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Fire chief gets raise



Fire Chief James Harris prepares to listen to the evaluation and salary negotiation. After City Commissioner Teresa Barron started with a possible annual salary of \$61,000, the chief said he appreciates that. He said he does this work for the people and not for the money, and he mentioned that he did not want to create dissention within the city by him being given such a significant raise. However, he added, he does have a daughter who is a student at the University of Florida, and he can use the money. In the end, the 4-0 vote was for an increase to \$59,000 a year.

Story and Photos By Jeff M. Hardison © Feb. 15, 2017 at 3:07 p.m.

CHIEFLAND -- Chiefland Fire Chief James Harris was given a \$4,157 annual increase in pay Monday night (Feb. 13) via a 4-0 vote after a process that almost provided him with a \$6,157 annual raise via a 2-1 vote.

The final decision to pay Chief Harris an annual salary of \$59,000 resulted from City Commissioner Rollin Hudson arriving just before the regular City Commission meeting was slated to start as he came in on the heels of the special meeting that had been scheduled, and did begin at 5:30 p.m.

At the start of the special meeting, City Manager Mary Ellzey told Vice Mayor Chris Jones that Mayor Betty Walker had called to say she would be unable to attend the special meeting or the regular meeting, and Commissioner Hudson was not going to make it in time for the start of the special meeting.

The vice mayor invited City Commissioner Teresa Barron and City Commissioner Donald Lawrence to speak about the chief. All five members of the Chiefland City Commission had already completed their multiple-page evaluation form.

The reason for the special meeting was to renegotiate the annual contract with Harris.

The annual base salary for the chief in the previous year was \$54,843.

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(from left) City Commissioner Teresa Barron, City Commissioner Donald Lawrence and Vice Mayor Chris Jones all seem happy at the start of speaking about Chief James Harris' evaluation.

Barron had been the liaison to the Chiefland Fire Rescue Department (CFR) before Mayor Betty Walker and then Vice Mayor Jones served as the liaison.

Barron served in that role, just as Walker had and Jones does now in their posts as vice mayor. Barron said she sees was happy to see Harris working well with Walker and then Jones. Walker was chosen by the whole City Commission to be mayor after the death of former Mayor Teal Pomeroy, and the City Commission chose Jones to be vice mayor.

Barron was the first Monday night to provide verbal comments about Chief Harris.

“I think he runs a tight ship over there (at the fire station),” Barron said. “And those guys (volunteers and paid members of the fire department) are very professional.”

Chief Harris loves his job, Barron said, and this is reflected by the high quality that he exhibits in his work.

Commissioner Lawrence said he likes “... how you make something out of nothing,” in reference to the used fire engine the chief found and which the members of the Chiefland Fire Rescue Department restored.

Lawrence also made reference to the many new air packs that the CFR obtained at an extremely low cost, but which are trustworthy to protect the firefighters' lives as they are put into use.



(from left) City Commissioner Rollin Hudson, City Commissioner Teresa Barron, City Commissioner Donald Lawrence and Vice Mayor Chris Jones share their different opinions about the amount to offer the chief for his next annual salary.

Vice Mayor Jones opened his comments by saying that in the four-plus years since he first

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took office he has learned a lot about each department in the city. Jones said the biggest struggle he sees for the CFR is the lack of available funds.

The members of the CFR, he said, are very dedicated.

Jones reminded listeners of an off-handed comment from a person in the audience a few years ago, when there was a public meeting at the Tommy Usher Community Center.

At the time, it was the start of discussions for the potential of Advanced Life Support, non-transport, services to be offered by CFR rather than the Basic Life Support level of service provided when CFR personnel arrive as the first-responding entity at a medical emergency.

Jones took offense, back then, because the person from the audience said the politicians did not know what is going on in the CFR. Vice Mayor Jones put in 13 and a half years with the United States Department of Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as a firefighter.

Jones said he knows the limits that Chief Harris is overcoming as he and the other CFR members go beyond those limits to provide the level of service they do for Chiefland and the unincorporated areas of Levy County where they respond.

After Jones finished providing his input, Barron made a motion to approve the contract for another year and to pay him \$61,000 a year. That motion was seconded by Lawrence.

Barron said she felt that as a full-time department head in the city, and with the other department heads at a similar pay scale, she felt Harris deserved that pay.

Chief Harris thanked Barron for her motion, but he did not want to see this cause any friction from within the ranks of the city workers or within the CFR, where he has some people who are not paid much at all.

Lawrence said he concurs with Barron.

At this point, Hudson had not arrived yet.

Jones said he felt that was too much of an increase for the fire chief, and he had seen the city lose other employees to other cities due to the lower pay scale.

Jones mentioned that if there was a desire to overcome disparity, as Barron had said existed due to other department leaders being paid in the \$61,000 range, then the City Commission should look at the disparity within the pay scales for all of the lower ranking employees of the city.

City Manager Ellzey said there was money in the budget to pay the chief with the increase which Barron had moved to approve, and Lawrence had seconded.

Jones, Lawrence and Barron discussed their points for several minutes. Barron called for her motion to be voted upon, and Hudson arrived.

Rather than just voting before Hudson had a chance to weigh-in on the matter, Vice Mayor Jones chose to bring Hudson up to speed on the discussion up to that point. If there had been a vote before Hudson arrived, it presumably would have been 2-1 in favor of \$61,000 a year for Chief Harris.

There was a vote after Hudson learned about the motion and discussed it. The vote was 2-2 on the motion for \$61,000 as the annual salary. Barron and Lawrence voted in favor of it and Jones and Hudson voted against it.

Therefore, that motion did not pass.

After more discussion, Hudson made a motion to put the annual salary at \$56,000. That did not get a second and died.

Barron made a motion to pay Harris \$59,000 a year. That was seconded by Lawrence and met with a 4-0 vote.