

At the town retreat and even before, town staff and fire department personnel discussed the need for increasing the fire tax this coming year. Funding for the Highlands fire district is a joint effort between the county and the town, since most of the district is in unincorporated areas here on the plateau.

The fire chief and town staff approached Commissioner John Shearl, the county commissioner representing the Highlands District, about increasing the fire tax. Commissioner Shearl said he was open to the increase but wanted to hold a public meeting about it. The public information meeting, which was held last week, was a very good and productive event for several reasons.

First, it brought county and town officials together to answer residents' questions and communicate the need for the increase. Second, residents had the opportunity to ask questions about the tax increase, staffing, and other fire department services provided to all residents. Third, town and county officials had the opportunity to discuss the future of fire protection in Macon County. Commissioner Shearl emphasized that the declining numbers in volunteer fire departments mean that the entire county will eventually have full-time firefighters at each station to provide all county residents with a 24-7 quick response time. He emphasized how to fund these growing needs will be a big issue in the next few years.

The next step in the process will be for the town board to approve the fire tax increase at the budget workshop session on April 9th. The workshop begins at 3 pm at the Highlands Community Building. As always, it is open to the public but will not be accessible remotely. The fire tax increase will then have to be approved by the county board of commissioners.

This tax increase will allow the Highlands fire department to maintain full-time coverage. In fact, it will allow the department to have 3 firefighters instead of the 2 currently on each shift. The fire chief, Ryan Gearhart, emphasized that it takes two firefighters plus volunteers to respond to a structure fire. About 16% of the time, when the two firefighters are responding to a call, another call comes in. A third firefighter would help them manage these simultaneous calls.

The department also needs to replace several aging fire trucks, some of which are already 20 years old or nearing that age. These trucks are expensive but necessary to maintain a high fire rating for insurance purposes. The higher the rating, the lower the fire insurance costs for residents. In a roundabout way, paying more in fire tax is an investment that yields lower insurance rates.

Several residents asked whether the fire tax rate was the same for residents in and outside the town limits. The answer is that it is the same across the board throughout the fire district. The fire district covers a 69-square-mile area that includes the Highlands town limits, which are about 6.75 square miles.

The rate and the amount a home or business owner pays are posted on the yearly Macon County tax statement we all receive. The amount one pays is based on the overall property valuation. To further clarify, property owners living within the Highlands town limits have two assessments posted on their county tax statement. One line is for the county tax they owe, and the other is for the town tax due. The county collects all taxes, and the town pays a fee to the county for that service. Many years ago, the town board wisely decided that creating a town tax collection department was not cost-effective and would duplicate what the county already does. The tax collection effort is one of several cooperative efforts that illustrate how the county and towns work together, especially in providing fire protection.