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Levy County Commission increases budgeted amount for Chiefland Fire Rescue by \$20,000



Chiefland Fire Chief James Harris (right) tells the County Commission that Chiefland Fire Rescue has scrimped and saved to find the necessary equipment at the lowest prices. Standing next to him is CFR Capt. Cal Morgan.

**Story and Photos By Jeff M. Hardison © Aug. 17, 2016 @ 10:37 p.m.
Graphs Provided by CFR**

BRONSON –Fire Chief James Harris of Chiefland Fire Rescue and CFR Capt. Cal Morgan found a 5-0 vote of approval to increase the budgeted money from Levy County to CFR by \$20,000 for the fiscal year that begins Oct. 1.

The \$20,000 increase for CFR from Levy County happened during a budget meeting even after Jared Blanton, Levy County financial officer from the office of County Clerk Danny Shipp, told the commissioners that they are showing expenditures in the budget that exceed revenue by about \$3 million.

Blanton showed the County Commission that \$3 million can be taken from the county's reserve balance. However, he said, a trend of spending reserves on recurring expenses such as for payroll and for operating costs, needs to change because the steep decline in reserves over the past few years, if continued at that rate will lead to no reserve.

Spending reserve money on capital outlay expenses, such as construction of a building, is a more accepted practice for spending down reserve balances, he said.

In reaching the point where Levy County Commission Chairman John Meeks agreed to increase the county's share to fund CFR, there was some discussion between Capt. Morgan and Chief Harris and the County Commission.

Harris opened his presentation by saying that each commissioner is a good person doing the best that he or she can do for the people of Levy County.

Since he was a Boy Scout at 11 years old and going all the way through his career as a professional firefighter in 1979, Harris said he has had a passion for firefighting. And that comes, he continued, from his compassion for people in need.

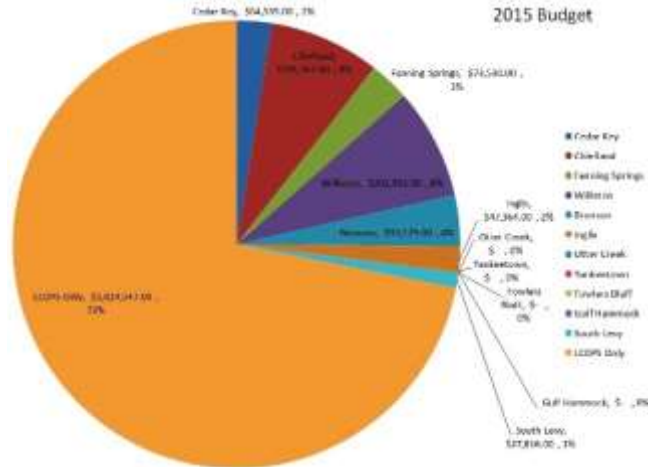
The firefighters' job, he said, is to mitigate those needs no matter whether they are small or big.

No matter where the call is made, or who makes it, the members of CFR will do its best to help those who need them, he said.

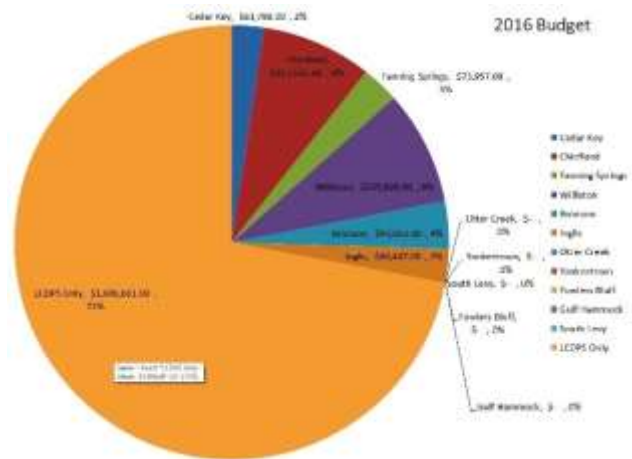
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Graphs

