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Fire consultant outlines path for more city consolidations after Demorest deal

By

Patrick Fargason

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Commissioners Ty Akins and Dustin Mealor listen to a presentation on fire consolidation. (Patrick Fargason/NowGeorgia.com)
DEMOREST, Ga.

A fire service consultant told Habersham County commissioners the county's recent takeover of fire protection in Demorest could serve as a real-world model as officials weigh whether other municipalities might eventually consolidate services, a move he said could reduce duplication, stabilize staffing and hold down overall costs.

Thad Dixon of Southeastern Fire Consulting Co. said the consolidation effort began with meetings last fall after county officials sought to gauge interest countywide rather than "piecemeal" one city at a time. He said cities with their own departments later signed resolutions agreeing to participate in the study, which first reached the commission agenda in January and was later presented during last year's retreat.

Dixon said Habersham County's fire department grew out of a 1994 consolidation of volunteer departments, and he framed the current discussions as an extension of that model — especially as volunteer rosters shrink in rural areas.

He repeatedly pointed commissioners to insurance implications tied to ISO public protection ratings. Dixon said ISO evaluates communities on a 10-class scale, with Class 10 reflecting no recognized fire protection, and he warned some areas can fall into that category if they are outside five road miles of a station or if stations are not consistently staffed.

Dixon said the county is currently rated Class 5, and he recommended the county reach a Class 3 or better before expanding consolidation, arguing cities are more likely to join if doing so does not raise residents' insurance premiums.



Thad Dixon, a consultant with SouthEastern Fire Consulting Company, gives an overview of fire services in the county. (Patrick Fargason/NowGeorgia.com)

Using Demorest as his primary example, Dixon said the city's 2025 fire budget was about \$792,000, while its contract with Habersham County Emergency Services is about \$655,000 — a reduction of roughly \$136,000. He said additional credits tied to equipment payments and a station lease bring the first-year savings estimate to about \$256,668, while increasing service levels.

Dixon also described a possible second-step funding approach centered on a fire service district tax. He said residents inside cities currently pay county millage that helps support the county fire department, even while paying for their own municipal departments. Under a district model, he said, the goal would be to shift that portion of the millage into a fire district framework rather than simply adding a new tax on top of existing rates.

He emphasized differing challenges across the county, including Tallulah Falls' reliance on an all-volunteer department and cross-county funding arrangements, and cited unusual municipal contracts — including Alto's pay-per-response agreement with Baldwin — as examples that could complicate a uniform countywide approach.

The fire consolidation discussion was one portion of the commission's annual retreat agenda. Commissioners are also continuing work on a unified development code, the zoning overhaul that has driven months of public debate and prompted the county's housing moratorium.



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