

The Brooks County Board of Commissioners met for Town Hall Meeting on Tuesday, May 10, 2022, at 6:00 p.m., in the Courtroom at the Brooks County Courthouse, located at 100 East Screven Street, Quitman, GA. Commissioners present were: Mr. Patrick Folsom, Chairman, Mr. James Maxwell, Vice Chairman; Ms. Myra Exum; Mr. Willie Cody; and Mr. Lee Larko. Others present were Mrs. Jessica McKinney, County Administrator; Ms. Patricia Williams, County Clerk; Mr. James Burchett, County Attorney; Mr. Jason Kemp, County Attorney; and various residents.

## **TOWN HALL MEETING – SIGN-IN SHEET PROVIDED**

### **1. CALL TO ORDER**

**2. PRAYER & PLEDGE** - Mr. Maxwell led all in attendance in prayer and pledge of allegiance.

**3. CHAIRMAN'S OPENING REMARKS** – Chairman Folsom opened the meeting stating he hopes this will be an orderly meeting. If anyone gets out of order they will be addressed one time, and if still out our order will be escorted out by the Sheriff's Department.

Chairman advised that the meeting will be governed by Roberts Rules of Order; and proceeded to give a brief history of East Brooks Volunteer Fire Department (EBVFD). The Board of Commissioners ceased the collection of the millage of tax designated to East Brooks in 2015. Funding has continued to as a Volunteer station through Brooks County Fire Department (BCFD) operational budget. Brooks County has made multiple attempts to negotiate a consolidated agreement to have one fire department for streamlined operations, healthier fleet and equipment management, continuity in budget planning and expenditures which would create stronger resources, and larger footprint of coverage for response.

Chairman informed attendees to sign the sign-in sheet if they wanted to speak, each speaker will be allowed two minutes. If one person has been designated to speak for a group, to say the name of the person and asked their question or address their concern. The discussion is to remain to only East Brooks Volunteer Fire Department and Brooks County Fire Department Operations. There will be no repetition of comments/concerns once addressed. Questions asked will be written down and answered by the Board.

Herb Mason – Mr. Mason spoke and asked question on behalf of four other attendees and was allowed to speak for 10 minutes. He inquired as to who owns East Brooks Volunteer Fire Department? The building was purchased in 1985 for \$6,000 by East Brooks. Mr. Mason stated he attended a meeting of EBVFD, asked for the list of names of Board members; and was asked to leave.

On behalf of Mr. Hugh Down – Mr. Mason inquired as to how many certified Fire Fighters there are? Who certifies the equipment? Who pays the bill for turnout gear, and who

foots the bill if something happens? How many tankers there are and how old are the tankers?

On behalf of Mr. Donnie Ware – why did Brooks County terminate the one mill disbursed to EBVFD?

On behalf of Mr. William Hallam – How long did it take Mrs. Exum to send letter to EBVFD?

On behalf of Mr. Jack Sesverd – There is a delapidated home across from Gateway Church and has been broken into. A home burned down in Shady Acres and Lowndes County was on seen before East Brooks arrived.

Peg Howard – Inquired if citizens pay for open records request copies? Attorney responded yes, depending on how much time and information they want.

Kim Browning – What is the average cost to run the Fire Department? When did the decision changed? If caused by financial, what specific finance? Does Fire Fighters have benefits? Do they accrue sick time, vacation? When was the last time funded for one mill? What is amount directly funded to EBVFD for last seven years?

Mr. Jim Pitts – Thanked the volunteers. Commented that both sides need to act like adults and make it work.

James Miles – Stated he was disappointed when the Chairman could not attend EBVFD meeting. While at the meeting, he noticed equipment not repaired, general housekeeping was not impressive.

Kim Browning – Of the funds given from Brooks County, how much is spent on electricity, water, air packs, gloves, etc. How often is EBVFD given funds to buy supplies and keep safe? Where does the water come from? How many have adequate equipment to provide adequate protection? What did East Brooks did not follow? Is there any non-compliance by East Brooks and any other Fire Department?

Herb Mason – How many years EBVFD did not respond to the budget?

Juan Turner – How is funding for fire department prioritized? Have you looked at outside sources to look at how the fire department is funded to make sure things are being done right?

