DeFuniak Springs City Council
Fire Assessment Workshop Minutes
1350 Baldwin Avenue, City Hall
April 29, 2026

Mayor Pro-Tempore A. Heavilin called the meeting to order at 5:00 p.m. followed by the invocation and Pledge of Allegiance.

The following members were present: Councilmember Todd Bierbaum (Seat 1); Councilmember Josh Sconiers (Seat 2); Mayor Pro-Tempore Amy Heavilin (Seat 3); Councilmember Glen Harrison (Seat 4); Councilmember Danny Cosson (Seat 5).
Also, present were City Manager Koby Townsend, City Attorney Clay Adkinson on conference call, and City Clerk Madison Lewis.

Absent: Mayor Bob Campbell

ITEM 2 – PRESENTATION ON FIRE ASSESSMENT PROGRAM (NON-AD VALOREM ASSESSMENT)

2.A. Sandra Neubarth from Accenture – Fire Assessment Program

Sandra Neubarth presented the fire assessment program and how the potential implementation of a fire assessment could fund fire protection services. The main points of the presentation are as follows:

A fire assessment was defined as a non-ad valorem charge imposed on property, which must meet legal requirements that it provide a benefit to property and be fairly apportioned among property owners.

The stated purposes included generating dedicated revenue for fire services, reducing reliance on the general fund, ensuring restricted use of funds, and allocating costs based on service demand rather than property value.

The proposed methodology, identified as the historical demand method, utilizes prior call data to allocate costs among property types and is widely used and legally supported in Florida.

The analysis considered service delivery, fire department budget (excluding EMS costs), call data for cost distribution, and parcel classifications to determine assessment rates. A five-year average net assessable fire budget of approximately $2.23 million was presented as the maximum funding level.

Call data indicated that the majority of fire service demand was attributed to residential properties, followed by institutional, commercial, industrial, and vacant land uses, and must be used to proportionally allocate costs.

Maximum assessment rates and multiple reduced-rate scenarios were presented, along with corresponding revenue estimates.

Policy considerations included potential implementation, selection of funding levels and rate scenarios, establishment of a maximum rate, and determination of exemptions for certain property types. It was noted that exempted costs would require funding from the general fund, and agricultural properties are statutorily exempt.

The implementation process would require adoption of an ordinance, preliminary and final assessment resolutions, mailed notices to affected property owners, and a public hearing prior to final approval.

City Manager K. Townsend explained to council that the budget will not reflect revenue estimates until the fire assessment has been adopted.

Councilmember J. Sconiers requested clarification on whether moving forward with the proposed five-year assessment, which includes additional enhanced services, would require the City to add on the existing ALS expenses.

Councilmember T. Bierbaum explained that the proposed fire assessment would still leave the City below the recommended staffing levels outlined in the National Fire Standards.

Councilmember D. Cosson warned against creating hardship for citizens by imposing the fire assessment.

Councilmember G. Harrison stated that the City cannot expect improvements to the fire department while continuing to struggle with adequately funding it.

Councilmember A. Heavilin asked for clarification on the number of service calls presented in the fire assessment.

Following discussion, Council reached consensus requesting an updated spreadsheet reflecting rate scenarios ranging from 37.8% to 75%, and indicating exemptions for government, institutional, and agricultural properties.

Sandra Neubarth explained hardship exemptions for qualifying property owners based on income criteria, noting that eligibility would require annual application and that income thresholds would be established by Council.

Councilmember A. Heavilin requested additional information on the potential number of qualifying households within the City and how similar programs are implemented in other jurisdictions.

City Manager K. Townsend cautioned that the City does not currently know how many individuals may apply for the hardship exemption and noted that the application process could potentially place an additional administrative burden on the City Clerk's Office.

Councilmember J. Sconiers discussed coordination with the County, and staff were requested to engage with county administration regarding the proposed assessment.

Councilmember G. Harrison stated that the fire assessment is the only viable option to fund the fire department and emphasized its importance given the uncertainty surrounding future property tax revenues and the potential impact on the City's general fund.

No formal action was taken.

ITEM 3 – ADJOURNEMNT

Mayor Pro-Tempore A. Heavilin adjourned the meeting at 6:23 p.m.

Approved:

Amy Heavilin

Amy Heavilin, Mayor Pro-Tempore

ATTEST:

Madison Lewis

Minutes taken by Madison Lewis, City Clerk
Proper notice having been duly given