Keowee Falls South wants its own fire department

BY JESSICA SIBLEY
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SALEM — While the Salem Fire Department works to beef itself up, some community members living at The Cliffs at Keowee Falls South are vying for more protection.

Concerned citizen Robert Petersen said clarification of Salem's emergency coverage was key to addressing the issue of a private fire and rescue department.

Kim Alexander, representing Salem, has said many of the concerns from members of Falls South are understandable.

"Just like the residents want, we want to provide the best services possible," she said. "The safety of our citizens is of top priority and Salem can deliver."

With the exception of The Cliffs at Glassy, Vineyards, Valley and Springs, which have their own fire departments, Salem's fire and rescue squad provide services for the entire Cliffs community.

Keowee Key Fire Department, in addition to providing for its own community, also provides fire service to the community of Towne Landing, just south of Keowee Falls.

Keowee Falls South is in the Salem fire district.

While Salem's fire department is volunteer only, the town is waiting on funding from the Appalachian Council of Governments to make that department full-time. Local officials expect to hear back in November on whether or not the grant is approved.

"From all the documentation and information we've gotten from the county, the ISO rating for Salem's fire district will go down with a visit from ISO officials," Alexander said.

"We have a very reasonable ISO rating, even under Salem's coverage," Petersen said. "That's no fluke. Our rating is good because our coverage is good."

A quick response times for medical emergencies also posed a concern for members of Falls South.

"For fire and rescue, the average response time is 5 minutes with a correct address," Alexander said. " Many of our first responders are registered nurses, while all of them are certified emergency medical technicians. Currently, our EMS service in Oconee is contracted through Oconee Medical Center. We too have an aging population and having that response time so low is key."

Members of Falls South circulated a petition five months ago with the same goal of private fire service in mind, but hopes fell by the wayside with little support.

Salem's goal is to become full-time by May 2010, with hopes of being fully operational by July 2010.

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Some residents in Keowee Falls South would like to establish a private fire department. But Salem says it's capable of meeting the community's needs.