Steve Schreck – Mr. Schreck was allowed 8 minutes due to speaking/asking questions on behalf of others: Mary B. Cummings, Jeff Cummings, Lee Adkins. He commented that the citizens own the fire department. Information requested by Brooks County 2011-2015 was responded to with a balance sheet created from Quick Books, which recognized Federal recognizes and there is nothing wrong with it; do not need an audit. Brooks County has nine fire departments, have you requested audits from them, or is East Brooks singled out? He agreed with the previous statement that we should be able

to work this out. If fire fighters are not certified, why are they allowed on fire truck. Why cannot meet requirements? Does Brooks County have accountability for other fire departments?

Dr. Susan Harding – What amount is paid for fuel and utilities? We need a fire department; funds were provided by substituted for a mill. There is no reason this cannot be resolved.

Jeannie Griffin – The larger group, East Brooks area, need fire protection to attract people to Brooks County. If there is not protection to keep people safe, Brooks County cannot grow.

The Board took a break at 6:54 pm and returned to meeting at 7:09 pm.

County Administrator wrote questions down to be answered:

Who owns the East Brooks Volunteer Fire Department? Belongs to East Brooks Volunteer Fire Department.

Who is the Board of Directors of EBVFD? Chairman replied we would like to know.

How many Fire Fighters on the roster? Brooks County responded we do not know. County Administrator signed a grant for EBVFD, which Fire Fighters received \$300, other than that, do not know.

Who certifies equipment? East Brooks has been inspected. Brooks County is working on deficiencies, which is the reason to we sought out for a Fire Chief. Because the state will allow with deficiencies if you are working on corrections. East Brooks has their own Fire Chief. Brooks County has 10 certified Fire Fighters, one scheduled to be certified by July 2022. Changes were made to the fire department beginning 2013-2014 under former Administrator, a plan was drafted, and we applied for a grant. The grant paid the salaries for three years. Once those funds were expended, we had to find a way to fund the fire department, and the fire protection fees were established to be collected from taxpayers. East Brooks was non-accountable, Brooks County ceased to write checks. We are not trying to push East Brooks out; they need Brooks County for funding; and Brooks County needs East Brooks to protect the citizens; we need each other.

How are the funds spent? Brooks County needs to know. We have not received the financial information requested from East Brooks; the balance sheet submitted is not sufficient; it does not have to be an in-depth audit. We want one fire department all under one in a pool to provide fire services if East Brooks will sign the consolidated agreement.

Current operation budget Jackson Road Fire Station is \$425,000. East Brooks returned an agreement requesting \$85,000, with one full-time firefighter increased to \$105,000; and

a budget for \$746,000; which is more than Brooks County Fire Department budget. Average cost to run the Brooks Fire Department? Depends on what is broken. What are the benefits? Volunteers are not paid. However, we recognized the value of volunteers going thru training; approved training pay was included in the budget. Brooks County has never stop funding East Brooks Volunteer Fire Department. We are inquiring as to where the money is going. What is the money being used on or what East Brooks using money on? We are only asking for what is required by law.

The Standard of Operations for East Brooks Volunteer Fire Department does not match Brooks County Fire Department. East Brooks is not being singled out, they are independent, and the other fire departments are consolidated. We are looking forward to working with East Brooks and do not understand the resistance of consolidation to better serve the community. Being uniformed under the Fire Chief will save money and lives; stated Commissioner Larko.

Commissioner Exum stated that the safety of citizens for the whole of Brooks County is worth triple of what paid. Would love to bring to Brooks County one big organization.

Mr. Adkins, Board Member, EBVFD, stated the Board want to sit with Brooks County, discuss and see what the issues are; he would like to see this done. Further stated there are too many emails, and he said, she said.

Chairman Folsom shared there were 264 calls to East Brooks from January 2020 until May 2022, of those 264, 27% were not responded to based off the CAD info.

Commissioner Maxwell stated he hope the Boards will get together. Stop putting out the wrong information; and try to come up with a solution.

Commissioner Cody thanked everyone for coming; want everyone to get an understanding and work together.

The town hall meeting closed at 8:30 pm.

Mr. Patrick Folsom, Chairman  
Mrs. Jessica J. McKinney, County Administrator  
Ms. Patricia A. Williams, Clerk