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Fire chief retires six weeks early; *Mayor is alleged to have created 'a hostile work environment'*

Story and Video

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FANNING SPRINGS -- What started as a request for better information about methods to restock supplies in the fire department, transformed into the city's fire chief giving two weeks' notice of his intent to retire early.

Fanning Springs Fire Chief Ronnie McQueen had told Fanning Springs Mayor Howell E. "Trip" Lancaster III about his plan to retire Dec. 31 in a private conversation earlier in the year.

As it turned out, the hostile work environment created by the mayor led the chief to choose to leave six weeks before that date.

McQueen had just finished telling the mayor and City Council about a long period of time when firefighters were working on a pine straw fire. Gilchrist County Fire Rescue, under the leadership of Chief James Campbell, had brought most of the manpower for this battle. And GCFR provided most of the water and Gatorade, and the Gilchrist County Road Department brought 50 hamburgers from McDonald's of Trenton to feed the firefighting troops during this battle.

Chief McQueen said he went to Walmart to restock Gatorade and water, but he learned the credit card for the fire department to make that purchase had been rescinded.

City Clerk Sheila Watson told the chief that the mayor had taken that action.

Lancaster said the City Council had been questioning every invoice, as he explained his reason for that action.

Chief McQueen acknowledged the mayor and said this would provide a good segue (pronounced ('segwā) into what he was going to say, but before that new topic, he want ask about reimbursement to a firefighter.

Every year, McQueen said, the volunteer fire department reimburses a firefighter for Emergency Medical Technician training.

This year, he wanted the city to pay Firefighter Chella Decker \$2,100 (minus \$175 for a laptop) to Nature Coast Emergency Medical Institute from the Fire Department's own fundraising account.

There was some conversation between Mayor Lancaster, Clerk Watson and Chief McQueen. The mayor said that whether the fire department raised the money or not, he wanted to see an accounting for it.

Given this expense had been approved by the City Council last year for another volunteer, the chief thought it would happen.

The chief went on then to say that previously expenses of less than \$500 – such as for water and Gatorade – did not require prior approval.

Then the mayor asked the chief if this was the direction that was going to be taken – to seek clarification of the mayor's commands in an adversarial manner.

The chief said this is not the direction that is going to be taken.

"The segue is that," Chief McQueen said, "it has gotten to a point where there is

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constant friction.”

The last year in the Fire Department has not been pleasant for the volunteers, Chief McQueen said, because of the hostile work environment that was created by Mayor Lancaster.

Even since McQueen won his appeal of the mayor’s improper suspension of him, the chief said there have been issues.

So, after 37 years of McQueen being the fire chief, though every administration of Fanning Springs, he is going to retire effective Nov. 15, rather than as he had mentioned the potential of retirement on Dec. 31.

The administration of Lancaster has made the atmosphere in the fire department to be detrimental to the firefighters.

As a result, firefighters are not volunteering to be available as much. This means there are going to have to be other qualified individuals coming to emergencies as first responders, the chief said.

The chief reminisced a bit after his announcement.

He spoke about a 1940 circa fuel tanker truck that came from St. Petersburg and was modified to serve as a fire department vehicle. The first truck had a pump that was powered by a Briggs and Stratton engine that started by pulling a rope, he said.

Fish fries and Bingo games funded tens of thousands of dollars’ worth of equipment.

At least two generations of volunteer firefighters and medical emergency personnel started at Fanning Springs Volunteer Fire Department and went on to careers in saving lives and property.

City Councilman Ron Queen said he is thankful to the chief for his decades of service, and for his helping young people who made this career choice.

City Councilwoman Barbara Locke made a motion to give Chief McQueen \$200 for each of the 37 years in recognition for the decades he served the City of Fanning Springs. Locke said she believes the fire budget will cover that.

City Councilman Queen seconded the motion.

Fanning Springs City Attorney Jamie Lynn Shideler (who is also known as Jamie Lynn White) of the Dell Graham Gainesville Law Office, immediately said that motion to award the chief \$7,400 as a parting gesture for his retirement should not be voted upon at the November meeting.

Shideler said this is a matter the City Council should put on the agenda for the next monthly meeting – which will be two weeks after McQueen retires from his post – so that members of the public can show up to provide their input. The attorney advised that she felt this should be properly noticed for the public.

Locke asked the attorney if the motion could be made at the next meeting, and the attorney said it could –after it is duly noticed for public input