

From: Corolla Civic Association
To: [Jack Riggle](#)
Subject: Proposed Corolla Fire Service District
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Fire Service Tax could be double what we asked for!

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You should have received in the mail a public notice and map mailed by the County on April 23 that announced a public hearing on the proposed creation of the Corolla Fire Protection Service District. The notice provided details of how to contact the County with questions and concerns about the creation of the service district. *We encourage you to individually e-mail your views to commissioners@currituckcountync.gov*

This notice also said that the Report, required by state statute, was available for inspection in the County Courthouse. CCA contacted the County and obtained an electronic copy which we circulated, and further made the case that, particularly due to the large number of non-resident property owners, the opportunity to go to the Courthouse to inspect the document was not adequate disclosure. Eventually, the County posted an electronic version on its website: <http://co.currituck.nc.us/wp-content/uploads/report-on-the-creation-of-the-corolla-fire-protection-service-district.pdf>

By now, you also should have received a letter in the mail from Corolla Fire & Rescue (CFR) outlining last year's request for paid firefighter support and how the County has transformed this into a far more expansive presence of paid firefighters. The County Plan to install an "urban" model combination paid/volunteer department was reviewed at the April CCA meeting, attended by over 40 members, and there was unanimous opposition to the County Plan.

While CCA supported CFR's initial request, the membership and CCA Board do not support the current County Plan which appears to us as a takeover of the volunteer fire department built over 35 years through the blood, sweat and tears of the volunteers and the community's generous support.

Please provide your input by taking the online survey. Since most of you will be unable to attend the **Public Hearing on May 21 (6 pm in Historic County Courthouse)**, we ask that you take a brief anonymous survey, here: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/DJYTBHX> . This is the same survey that can be found

by going to the CFR website and clicking on the link on the home page. The results of this survey will be presented at the Public Hearing.

For more information on these critical issues, the following Q&A's have been posted on the CFR website, and for your convenience, they are pasted below:

Q: Why did CFR determine that paid firefighters were desirable in the first place?

A: Several reasons:

- Response time can be improved by a couple minutes if someone is at the station to get an Engine to the scene. In the summer months, EMT's are frequently on EMS calls and not available to take the first out engine.
- Getting to the scene and getting water on a fire quickly keeps little fires from becoming big fires. With dedicated firefighters, this could be ensured. But, CFR has for decades excelled at quick response and snuffing out the little fires.
- Also be helpful to the volunteers to have some younger folks to climb on top of the trucks and repack hose after a fire.

Q: How often is it necessary or appropriate for a firefighter to go into a burning building in Corolla?

A: Actually, hardly ever.

- Over the last 15-20 years, we've averaged one full-blown structure fire a year and 2 out of 3 of these start outside the structure due to our marine environment.
- This is unlike an urban environment where fires typically start in a room due a space heater, a Christmas tree catching fire, etc.
- Fires starting outside of these structures will turn into a full conflagration in 8-10 minutes due to the lightweight Class A construction typical in Corolla.
- If the house is a quarter consumed in flames at the time the first engine arrives, it is unsafe to send someone inside.
- Additionally, for a fire occurring during high season when there is a lot of water usage, the water volume necessary to protect interior firefighters is not available.
- During the off-season, the majority of properties are unoccupied so it is not a matter of entering the building to save people who can't get out.
- For the above reasons, the County's position that there is a need for "transitional attack" capability (i.e., attacking from the outside and the inside at the same time) is, we believe, a fallacy.
- Also, we have mutual aid agreements with multiple nearby fire departments.

Q: Why does the County think that it's necessary to have such a large force of paid firefighters in Corolla at all times during the year?

A: County fire officials maintain that safety standards require that four firefighters go out on a truck together and, as noted above, the need for "transitional attack" capability.

- The County says that there are 5,000 structures in Corolla, you never know what month a fire will break out and that you need to be able to fight two fires starting in different locations at the same time.
- **However**, the standard “four out on an engine” applies to departments in **URBAN** fire districts.
- ISO just classified Corolla as a **RURAL** fire district following its February 2018 inspection (same as with previous inspections. One of the key reasons for the “rural” classification is that CFR firefighters & equipment are utilized, on average *less than 4% of the time* during the year.
- For **rural** fire departments, two out on an engine is compliant with applicable safety standards.
- The fact that there are 5,000 structures in Corolla is irrelevant.
- As to the possibility of simultaneous fires, our analysis of the data shows that, statistically, there at least 5 days between structure fires and 90+% confidence that the probability of simultaneous fires is less than 1%.
- Is it logical to pay double for a situation that may occur less than 1% of the time?

Q: You mentioned CFR’s recent ISO inspection. How did CFR make out in that review?

A: Outstanding.

- CFR improved its ISO rating from a 6 to a 5, as good or better as any other volunteer fire department in Currituck County.
- CFR narrowly missed out on a “4” rating. This was due to water supply (a County issue) and an inability to guarantee that we could get all five of our Class A pumper apparatus to a major conflagration.
- This latter issue could be solved by the CFR proposal for two firefighters at each station (one of the reasons for our “2+2” request.
- In a “garden-variety” house fire (which is 90% of the fires), sending two engines and the platform/ladder truck to the scene is adequate.
- The bottom line is that, having “2+2” can get our ISO rating to 4. However, having “4+4” will not get us a 3 rating, as those criteria can’t be solved by simply adding more firefighters.

Q: So what is CFR’s average response and how would that be bettered under the County Plan.

