

# Weatherford Telegram

## Taxing district may approach VFD's

Posted Friday, Jun. 17, 2011

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Special to Weatherford Telegram

More of Parker County's volunteer fire departments could soon improve their fire-protection abilities by receiving tax money from the residents they serve.

At a meeting last week, the leaders of Emergency Services District No. 3 voted to approach several local volunteer fire departments about becoming part of the district. The district, which covers parts of eastern Parker County, funds fire protection through a property tax. ESD 3's tax is 10 cents per \$100 valuation, the maximum rate currently allowed in Texas. Fire departments funded by ESDs can usually have paid firefighters on call around the clock, rather than relying solely on volunteers, many of whom have other jobs.

ESD President Steve Malley emphasized that the VFDs have not asked to become part of the district. However, he said, it might be a way to keep struggling departments alive.

"The donations are drying up, and the big companies aren't handing out money like they used to," Malley said. "We'd be taking the burden of funding the fire department off the guys who are fighting fires, instead of letting them worry about where their bunker gear is coming from."

Before any fire departments can become part of the ESD, the current residents of the district must vote to expand its boundaries, and residents that live within the proposed addition must also vote on the tax. Commissioner Wally Wallace, who is also an insurance agent, said having paid firefighters on hand can lower an area's ISO rating, thereby lowering homeowner's insurance rates. Most of the area's volunteer departments have a rating of 9, and the Hudson Oaks Fire Department, which is part of the ESD, rates a 4.

"For a \$150,000 house, going from a 9 to a 4, the savings in insurance probably make up for the taxes or more," Wallace said.

Malley also said that if any new departments become part of the ESD, they will not lose their ability to govern themselves.

"Some don't want to give up control of their department - Silver Creek has all their own stuff, Willow Park has all their own stuff," Malley said. "There's a fear like, 'We're going to lose control of everything; these guys are going to come in and ramrod us.' The only thing we're ramrodding is accounting. We're not going to tell you how to run your own department, as long as you run your department in a professional demeanor."

ESDs and VFDs in Parker County have conflicted in the past. In 2009, Tin Top Volunteer Fire Department was decommissioned by the county after disagreements with ESD No. 6 over financial records and contract terms. The area previously served by that department is now served by the Spring Creek Volunteer Fire Department, formed last year.

To make sure that all interests are represented, Hudson Oaks Fire Chief Pat English said additional commissioners should be appointed to the ESD board to represent any new areas that are taken into the district.

"That way, it's not five guys from Hudson Oaks calling the shots," English said.

Over the next few weeks, English and several ESD commissioners will meet with local volunteer departments to gauge their interest in joining the ESD. Though the board mentioned the Willow Park, Aledo and Silver Creek departments as possibilities, Malley said they would be interested in talking with any VFD in the county. The boundaries of an emergency services district do not have to be contiguous, so a VFD on the other side of the county could join.

Aledo VFD Chief Scott Mitchell said his department would meet with the ESD, but isn't committed to exploring the idea just yet.

"To say that we are interested in doing something like that would be premature," Mitchell said. "[English] said they were looking to do an informational presentation to the department - what the ESD had to offer and how it might work. We, as a department have had no discussion, and have not even explored the idea recently."

Mitchell said Aledo VFD is well-staffed, with 60 volunteer firefighters, and has adequate equipment. Fundraising for the department is time-consuming, he added, but they've seen a good response from the community from their efforts.

"If we don't fundraise and actively pursue those sorts of things, yes, the money dries up," Mitchell said. "Is it a challenge? Yes. Have we seen donations drop off? Yes. But our budget has not significantly changed over the last 5 or 6 years."

With today's high unemployment rates, residents might also be reluctant to vote in another tax, he added.

"I don't know, in today's climate, what kind of luck you would even have passing a tax," Mitchell said. "Times are tough."

Willow Park VFD fire chief Jim Witherow said he doubted his department would become part of ESD No. 3, since they already receive enough funds from the city of Willow Park to fund six full-time firefighters at their station. Their ISO rating is a 4, the same as the ESD-supported Hudson Oaks department.

"I'm not sure what we could talk about that would be something that the citizens of our district would benefit from," Witherow said.

The ESD's next regularly scheduled meeting is July 12.

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