland Fire Department providing services to the city and the fringe residents, and the Bradley County Fire Department providing service to the rest of the county. Should the contract with the county not be renewed, the city would no longer receive a \$1.8 million payment for services from the county.

Cleveland City Councilman, Bill Estes attended the town hall meeting and explained, "Cities incorporate for a reason; to provide better services than what they currently receive. The philosophy behind a metropolitan fire department is different than a philosophy behind a county or rural fire department.

County fire needs will be different. They'll need more water trucks for brush fires, for different types of apparatus. These fire departments have different goals in the way they're organized."

Estes went on to explain

residents, at all. But, I think both departments and both governing bodies just have different motivations and different needs."

Estes believes a new contract will be negotiated and that it will have an end date

and the possibility of layoffs in the Cleveland Fire Department if the merger were to happen, Estes responded, "I can't speak for my fellow councilmen, I'm not going to vote to close fire halls or lay anyone off. But there are multiple ways to raise revenue, its not just property taxes. We use that because it's easy. Right now a penny is worth about \$115,000 of revenue to us of every penny we raise in property taxes. But there are hotel/motel taxes, there are hamburger taxes, there are impact fees there are other assessments. If we have a 3, 4, 5 or 6 year contract, the city budget can absorb that loss of revenue year by year. There are ways to handle this, there are ways to do it softly without fire halls closing, without layoffs."

The Cleveland Fire Department has been in existence since 1896. It has a well established tradition of excellence and service to the citizens of Cleveland. The firefighters encouraged city residents to contact their city council representatives and tell them not to give their fire protection away and they also asked residents to show their support against the merger by signing a petition.



(left to right) Cleveland Fire Department Firefighters Jason Pennell, Dennis Carrol, Pete VanDusen and Dennis Duggins

that it was good to look at consolidation and he said, "Both the county and the city have done the tax payers a good service in looking at it all. From my point of view it does not look good for city

and it will have an end date with a separation which he said would be the best and most pragmatic for all parties involved.

When asked about the city losing \$1.8 million in rev-

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George McCain was appointed designee.

- The Council approved ordinance 2009-39 which amends sign regulations with respect to billboards. Distance requirements were increased from 150 feet to 400 feet between billboards. Discussion then turned to signs in right-of-ways. Mayor Rowland mentioned that perhaps police officers on duty could remove them. City Police Chief Wes Snyder asked Rowland, "For clarification, you want signs removed from right-of-ways?" Rowland replied, "They are against the law."

Cleveland City council meetings are open to the public each month at the Municipal Building on Church Street on the 2nd and 4th Monday with the work session at 2pm and the voting session at 4pm.