

Officials mull The Cliffs, new firehouse

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WALHALLA — A near capacity crowd filled Oconee County Council's chambers Monday night for a called meeting of fire chiefs and staff and the county's safety committee to discuss the concerns of newly elected council members.

Topics included:

- The construction of a new firehouse and how the county could honor its agreement with Westminster;
- Fire coverage for The Cliffs Communities in northern Oconee County; and
- Efficiency at Station 21.

Westminster Fire Department Chief Chris Smith outlined the basic agreement with Oconee County regarding a new firehouse.

"Originally, it was discussed that the county intended on building a fire facility at the industrial park at (highways) 11 and 123," Smith said. "That being 2 1/2 miles from the city, I asked county council if they'd consider building it in the city and combining the two agencies under one roof."

The city, upon agreeing with the county on such grounds, purchased 14.95 acres for a joint firehouse and emergency services station with the agreement that the city would provide all utilities to the building. Thousands of dollars were also spent clearing the area of trees and preparing the land for construction.

"The city has done its part," Smith said. Members of the safety committee didn't disagree that Westminster had kept its end of the deal, including new councilman Joel Thrift, who suggested he wanted to take steps to insure the city would not be hung out to dry. The safety committee is slated to schedule a workshop to discuss concerns and possible ways to give the project new life.

"Let's see if we can't get this project moved forward in some fashion," Thrift said.

General discussions were held about The Cliffs Communities. Jeff Wilbanks, Salem Fire Department chief, said he would like his department to help cover that area and would even do so with a new station and new personnel if the county could identify funding for such a venture. The question was also raised on whether coverage would be funded through taxes or subscription fees inside the communities.

Jess Neville of West Union disagreed with a fee-based funding plan. "I don't think the majority would be in favor of any kind of subscription type service."

Rodney Burdette, Oconee County's Emergency Services director, defended Station 21. Travis Tilson of the Oconee County Sheriff's Office, however, presented information regarding the station's performance, citing that out of nearly 800 fire-oriented calls to which the station had been dispatched, it arrived at 203 of them.