

Midway considers layoffs

BY PAM BRANNON
Gulf Breeze News
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Midway Fire District officials are wrestling with the financial future of the department. The district's commissioners are considering layoffs and pension plans and recently received grant funding from the federal government.

Laying people off on New Year's Eve does not sit well with Midway Fire Commissioners. But if something doesn't change with their revenue collections, that might be when two firefighters will be getting pink slips this year.

Fire Commission Treasurer Clyde Broome presented the revised budget for Oct. 1 through September 2008 to fire commissioners at last week's regular monthly meeting. It is a budget that has to be done in time to be presented to the public at a special public tax and budget meeting Sept. 4 at 7 p.m. Then there will be a final meeting for final adoption of the budget at 6 p.m. Sept. 11, before the regular fire commission meeting of that month.

To balance the budget with the revenue collections now projected there were cuts in the budget from what was originally proposed for the next fiscal

year. Those cuts include not purchasing a service truck that was planned in the budget, as well as no pay increases for anyone next year and a cut in the training budget. And it includes laying off two firefighters as of Dec. 31, 2007.

"New Year's Eve is sure not a very good time to lay someone off. I guess it is better than Dec. 24, maybe. But of course, we don't want to get right up to December and suddenly have to tell these guys they don't have jobs," Commissioner Jaques Gorris said. "We have to be as up front as we can be with them. I assume, in fact, that these conversations about possible layoffs have already been done?"

Fire Chief Stephen Demeter said yes, there had been discussions already.

Gorris said, "But there is no guarantee, right? So there might be some other fire associations that would hire them with a guaranteed job by the first of the year. I sure hate to lose them, but we have to be as up front as we can be with our people. And we cannot blame them if they cannot wait around to see if they have a job come mid-January. I know Navarre is going to be hiring about 12 firefighters come January, since they are going to be a paid department."

Despite the potential layoffs, employees of Midway Fire

District now have an added way to save for the future. Fire commissioners approved a program last week for employees to place money tax free toward retirement if they so choose.

It is called the 457 pension program. Commissioners explained that it is not like a 401K program, since there is no penalty for early withdrawal of money. There is a maximum cap allowing employees to out no more than \$15,500 a year in the 457 account, and there is no tax on the money until it is withdrawn, usually at the time of retirement.



Demeter

Currently the Midway Fire District does offer a pension fund for employees to place money into, but it has a cap of 5 percent of annual salary per year, so commissioners said most employees could not put more than about \$1,500 at the most in the fund each year. The 457 account allows much more. And employees can participate in both retirement programs.

Chief Demeter also reported to commissioners that they received some grant money this month, that the staff has been busy working toward their ISO

accreditation inspection to lower residents' insurance rates, and have been responding to a higher than usual amount of calls with good response time.

The chief told commissioners they are receiving \$168,300 in Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) grant money for firefighter air packs.

"FEMA had told us earlier that they thought their money was all gone when we asked for the grant for these air packs, but they would let us know closer to September if they had any left over. And if they did, then they would fund our request. So we received an email this week saying we are getting the money."

They are also receiving another grant for \$2,500 for a laptop computer to be used in the field to help upgrade the process of fire inspections for businesses.

"The process has been that our fire inspector has done his report on paper, and handed it to the business owner, then come back and put all the information into the computer at the office," Demeter said. "With this laptop, the inspection can be done and the report made right there, in the computer, and a copy printed off and handed to the business owner right there. One step and it will be done. Much more efficient."

Calendar of Events

Thursday, Aug. 23
Santa Rosa County Commission Regular Meeting, 9 a.m., Commissioner's Board Room, 6495 Caroline Street, Milton

School Board Meeting, 10 a.m., School District Administrative Offices, 5086 Canal Street, Milton

Friday, Aug. 24
UGA Florida Panhandle Bulldogs Celebration, 7 p.m., Crowne Plaza Pensacola Grand Hotel, CUVA Club Room (1st floor off south lobby), 200 Gregory Street, Pensacola.
Join University of Georgia alumni, friends and fans for the annual "Georgia Bulldog Kick-off Celebration."

Saturday, Aug. 25
Swenson Park Old Fashioned Community Picnic, 5:30 p.m. - 7:30 p.m. Swenson Park, Santa Rosa Shores

Sunday, Aug. 26
No meetings scheduled

Monday, Aug. 27
No meetings scheduled as of press time

Tuesday, Aug. 28
City of Gulf Breeze Board of Adjustments, 6:30 p.m., Gulf Breeze City Hall, 1070 Shoreline Drive, Gulf Breeze

Wednesday, Aug. 29
City of Gulf Breeze Executive Committee Meeting, 6:30 p.m., Gulf Breeze City Hall, 1070 Shoreline Drive, Gulf Breeze

Local Mitigation Strategy Task Force, 1:30 p.m., EOC Building, Pine Forest Road, Milton

Thursday, Aug. 30
No meetings scheduled as of press time

ADDRESS: Company cited for \$132,000

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release said the company was cited for three willful safety violations with monetary penalties totaling \$132,000. Those infractions included employees working from an improperly erected scaffold, using a makeshift platform and using a forklift to lift them to a roof without proper fall protection equipment.

Inspectors also documented

four additional violations that could cost the company \$10,000 in fines. Those infractions included employees working on a roof edge without fall protection, using a pallet on a forklift as a working platform, accessing the scaffold in an unsafe manner and allowing debris to accumulate at the worksite.

The company was also cited for employees not wearing hardhats near overhead brick laying

operations. The hardhat violation, which could result in a \$4,000 fine, was the second such infraction for A. E. New Jr. Inc. in three years. According to OSHA records, the company was fined \$700 for the head protection violation and a total of \$2,450 for infractions in 2004.

