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## **Chief Harrell accepts Levy County offer; *Gilchrist County potentially cuts two of four new truck requests from fire department***



**Gilchrist County Fire Rescue Chief Mitch Harrell tells the Gilchrist County Commission why he sees a need for replacing certain equipment as he addresses the five-member group on Thursday afternoon (July 21) at a budget workshop. Earlier that morning, he had confirmed with Levy County Coordinator Freddie Moody that he would accept the offer to be the next director of the Levy County Department of Public Safety, Moody said on Friday morning (July 22). Chief Harrell will be taking his new office on Sept. 1, and between now and then he will be meeting with LCDPS staff and other stakeholders.**

**Story and Photos By Jeff M. Hardison © July 21, 2016 @ 11:17 p.m. Updated July 22, 2016 @ 8:57 a.m.**

**TRENTON** – Gilchrist County Fire Rescue Chief James M. “Mitch” Harrell has accepted the offer to be the next director of the Levy County Public Safety Department, Levy County Coordinator Freddie Moody said on Friday morning (July 22).

Harrell was the second chief ranked by the Levy County Board of County Commissioners, with which county staff negotiated an agreement for employment. Williston Fire Chief Lamar Stegall was the first choice, but those two parties did not reach a mutual agreement for WFR Chief Stegall to become LCDPS Chief Stegall.

Therefore, as of Sept. 1, the man who will become former GCFR Chief Harrell will then become LCDPS Chief Harrell.

Moody said Harrell requested and received permission to give Gilchrist County a 30-day

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notice of his intent to switch counties before starting in Levy County. By Thursday evening, Harrell had spoken with Gilchrist County interests in regard to his acceptance of the Levy County offer.

Moody said Levy, Gilchrist and Dixie counties all have an excellent working relationship in regard to fire-rescue matters.

Harrell said he is thankful for the opportunities provided to him in Gilchrist County, however it is in the best interest of him and his family to accept the Levy County post. The future chief of LCDPS said he is happy and ready to start his service to people in that capacity.



**Gilchrist County Commission Vice Chairman Kenrick Thomas (left) and County Commissioner D. Ray Harrison Jr. interact with the county's fire chief during a budget workshop on Thursday (July 21).**

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**Gilchrist County Commission Chairman Todd Gray, and commissioners Sharon Langford and Marion Poitevint listen to the fire chief for their county's fire department.**

The Gilchrist County Board of County Commissioners are working on the budget for the coming year, and they met in Trenton on Thursday afternoon (July 21).

Commissioners in Dixie County and Levy County are going through the same arduous annual effort as their Gilchrist County counterparts.

Elected leaders throughout the Tri-County Area seek to determine the best place to spend money to provide services and not burden taxpayers more than needed with increased property taxes or higher special assessments.

During the Thursday afternoon budget workshop, Gilchrist County Fire Chief Harrell spoke with County Commission Chairman Todd Gray and Vice Chairman Kenrick Thomas, Commissioner D. Ray Harrison Jr., Commissioner Sharon Langford and Commissioner Marion Poitevint, as well as with Gilchrist County Clerk Todd Newton, Finance Director Richard Romans and County Administrator Bobby Crosby.

During part of the discussion about possible expenditures for the coming fiscal year – which starts Oct. 1, Chief Harrell explained the lifespan of breathing apparatus, as well as how he wants to keep a uniform set of equipment. Firefighters are safer if they know the breathing equipment they will be using at a fire scene.

Switching from one style to the next is ill advised, he indicated.

For 40 new sets of breathing equipment, the cost would be about \$300,000, he said. There are currently 40 older units being used by the volunteer and paid firefighters. These current units are working, but there will be a time when replacements are the only option.

After some more discussion, commissioners chose against adding that estimated \$300,000 expense to the tentative budget for the coming fiscal year, or even to finance it for more than one year.

Harrell had requested a \$285,000 new tanker truck for the fire department. There is a need for a new Ford F-150 and two F-450 brush trucks, too, he said.

Chairman Gray, after a lengthy discussion, said he believes adding the tanker with a 10-year financing plan, and adding one of the brush trucks with a low-end estimated cost of \$100,000 is

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all the county can do in that regard this year, because of available funds. The pickup truck, one of the brush trucks and the complete set of replacement breathing apparatus must wait for now, Gray said.

Commissioner Harrison agreed with Gray, and while the other three members did not voice much endorsement for that at the workshop, there appeared to be consensus to move in that direction as the budget will become more formalized in the coming weeks.

There are currently four brush trucks in Gilchrist County, with one at each station. If the County Commission purchases one, as was indicated at the most recent budget workshop, then it will be a replacement truck.

As for the tanker, Harrell reminded the County Commission members that insurance rates for business and residential property owners are affected by the amount of water available to extinguish fires. Removing a tanker from the fleet and not replacing it can cost insurance customers more.

Chief Harrell mentioned that other than these five high cost expenditures, given all of the vehicles and other equipment are properly serviced and maintained, he foresees no other expensive demands from the fire department on the county budget for the next five to 10 years.