A: CFR’s response time from dispatch to arrival at scene has consistently been in the range of 5 to 7 minutes.

- If EMT’s are at the station and available, they get an engine going out the door of the station in 3 minutes. Solely with volunteers is 5 minutes.
- In the off-season, an EMT is available to take an engine out 95% of the time.
- Average volunteer response to all calls is 8 and, for structure fires, 12. If called out at a “working fire”, it virtually all of the volunteers. Volunteer response is consistent

throughout the year.

- Having dedicated paid firefighters (whether “2+2” or “4+4+1”) will not materially improve response time. It will shorten the time it takes to start getting water on the fire by a few minutes in an actual fire situation (about 15% of the calls dispatched as “structure fires.”)

Q: How many Fire & EMS calls are there a year what is the nature of the calls?

A: There are about 1,200 EMS calls per year and about 400 fire calls on average, a 3::1 ratio.

- Call intensity correlates to how many people are in Corolla that month.
- Currently, there are 2 EMS professionals at each station and this is deemed adequate staffing to handle 1,200 EMS calls.
- Of the 400 fire calls each year, about 40% are for “rescue” situations (e.g., elevator rescues, securing helicopter landing zones, etc.).
- The other 60% are for “fire” incidents. Of these, 30% are false alarms and 30% are actual fire situations.
- In the 120 actual fire situations, the volunteer force has been successful in preventing a full-blown structure fire 97% of the time.
- Where the incident becomes a full-blown fire, CFR volunteers have been able to save adjacent structures 90% of the time.
- From a statistical standpoint, the County’s Plan to more than double the number of firefighters requested adds little additional utility – which makes it exceedingly difficult to justify the additional cost to the taxpayers. We could have 200 paid firefighters in Corolla and a house will still be lost from time to time.

Q: What is the current size and average age of the volunteer force?

A: 40 active volunteers with an average age in the mid-50’s if new recruits are included.

- Last year it was publicized that CFR had 50 volunteers and the average age was 65. This number included a number of Life Members in their late 70’s and early 80’s who were not active in response.
- A concerted effort by our new fire chief to recruit younger residents has yielded 7 new recruits, 6 of whom are under age 35, dropping our average age to the mid-50’s.

Q: The County says that it is giving Corolla more protection for slightly more cost because it is making the paid firefighters work longer work weeks with minimal paid overtime. Isn’t more better?

A: Not always. And one never really gets something for nothing.

- Under the CFR Plan, the paid firefighters would generally work 42 hour shifts, one 24 and one 18. One week the shifts overlap.
- The County Plan would change this to 56 hours per week, 48 hours on and 96 hours off. Under a Department of Labor exemption they would only get 3 hours of

overtime.

- Under the County Plan, 39 people are needed to run the 3-shift operation. This entails 13 people each shift -- 4 firefighters at each station, plus Command + firefighters on EMT duty
- Of these 39, 3 are Captains (one per shift), 6 are Lieutenants (who count as one of the 4 at each station), and 30 are Firefighter/EMT's. Captains make \$70 – 75K.
- Under the County Plan, the Firefighter/EMTs are deemed firefighters 51% of the time and EMTs 49% of the time. But, is it realistic to have paramedics on fire engines with paramedic equipment when one can't transport a patient to OBX Hospital in a fire engine?
- The County hasn't shared its financial cost projections for the service district, so we've done our best to analyze the finances on our own.
 - Even assuming the applicability of the DOL overtime exemption (which we think is unclear), the tax cost appears to be at least twice that of the "CFR Plan".
 - As the initial rate of 5% the County proposes is benefitted by the SAFER grant from FEMA, the cost of the County Plan is at least 8 cents/\$100, as the SAFER grant is worth 3 cents/\$100 in the first two years.
 - The CFR Plan, without considering the SAFER grant, costs between 3.7 – 3.9 cents/\$100.

Q: Do you foresee any unintended consequences?

A: Potentially, yes.

- **Eventual "squeeze out" of volunteer force?**
 - 13 paid professionals and the County taking fire suppression responsibility may well change the dynamic at the stations making it less appealing to volunteers.
 - Likelihood of volunteers having a meaningful role on fire calls makes responding a less attractive proposition.
- **Will Medics & EMT's be able to bring their A-game, 30 hours into a 48-hour shift?**
 - Will 48-hour shifts create a potentially dangerous situation?
 - Studies show that people don't function well or think clearly if they have to deal with a shift like this, as deep sleep is difficult if the thought of a potential call overhangs. Frequently, multiple calls actually do come in during the middle of the night that disrupt sleep.
 - A person who has been up for 20 hours has an impairment level equivalent to drinking 5 beers. This is why the FAA regulates the time an airline pilot can be behind the "sticks".
 - The vast majority of calls in Corolla are EMS. If you had a medical issue, would you really want a paramedic making critical life or death decisions 25-30 hours into a shift?

- **Will the structure of the County's Plan be conducive to high turnover?**
 - The requirement of extra hours for no additional pay is a morale-killer and interferes with a side job needed to make ends meet.
 - Many new hires commute from as far away as Virginia, which is likely to become tedious in Summer traffic.
 - Most of the time they'll sit in the stations with very little to do. Will many of the new "cadets" leave for more attractive positions in the Hampton Roads area after they get their "ticket: punched? What impact with this have on the service district's costs for training if there is frequent turnover?

PLEASE TAKE THE SURVEY HERE: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/DJYTBHX>

Thank you!

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