

Levy County Commission ranks public safety director candidates

Story and Photos By Jeff M. Hardison © July 5, 2016 @ 5:27 p.m.

BRONSON -- Levy County Commissioners ranked Williston Fire Chief D. Lamar Stegall on Tuesday (July 5) as the best man to accept the post from which former Public Safety Director David Knowles resigned on March 8. Levy County staff will begin negotiating with Stegall for a salary. If there is no meeting of the minds in that regard, then the succession of ranked candidates is as follows: James Harrell, James Campbell and Wayne Watts Jr.

Larry Taylor, who was among the final five from more than a dozen applicants, did not show up to be interviewed.

There was a delay with the start of the interviews, because there had to be some last-minute legal research to determine if there was a veteran's preference applicable in this process.

It was determined that there is no veteran's preference for department heads hired by the Levy County Board of County Commissioners.

County Coordinator Freddie Moody set the method for the interviews by suggesting that each candidate speak a bit about themselves and then questions would be answered from the County Commission by each candidate.

Following is coverage of each of the four candidates, and then the ranking of them by the five County Commissioners.



Chief Lamar Stegall prepares to be interviewed.

D. LAMAR STEGALL

County Commission Chairman John Meeks enjoyed saying Chief Stegall's actual first name, which is "David," as Chairman Meeks opened the interviews. The chief is best known with his middle name as being his first.

Lamar Stegall thanked the County Commission for giving him the opportunity to speak with them about the potential for him to be the next director of the Levy County Department of Public Safety.

For slightly more than the past 20 years, Stegall has been involved with emergency services in Levy County.

He started his career in 1994-95 with the city of Dunnellon as a professional firefighter. He worked there and attained the rank of lieutenant, before transferring to the city Ocala Fire Department for several years.

Then he went to work for Florida Power Corp., which has eventually evolved into Duke Energy.

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Stegall started at the Crystal River power plant as an emergency response coordinator. He was a shift commander for the nuclear fire brigade and the fossil fuel fire brigade. For the past 17 years, he worked for the electricity generating company.

With Williston Fire Rescue Department, he worked his way up from being a firefighter to becoming the chief of WFR.

Back when Levy County had a Fire Advisory Board, Stegall was the chairman of the board for many years. He is a native of Levy County, who “was born with Montbrook sand in my toes and will die with Montbrook sand in my toes.”

After County Commissioner Lilly Rooks asked Stegall what changes he would bring to the county’s fire department, Stegall said he would seek to retain the local talent.

“I would bring it back to the roots of our homegrown system,” Stegall said.

Levy County loses a lot of talented men and women who go to Alachua, Marion and Citrus counties. He stressed that Alachua County is the strongest magnet for pulling Levy County firefighters away.

Creating a plan to grow firefighters into the Levy County system is what he would do to avoid losing them.

“Another thing we need to do in Levy County is to retain the employees we have,” he said. “We’ve got to give them incentive programs to keep those people in place.”

Stegall said incentives already exist, but he would like to see those improved.

The chief noted there is no instant fix. There is no Band-Aid, he said. The methods will take time to create, and it will take time to show that they are effective.

One aspect he mentioned off the cuff is to continue the certification for firefighters-paramedics and firefighters-EMTs, but also to consider hiring people certified only as paramedics or EMTs.

He spoke about methods to reduce “zero status,” where there is no ambulance available in the county.

Interestingly during the interviews, it was mentioned that the Gainesville daily newspaper was critical of first-responders in Alachua County when there were times that county faced the same dilemma.

County Commissioner Danny Stevens mentioned his opinion about weekly news reporters who write stories that indicated Levy County was unique with this problem, even though a large metropolitan county adjacent to this county has experienced the same hindrance to public safety in the recent past.

Commissioners asked Stegall about the number of people under his command in various places. He also spoke about being able to work within a budget. Stegall said he treats tax dollars just as he would if they were his own.

He runs his personal budget tight, he said, adding jokingly, “Well, as tight as I can keep (his wife) Darlene out of it.”

“We want to provide the best service possible for our citizens,” he said, “for the least expense.”

The single-most important factor Stegall stressed in regard to his best attributes is his integrity.

He is direct. There are “no smokescreens or anything like that” to confuse an issue, Stegall said.

Commissioner Stevens asked Stegall about his method for discipline. The chief said there are rules for disciplining a county firefighter that are spelled out in the union.

The chief did share one story about having to immediately relieve a firefighter from duty due to some improper conduct. Six months later, the firefighter showed he had learned from that error. The chief let the man rejoin the team, and that firefighter is a valuable asset again to the WFR.

Stegall was asked by Chairman Meeks if he could work with a medical director and battalion captains who may disagree with him on a procedure or practice.

When it comes to procedures, Stegall said, the director must look to the people whose expertise is that – procedures. The director gets the people to where they need to be, and to have the tools they need to get the job done, and to make sure they enjoy the job they are doing, Stegall said.

Chairman Meeks asked if Stegall could build and maintain strong bonds between the Public Safety Department and the various municipal fire departments. Stegall said he feels certain this will happen under his leadership.

