

**“Final Report”**  
**Engage Gwinnett Recommendations Status – Fire and Emergency Services**

Service Area	Status Quo, Declining Tax Digest, or General	Recommendation	Status	Actions Taken	Budget Impact
	Status Quo	The committee is very cautious in recommending changes because they are concerned about unintended consequences. Therefore, they recommend that all proposed changes in the funding and operations of Fire and EMS be subjected to an intense review and analysis process which fully examines all possible consequences and balances the projected benefits with the potential risk associated with the proposed changes.	Complete	We agree with the need to give deliberate and judicious consideration to changes and have attempted to apply this philosophy in the Department of Fire and Emergency Services as well as throughout the entire organization.	No budget impacts at this time.
	Status Quo	Our priority recommendation is to continue the good work underway by the department and to maintain the current service levels.	Complete	Fire and Emergency Services continues to monitor and reassess its service levels in order to provide the highest return on investment possible while maintaining its fiscal responsibility.	No budget impacts at this time.
	Status Quo	Maintain the department’s current practice of providing emergency medical transport services. As determined by research performed by the County and staff from Georgia Gwinnett College, eliminating ambulance crews from the department’s staffing plan would actually increase the overall cost of providing Fire and EMS services. (For more information, refer to the “Fire and Emergency Services Committee Research Report” on the Engage Gwinnett website.)	Complete	With this recommendation in mind, the County has continued providing emergency medical transport services.	No budget impacts at this time.

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	Status Quo	In addition to comparing itself against its own past performance, we recommend that the department identify appropriate communities and fire departments to use for benchmark purposes. Comparisons with these peer communities and organizations should be an ongoing and formalized process. While we acknowledge that such comparisons are difficult and imperfect, we believe that it is important to demonstrate how Gwinnett County Fire and EMS stacks up against other departments across the country.	Complete	The Fire Strategic Planning and Management Section conducts an annual comparison to other Georgia counties and other cities such as Jacksonville, Florida; Columbus, Ohio; and Phoenix, Arizona. The department will continue to use information obtained from these jurisdictions and agencies to identify best practices, not only now, but also if and when service or budget reductions are necessary. In addition, the department is preparing for the Center for Public Safety accreditation process. The accreditation process provides greater opportunity to measure effectiveness against standards that are deemed “right for Gwinnett.”	No budget impacts at this time.
	Status Quo	Identify and evaluate best practices from other progressive fire departments, including how these departments are addressing cuts in funding.	Complete	The Fire Strategic Planning and Management Section conducts an annual comparison to other Georgia counties and other cities such as Jacksonville, Florida; Columbus, Ohio; and Phoenix, Arizona. The department will continue to use information obtained from these jurisdictions and agencies to identify best practices, not only now, but also if and when service or budget reductions are necessary. In addition, the department is preparing for the Center for Public Safety accreditation process. The accreditation process provides greater opportunity to measure effectiveness against standards that are deemed “right for Gwinnett.”	No budget impacts at this time. There will be some costs associated with the accreditation process, however these costs will be minimal compared to the results.
	Status Quo	Focus immediate attention on preparing for the upcoming ISO rating process, which we understand is imminent. Once ISO has released its updated rating and related evaluation comments, use these as a source of information for identifying areas where efforts should be concentrated in the future.	Complete	With the opening of three stations in November 2010, 98 percent of county residents now live within five miles of a station. The department’s growth projection and the updated rating information will continue to be used for staffing and planning. The ISO review, which began on March 28, 2011, is complete. The results have been published – Gwinnett County retained its ISO rating of 4. A summary of the ISO review has been published on the County’s website. In addition, we use standards from NFPA, CPSE, AHA, and trauma criteria to determine “right for Gwinnett” standards.	No budget impacts at this time. Future budgets may be impacted based upon delivery changes and growth.

