New protection structure emerging for Oconee

Plan would save county thousands of dollars, chairman says

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SENECA –Wayne McCall admits his original plan for restructuring Oconee County's emergency services wasn't exactly the picture of clarity.

"The original chart I held up that night, well it just wasn't going to work," McCall, chairman of Oconee County's public safety committee, said. "It looked good, but it wasn't going to work. When I'm wrong, I'll admit it."

McCall, with the input from firefighters and an unidentified independent consultant with expertise in the fire protection field, have developed a draft of a more specific fire and rescue structure.

"The guy doing this is very knowledgeable. He's pointed out a lot of things that are mandated by the state that I had no idea about. He's really educated me," McCall said. "The best thing is this research isn't costing the taxpayers one cent."

In the new plan, a fire and rescue coordinator would oversee an administrative organization of a fire and rescue secretary and an assistant coordinator. The assistant coordinator and secretary would take suggestions from a chief's advisory board, which would receive information and requests from fire chiefs and rescue chiefs. Fire and rescue would be separately represented by their chiefs and volunteers in the structure.

At the top, the fire and rescue coordinator would be accountable to the county administrator, who would in turn report to a fire and rescue commission.

"The biggest improvement is input. You've got better communications and input from the firefighters all the way to the top," McCall said. "Everyone is represented. Through the organization, everyone has a say-so in purchasing.

"The next thing is, it develops trust and makes more people want to stay on as volunteers."

The fire and rescue coordinator would the chief operating officer for all of Oconee County Fire and Rescue, while implementing and enforcing rules, regulations and standard operating guidelines. The assistant fire and rescue coordinator would serve as the fire marshal. He would conduct inspections and assist the fire chiefs with origin and cause determinations in fires.

Under the plan, the six current county-paid fire fighters would remain on 24-hour shifts, and run no calls automatically. The paid hands would divide the 14 volunteer firemen, the people going into the burning buildings, want to see done."

McCall said he would pay out of pocket to make copies of the plan for the council and interested parties to see in the near future.

At an estimated $1.7 million, funding needed for Emergency Services under the reorganization plan is predicted to save the county roughly $400,000 when compared to the 2008-09 budget. The bulk of those savings would be derived from a $285,840 cut in total salary and benefits. The plan calls for a significant investment in training for firefighters and rescue personnel, with $90,000 being allocated to seminars and training for items such as water rescue training, confined space entry training and recertification courses.

Operational items such a code books and office supplies are estimated to carry a $13,000-cheaper price tag under the reshuffling. Putting capital expenditures like new cab trucks and rescue squad vehicles on hold, could save another $60,000 if the plar were to be put in effect.

fire departments and Haz-Mat among three shifts, and assist with inspections, paperwork, hose tests and training.

McCall refused to call out embattled Emergency Services Director Rodney Burdette or any of his administration out by name, but did say there would be managerial changes once the council had agreed on the organization.

"In this we've not fired anybody," McCall said. "Now, there will have to be some changes in management. The changes are not us trying to be mean. They are what the