

County Gave Department of Public Safety Sweeping Powers in 2011

By Terry Witt
Senior Staff Writer

Levy County Commissioners have operated an ambulance service for many years, but in 2011 commissioners took a big step beyond just operating ambulances to establishing a Levy County Public Safety Department with much broader powers.

The Levy County Department of Public Safety (LCDPS) has been at the center of many controversies since its inception, starting with the relocation of one ambulance each from Chiefland and Williston to the area of the Levy County Jail in Bronson.

Other conflicts have arisen from the county asserting control of all fire services within the unincorporated areas of the county and sometimes taking control of areas previously served by cities by establishing part-time fire departments that operate only during daylight hours.

A county commission resolution approved on Dec. 20, 2011 established LCPDS to provide medical advance life support (ALS) and basic life support (BLS) transportation services for the public, as well as non-transport services for fire rescue, and fire services in the unincorporated areas.

The resolution abolished the traditional Fire Advisory Board that gave volunteer fire chiefs in the county and cities the opportunity to advise county commissioners on fire issues and debate among themselves how the county fire tax revenue should be distributed among their departments.

The resolution consolidated power in the LCDPS and gave county commissioners who control the department much greater authority. Commissioners have total control of fire services in the unincorporated areas of the county and can contract with cities to provide these services. The resolution also gave commissioners power to operate Emergency Medical Services as they saw fit throughout the county without consulting cities.

With the adoption of the resolution, cities have less input into how the county operates EMS and how county fire-tax funding is distributed. Cities can still make their voices heard, as will be the case Tuesday when Chiefland City Commissioners will host a public workshop on a fire rescue issue. But the county commission has control of the EMS and county fire-tax funding and the political power that goes with it.

LCDPS has no budget line item of its own in the county commission budget, but the agency administers EMS funding and fire funding. The EMS budget for the current year is \$5,559,597. The county fire budget is \$2,401,119, which means LCDPS administers nearly \$8 million in county funding for emergency services.

Below is a summary of Resolution 2011-67 that established the LCPDS.

- “There is hereby established a Levy County Department of Public Safety which shall be responsible for the health, safety and welfare of County citizens through the management, operation, and control of emergency medical ALS/BLS response transport and non-transport and fire/rescue response and related functions of County government. The functions and responsibilities of the Department of Public Safety shall include:”
- Responding to all calls for pre-hospital emergency care in Levy County, including ALS or BLS transport and non-transport services.

- Providing fire/rescue and fire protection services within the unincorporated areas of the County and within municipal boundaries that have been authorized by the Board and the governing body of the affected municipality, or through the use of contracts with volunteer fire departments, municipalities or private entities.
- Providing fire prevention, fire inspection and fire code enforcement services.
- Operating a fire-training academy and overseeing training programs and training records for firefighters who provide fire/rescue services to the county.
- Participating in the County's communications operations in conjunction with other County departments and with federal, state and local government entities.
- Managing mutual aid agreements with local governments and federal or state governments, or agencies for the "mutual beneficial provision of emergency medical response or transport and non-transport services and/or fire rescue services.
- Providing public safety education countywide.
- Performing all functions, duties and responsibilities previously performed by the advisory body known as the Fire Advisory Board, or the Levy County Fire Protection Advisory Committee.
- Performing such other duties and responsibilities as determined by the county commission and County Coordinator Freddie Moody.
- The position of director of LCDPS was established by the resolution. Director David Knowles is responsible for the administration of the department, including all responsibilities listed above, and "any related duties as required to carry out the duties of the Department of Public Safety as required by the Board or (County Coordinator Fred) Moody.
- The Fire Advisory Board, or Levy County Fire Protection Advisory Committee, established by the Board on Feb. 2, 1988 was dissolved by the resolution.