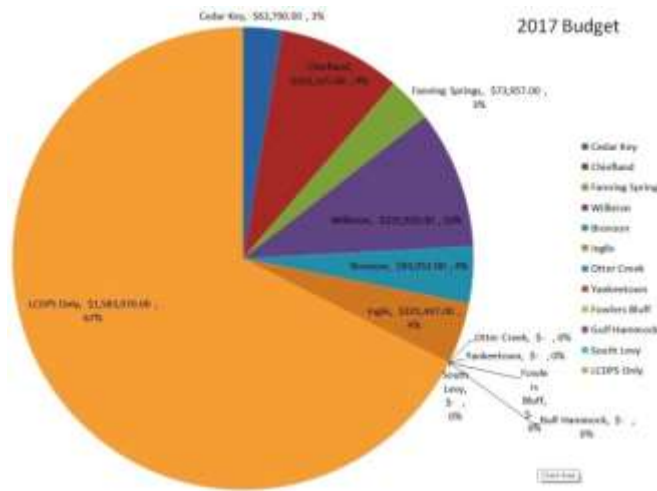
The graphs below show the division of funds from the Levy County Board of County Commissioners allocated or tentatively allocated to the Levy County Department of Public Safety and the various municipal fire departments for 2015, 2016 and 2017. These pie charts were created by the Chiefland Fire Rescue Department. The light orange is LCDPS. The red is CFR. The darker blue at the top is Cedar Key. The green is Fanning Springs. The purple is Williston. Bronson is the blue next to the purple. Inglis, Yankeetown, Otter Creek and others are difficult to see on the pies.



2015



2016



2017

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CFR Capt. Cal Morgan (at right)



Capt. Morgan began telling the County Commission about CFR answering calls where other departments – including the Levy County Department of Public Safety – were not responding.

Morgan said a female survived a rollover crash and was lying on her dead husband for a period of time – perhaps five or six hours – on Sunday (Aug. 14). The accident scene was hidden by trees that were knocked over during that crash on U.S. Highway 19, three miles south of State Road 24.

The first units were paged from Station 11 and Station 3 at 1:10 a.m., Morgan said. CFR was called out at 1:26 a.m. after no other units responded to the calls from dispatch to respond.

While at the scene three miles south of the town of Otter Creek, CFR is paged to respond to a call on Azalea Camp Road – out close to Manatee Springs State Park, Morgan said.

That rollover accident was a call-out at 1:50 a.m. on Sunday morning, he continued. That was 20-some miles away, Morgan said.

“Basically,” he said, “every time something happens, Chiefland Fire meets its obligation. We had another call out to District 6. (Levy County Road) 347 out by Fowlers Boat Ramp for a vehicle versus deer.”

When CFR was at this scene, which is very close to the Fowlers Bluff fire station that is manned part-time by LCDPS, Morgan said CFR was alerted to a commercial fire alarm at Winn Dixie inside the city limits of Chiefland.

Fanning Springs Fire Rescue and Bronson Fire Rescue were paged out for Winn Dixie alarm, he said, because it is a commercial structure and that requires a three-station response.

And so, CFR was called back to the city from its call that put it in Fowlers Bluff due to no other responding units.

“We’ve had a plane crash in Station 6’s zone, and no Station 6 coverage” Morgan continued. “We’ve had a rollover ejection in Station 6’s zone. No Station 6 response and we responded.”

Capt. Morgan was taking a breath to continue with a narrative about more issues where CFR responded when there was no other fire department responding.

“You can tell us that we haven’t covered our area and we haven’t done our job,” Chairman

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Meeks said. “Nobody sitting up here is not aware of that.”

Meeks went on to say he appreciates CFR “going above and beyond.” That is why Meeks invited Chief Harris to approach the County Commission – because Meeks heard a truck was in need of repair.

The chairman said he just wanted to hear what the city fire department was requesting.

