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Williston fire chief gets raise after 4-1 vote



Williston Mayor Jerry Robinson holds a certificate showing that Williston City Council President Nancy Winger earned for completing the Elected Municipal Officials III: The Leadership Challenge event on March 2 and 3 in Orlando. The Florida League of Cities University awarded the certificate to the city leader. Also at his first meeting as the mayor of Williston, Robinson read a proclamation that April is recognized as General Aviation Month in Williston.

Story and Photo

By Jeff M. Hardison © April 18, 2018 at 5:08 p.m.

WILLISTON – By a 4-1 vote Tuesday night (April 17), the Williston City Council agreed with Mayor Jerry Robinson's recommendation to give Fire Chief Lamar Stegall a raise.

City Council President Nancy Winger cast the dissenting vote to the motion that was made by City Councilman Charles Goodman, seconded by City Council Vice President Marguerite Robinson. The other two positive votes to the motion were cast by City Councilman Elihu Ross and City Councilman Justin Head.

The raise takes Chief Stegall's hourly rate from \$15.33 to \$25.

Council President Winger said she believes the chief is well worth that amount of hourly money, however she felt this was not the time to be seeking and granting raises. She feels the better time would have been during the budget-making process.

Mayor Robinson said he had asked City Finance Director Stephen Bloom if the city could afford this pay increase for the chief in its current budget, and he said that a budget amendment will take care of the matter and that the city's coffers can cover the difference.

Before making his recommendation for the increase of almost \$10 per hour, Mayor Robinson, who was in his first meeting as the mayor, provided the other municipal leaders with some background information about how little Stegall has received for what he has given to the city and the surrounding unincorporated area of Levy County.

After former Mayor R. Gerald Hethcoat made Stegall the chief in 2001 or so, Robinson said, Stegall's hourly salary at that point remained the same until 2012, when it was increased to \$15.33 an hour – where it has remained. The chief works about 10 hours a week now, except where there are extraordinary circumstances such as hurricanes and big wildfires.

Depending on the chief's job at Duke Energy and if he is able to retire, Mayor Robinson said, that may lead to Stegall being able to work 15 to 26 hours a week. The mayor said there will be some weeks during hunting season when Chief Stegall will not be on the clock because he will be hunting.

City Councilman Ross was the first City Council member to ask about why this is happening at this meeting rather than during the budget-making process.

Mayor Robinson said he wants to do it now, because the city can do it now. As for questions

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about raises for other department leaders or administrators, Mayor Robinson said he has not heard requests from other departments yet. Robinson showed the city leaders that the raise was below what other chiefs in the area are being paid.

Robinson said the chief's service to the city has been far beyond anything that he has been paid for so far. Robinson and others reminded the City Council that the team of professionals at Williston Fire Rescue have made this volunteer fire department to be seen as the standard to which others hope to attain.

Chief Stegall's talent at finding excellent young firefighters and medical professionals who will give 100 percent, and his ability to inspire the WFR staff members as well as to keep the WFR operating at an extraordinary level of service for a very low cost was mentioned by various members of City Council.

City Councilman Goodman led the effort to follow Mayor Robinson's request. Goodman said he sees very little likelihood of Williston being able to find a qualified chief who would work part-time on the volunteer department for the meager pay the city gives to Chief Stegall.

"As far as keeping Chief Stegall," President Wininger said, "I don't think there is any better. I do have a problem with the timing. I think he is worth every penny of it. I think there isn't any question. My concern is the timing, because of what happened with budgets before where we had fire (WFR) came (seeking raises) and we said 'Yes' and then the police came in and we said 'Yes.'"

Then other workers noted they were being underpaid and the City Council said "No" to those raises, Wininger said. If this matter had come up during the budget process, Wininger said, then she probably would have voted in favor of it.