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Chairman Meeks asked if Stegall thought the special assessments for fire and for EMS are good, or if they should be increased or decreased. Stegall said he cannot answer at this moment. He needs to conduct an assessment of the whole program.

“It wouldn’t be fair for me to come up here and say, ‘I am going to cut taxes or assessments because I think we can do that,’” he said. “I would have to have time to look at the overall picture.”

Commissioner Mike Joyner asked Stegall if he was leader or a warrior. Stegall said he is a leader because a leader gets his people to follow him, without having to order them to follow him.



JAMES M. HARRELL

James M. “Mitch” Harrell, 54, of Bell is currently in the same position in Gilchrist County as Director Knowles was in before Knowles resigned from Levy County.

In fact, Harrell would meet on occasion with Knowles and with Dixie County Emergency Management Director (and County Manager) Timothy Alexander.

Harrell started his career as a junior volunteer firefighter in the town of LaCrosse (Alachua County), where his father was a volunteer.

He worked for the city of Alachua Fire Department, which was taken over by Alachua County Fire Rescue. Harrell then worked for ACFR for 26 years and nine months before retiring as assistant chief.

He accepted the fire chief position in Gilchrist County, where he has been for more than three years now.

Harrell, and his wife of 23 years, Lydia, who is a fifth generation resident of Gilchrist County, have two sons, one who is entering his senior year at Bell High School and one who attends the University of Florida.

As for managing crew members, Harrell said he prefers building consensus with the team to determine what will help everyone to do their job better. So he seeks input from the men and women on the crew.

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JAMES CAMPBELL

James Campbell said he was born in Texas but has lived in Gilchrist County since he was 2 years old.

His father owned a business where he would install equipment. Working on firetrucks became the young Mr. Campbell's job, he said.

He has completed a Gilchrist County Sheriff's Office vehicle from front to back – details, lights, cage and camera system within eight hours.

As soon as he turned 16 years old, Campbell joined both the volunteer fire departments in Trenton and Fanning Springs.

His plan was to join the military out of high school. However, his mother told him that she would pay for his schooling to be an Emergency Medical Technician if he would try that first, rather than joining the military right out of high school.

His first emergency service was at Bronson Speedway, where he joined Scott Coker in a pickup truck with fire extinguishers in the back.

He worked in Gilchrist County, and then in Ocala where he became a critical care paramedic. Campbell is among the paramedics that serve on the ShandsCair helicopter.

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WAYNE WATTS JR.

Watts said he has been involved with firefighter and emergency management for 36 years as of next month.

He is a firefighter-paramedic. He has worked in small departments and with a large department with over 1,300 people in it.

The largest fire he fought was three million gallons of gasoline and that firefight lasted for five days.

“It didn’t take five days to put it out,” Watts said. “It took five tries to figure out how to do it.”

This fits with his basic management philosophy that not one shoe will fit every situation. Watts said the director needs to learn the people, learn the ins and outs of the system and the politics.

“You develop policies on what is best for the citizens of your community,” Watts said, “what’s best for the people who work for you and what’s best for the commission – in that order.”

Watts started as a firefighter, has been a battalion chief and has served in every position in fire service, including the direction of emergency medical services, logistics and command.

RANKING

To reach the ranking of Stegall, Harrell, Campbell and Watts, the five county commissioners rated them first through fourth. Following is the ranking each commissioner gave and the order that the commissioners gave their ratings.

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MIKE JOYNER

County Commissioner Mike Joyner put them in the following order: Campbell, Stegall, Harrell and Watts.



ROCK MEEKS

County Commissioner Rock Meeks ranked them: Stegall, Harrell, Campbell and Watts.

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DANNY STEVENS

County Commissioner Danny Stevens made a statement before sharing his ranking.

He said he had difficulty ranking them, because every candidate was good. Some contenders presented better resumes and others gave better verbal presentations.

Stevens said that whether the County Commission continues having the Department of Public Safety to continue on the course started earlier, or if there are revisions, he rated the people in the following order: Harrell, Watts, Stegall and Campbell.

Stevens explained that he heard Campbell indicate that he would have difficulty delegating authority, and that would create a bottleneck in operations. That is why he rated Campbell as last.

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LILLY ROOKS

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County Commissioner Lilly Rooks ranked them as Stegall, Campbell, Harrell and Watts.

Rooks said she almost moved Campbell to third due to an answer he gave in relation to a question about the budget, however she liked how he presented himself “and I think he’s got a good head on his shoulders.”



JOHN MEEKS

Commission Chairman John Meeks ranked them as Stegall, Harrell, Campbell and Watts.

Meeks said Watts would have rated some extra points from veteran’s preference.

As for Campbell, Meeks said “He has some good ideas and I appreciate his enthusiasm, but I think it almost puts us back in the same place where we were at before. And I think we kinda’ need to go in a different direction.”

Meeks said that in regard to Harrell, he has been doing this type of work for almost 40 years. Meeks asked how much longer will Harrell be willing to keep doing it.

Among the reasons Meeks ranked Stegall as top candidate, is from his past work with the municipal departments in the county. Stegall’s work on the Levy County Fire Advisory Board is significant, Meeks indicated.

“He’s our local guy,” Meeks said. “I want to give him a shot.”