"We look forward to working very closely with OSHA," said Albert "Ned" New Jr., the company's owner. "Safety is very

important to us. This situation is certainly not enjoyable but we intend to move ahead."

The company has 15 working days starting Aug. 13 to contest the proposed penalties. Borders said the company has requested an informal conference with the government agency to discuss the alleged infractions.

For more information about OSHA's enforcement standards, visit www.osha.gov.

Zoo: Park celebrated 20 years in 2004

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Then, some time later, they added some share holders like Bobby Switzer and Navarre's own Bill Pullum. Out of the goodness of their hearts and their back pockets, those share holders kept The Zoo going for over 10 years."

He said as year 2000 was approaching, the men began to talk about putting in place an organization that would keep The Zoo going into perpetuity, long after they had retired or passed themselves. That is when the idea of a 501(c)3 not-for-profit organization took form. Also shortly after that is when Pat Quinn talked to his old friend Doug Kemper, on a few trips to Africa, about coming to Northwest Florida to help The Zoo transition under a non-profit board and grow. Kemper had helped develop non-profit projects around the country, such as the Aquarium in Seattle and a 20-year project in Oklahoma.

"When I finished the Oklahoma project, I came here to look at The Zoo. I could see right away the potential for

building it into a wonderful non-profit national destination point for travelers, as well as a local family attraction," Kemper said. "But first we needed to get it reorganized under a non-profit board."

He said The Zoo, sitting on 50 acres of prime land along Hwy. 98, is as large as many attractions around the country like the New Orleans Zoo. It just needed some facelifts, marketing, and some new initiatives to draw people.

The non-profit reorganization was completed. The board took over management Sept. 1, 2004.

"We had great plans already in place for the future. We had targeted some federal programs for possible grants, and were already that year on our way to a banner year for gate receipts," Kemper said. "So in 2004 we celebrated the 20th birthday of The Zoo and announced its transition to a 501(c)3 non-profit business. We always needed 150,000 visitors a year to break even at The Zoo, and in 2004 we were well on our way to 175,000. Then it hit - Ivan, less than two weeks after the non-

profit board took over."

The Zoo was then closed for 13 months. Kemper said before the storms they had grown to about 2,000 annual pass holders, but after the storms they dropped to about 1,600.

"We had insurance we thought would cover us, even for loss of business, but we discovered that it would only pay \$191,000 over an eight week period," Kemper said. "But our clean up costs were \$600,000 and the business loss was just over \$900,000." He said they ended up with about \$2-1/2 million loss in buildings and business interruption.

Then at the end of 2004 they had to borrow \$375,000 just to feed the animals.

"Now 150,000 visitors will not make us break even, with the extra accrued debt we have made since the storms," Kemper said.

He said, "If we had \$200,000 we could make it through this year without closing our doors. But we have been asking for a million in pledges from the community for this year, so we can have a contingency in case

another storm or unexpected emergency hits The Zoo. Then we are asking for another couple million over the next year or two because we have a land-lease agreement with the original share holders on the land where The Zoo sits that will need to be paid off in a few years and we need to eliminate some of the debt we accrued since the past storms."

Aiken suggested starting a Buy a Brick program similar to the one used in the Nature Walk in Navarre Park that helped fund the Butterfly House and Park pond.

She also suggested asking the county to sponsor a Zoo Authority, not requiring any money but giving The Zoo a government authority to channel FEMA monies. Kemper said that would be a big help.

Dennis Bryce has been working on a children's book about The Zoo for two years, but has changed the focus to The Zoo needing help. He said he would give all proceeds to The Zoo. Some Zoo board members said they would help find a publisher.

FDOT releases bridge inspection information

FROM STAFF REPORTS

Gulf Breeze News
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The Florida Department of Transportation recently reversed its earlier decision to withhold all information about the structural integrity of the state's bridges.

During a meeting in

Tallahassee with Senator Don Gaetz (R-Niceville), Assistant Secretary Kevin Thibault agreed to provide summary information regarding the structural health and deficiencies of all 11,000 bridges inspected by the DOT.

Gaetz had objected to the Department's earlier refusal to provide information and urged

that the public be informed about the integrity of the bridges they use. The Senator acknowledged that some engineering details should be kept confidential so that terrorists or other criminal elements would not have sensitive information that might compromise security.

The reports available today

show that of the 6,300 bridges operated and maintained by DOT, 56 are structurally deficient. Of the approximately 5,000 additional bridges owned by local governments or independent authorities but inspected by DOT, 217 are deficient.

For more information call 1-866-450-4DON toll free.

Santa Rosa County Sheriff's Office Report

Information provided by the Santa Rosa County Sheriff's Office.

Felonies

8/15/07
Herrholz, Eric John, 34, W/M, 1100 block of Ceylon Court, Gulf Breeze, grand theft, less than \$20,000, fraud

Potts, Jeremy Kane, 26, W/M, 1300 block of Calcutta Drive, Gulf Breeze, grand theft, less than \$20,000, fraud

8/17/07
Mahoney, Carrissa Ann, 29, W/F, 3200 block of College Court, Gulf Breeze, fugitive from justice

Oshima-Hall, Danielle Alane, 35, W/F, 2900 block of Crittenden Drive, Navarre, failure to appear

8/19/07
Gonzalez, Ramiro Gonzalez, 23, H/M, 3200 block of College Court, Gulf Breeze, sex offense

Green, Mary Tjuana, 45, 40 block of Dracena Way, Gulf Breeze, fugitive from justice

DUI

8/13/07
Suvorkin, Konstanin, 23, W/M, 100 block of Shirley Drive, Gulf Breeze, DUI

8/16/07
Anderson, Gregory Kim, 54, W/M, 1200 block of Tiger Trace Boulevard, Gulf Breeze, DUI

Elected Officials CONTACT

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