Meeks reminded the chief that Mitch Harrell begins as the new LCPSD director on Sept. 1. The chairman said he plans to work with Harrell to find a better method for allocating funds to the cities’ fire departments so that coverage of the county around the cities can improve.



CFR Capt. Cal Morgan (left) and Chief James Harris stand at the podium with the fire districts in front of them.

Harris and Morgan gave the County Commission a paper showing that in the last five years 2011-2016, CFR ran 6,907 calls – which is an average of 1,382 calls per year.

The city spent \$4,077 on portable radios after the LCDPS replaced the entire radio system, according to what the chief shared with the County Commission. And all told about \$8,000 was spent on portable radios, he said.

The chief said CFR requested from LCDPS more Automated External Defibrillators.

“That is the piece of equipment that brings somebody back from the dead,” Harris said about AEDs.

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They are not clinically dead, he added, but they are physically dead. Their heart has stopped. “We were refused AEDs by the former director (of LCDPS),” Harris said. “Three of them are what we needed. They are \$8,100.”

With one donated to CFR by a federal agency, and by shopping around, the department found four AEDs for \$600, Harris said.

He went on to explain about bunker gear and air-packs for firefighters to be able to turn out for fighting fires and to breathe in smoke-filled environments.

Chief Harris then explained that while the fire assessment increased for county property owners by in excess of 80 percent, the CFR lost more than 20 percent of its previous revenue stream from the county during the past five years.

Where CFR was formerly paid about \$25,000 to cover Fowlers Bluff that has been cut for six years – which means CFR did not see approximately \$150,000 from that part of its previous budget.

And CFR was formerly paid about \$31,000 a year to cover the area around the town of Otter Creek, but that was stopped four years ago to equal approximately \$124,000 loss of revenue to the municipal fire department.

All-told, CFR lost about \$301,000 from the Board of County Commissioners in the past five years – in comparison with before the LCDPS was created.

“Nobody but us was cut and we are running the majority of the calls,” Harris said.

Chairman Meeks countered by saying the other departments had not been contracting with other communities as CFR did.

The LCDPS took over several parts of Levy County where there was not a very functional volunteer fire department like in South Levy, Gulf Hammock, Morrision-Montbrook, Otter Creek, Rosewood and Fowlers Bluff.

There are not enough paid and volunteer firefighters currently in rural Florida, but that is part of the trade-off for not living in an urban area. Volunteers are being sought in Dixie and Levy counties, though, to help reduce the loss of life and property.

Meeks said former LCDPS Director David Knowles has resigned and Chief Harrell starts Sept. 1.

Meeks said the county is striving to amend issues with the LCDPS and municipal fire department by creating a new funding strategy. In the meantime, since the budget year starts Oct. 1, Meeks wanted to see how the county could help CFR in the upcoming fiscal year.

Capt. Morgan said CFR needs \$15,000 just to have enough proper bunker gear alone.

County Coordinator Freddie Moody mentioned he had spoken with Cedar Key Volunteer Fire Chief Robert Robinson about Cedar Key firefighters covering Rosewood and the like. Moody suggested to that chief, as he is suggesting to Chief Harris, to wait until Chief Harrell takes his post.

Then there can be a meeting of the chiefs to iron out finer points about coverage areas, and eventually a formula for funding might be created.

Meeks sought to help CFR through the coming fiscal year of Oct. 1 through Sept. 30, 2017. He asked Harris what he wanted.

Chief Harris said he would like to see the county increase the CFR budget by \$56,000 for the coming year – which would put CFR back at the 2011 amount it received from the County Commission.

On a motion by County Commissioner Lilly Rooks, seconded by County Commissioner Mike Joyner, Chairman Meeks’ suggestion to give CFR another \$20,000 in the coming fiscal year was approved by a 5-0 vote.

This means CFR is looking at \$222,325 from the county to cover calls outside of the city and inside of the city, and it is budgeted for 203,000 for calls by the city taxpayers for the coming year, according to the budget workshop discussion on Tuesday afternoon.