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	Status Quo	Use the research report prepared for this Work Group to explain the potential financial impacts on homeowners and businesses of ISO rating changes, as well as to compare these with budgetary increases required to maintain/improve existing ISO rating. Have this research performed annually, so that up-to-date information is available each year. Publish the annual research results in a manner that makes them easily available to the public.	Complete	We agree and will use the ISO report as a communication/education device to keep the public informed. Now that the ISO report has been completed, it will be incorporated into the department’s strategic plan. Chairman Nash and County Administrator Stephens were briefed in January 2012. A full Board of Commissioners briefing was conducted on March 6, 2012. A summary of the ISO review has been published on the County’s website. In addition, we use standards from NFPA, CPSE, AHA, and trauma criteria to determine “right for Gwinnett” standards. The “right for Gwinnett” standards/measures also will be published.	No budget impacts at this time.
	Status Quo	As funding allows, add stations, equipment and staffing to maintain and improve coverage across the county, especially in areas with longer response times or greater service demands.	Complete	Three new stations opened in November 2010: 18, 29, and 30. Current planning calls for future stations and relocations once funds are available in order to increase our capacity for providing Fire and Emergency Medical Services. The next steps are to construct and staff Station 31 located near Gwinnett College and relocate Station 10 close to Coolray Field. These stations will address geographic coverage, response times, and special circumstances.	The land for both stations has already been purchased. Equipment for Station 31 has been acquired and capital funding is available for construction. Operating costs would increase but would be offset slightly by closing old Station 10 and building more efficient stations.
	Status Quo	Focus on efforts to reduce community risk through education and outreach. Expand use of volunteers and coordination with other organizations in order to make the most of available resources and to reach the greatest number of people.	Complete	The Community Risk Reduction Division is dedicated to this initiative. They have partnered with the Chamber of Commerce and Gwinnett Medical Center to offer programs that will help reduce risk. In addition, volunteers provide more than 175 hours of service per month in community-related efforts.	No budget impacts at this time.
	Status Quo	Address outdoor burning issues through education initially, but consider the possibility of more stringent regulation where warranted based on risk.	Complete	<p>This topic was researched and changes were incorporated into the revised Fire Ordinance, which was adopted by the Board of Commissioners on March 20, 2012.</p> <p>Section 46-54 rules and regulations for outdoor and open burning has been updated to clarify and, in some cases, to be more stringent. Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 46-54 c. (1) (a) Adds a section requiring burning of natural vegetation to be at least 25 feet from a property line</li> <li>• 46-54 c. (2) Reorganized to clarify</li> <li>• 46-54 c. (3) Adds language from the International Fire Code regulating the use of open flame and gas cooking devices on combustible balconies and near combustible construction</li> <li>• 46-54 c. (4) New section on recreational fires in chimineas and outdoor fireplaces. Previous ordinance did not address these issues</li> <li>• 46-54 d. Burning Restrictions. Clarifies some of the parameters used to determine a legal burn day; addresses recreational fires at night and on Sundays</li> </ul>	No budget impacts at this time.

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	Status Quo	Proceed in timely fashion with the re-writing of existing code(s) and regulations to clarify and simplify their use by staff, regulated parties, and the citizens.	Complete	This topic was researched and changes were incorporated into the revised Fire Ordinance, which was adopted by the Board of Commissioners on March 20, 2012. The entire ordinance is updated to reflect current practices and adopt current codes and standards. The updates match state requirements and codes in most cases. We have adopted the Rules and Regulations of the Safety Fire Commissioner that we are required to use in accordance with OCGA 25-2. Conflicts formerly existing between state mandates and our old ordinance have been resolved. Our Recorder’s Court now has the appropriate jurisdiction to address all of our code violations. Updates should occur automatically without additional adoption for state-mandated codes and standards.	No budget impacts at this time.
	Status Quo	Identify and access code adjustments likely to have the greatest impact on fire risk and management. The benefits to be derived from strengthening code requirements should be balanced with the cost to property owners and the community.	Complete	This topic was researched and changes were incorporated into the revised Fire Ordinance, which was adopted by the Board of Commissioners on March 20, 2012. Most of the updates to the ordinance fit within this philosophy. A few examples: We have strengthened the requirements for sprinklers in residential board and care occupancies where there is a significant risk to occupants from fire. At the same time, we have revised the requirements for tenant separation in commercial buildings that meet the building code requirements for non-separated use such as office suites and other sub-lets. In many cases such as Section 46-41 and 42 for tenant separation in commercial and multifamily dwellings, we have removed specific prescriptive requirements and replaced them with language reflecting the building and fire codes. This gives building designers and builders much more flexibility and provides options that may be more cost effective. There are numerous other examples of updates in the ordinance that balance improved fire safety with the cost to the community.	No budget impacts at this time.
	Status Quo	Evaluate existing level of cooperation between the Fire Marshal’s Office and Planning and Development Department and identify any areas where change may be beneficial to the departments or their customers.	Complete	This topic was researched and changes were incorporated into the revised Fire Ordinance, which was adopted by the Board of Commissioners on March 20, 2012. Our levels of cooperation are excellent. We share Accela software to manage permits and inspections and work together at all levels on a daily basis. The ordinance has been updated throughout to reflect our current method of operation with Fire Plan Review under Planning and Development. Some examples include the committee of both Fire and Planning and Development staff required to review and approve an administrative variance (Section 46-34.5). Another example is the authority of a permit to be revoked by Fire Plan Review or the Fire Marshal (Section 46-29). There are several other examples throughout.	No budget impacts at this time.

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	Status Quo	Consider increasing the frequency of fire hydrant inspection and maintenance.	Complete	The Fire and Emergency Services Department recently renewed a contract for this service, which will be managed by the Department of Water Resources. In addition, a new memorandum of understanding with Water Resources has been completed. Discussions with the Department of Corrections determined that inmate crews could perform maintenance. In January 2012, two inmate crews began performing maintenance in addition to the existing contract.	No budget impacts at this time.
	Status Quo	Search for other opportunities for outsourcing and contracting functions, and evaluate these opportunities to determine viability and benefits.	Complete	The Department of Fire and Emergency Services currently reviews all contracts on an annual basis. The department will incorporate this philosophy into our business practices and, where possible and feasible, review our operations for outsourcing and contracting activities. Two examples include the EMS billing, which is now in place, and the use of two inmate crews for hydrant maintenance. Fire and Emergency Services is always looking for other opportunities.	No budget impacts at this time.

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	Declining Tax Digest	<p>To ensure that a range of options was considered, we first looked at what spending cuts would be required to offset the revenue loss if no revenue increases were possible. In our brainstorming about possible spending cuts, we came up with the following list of possibilities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delay opening of new and re-located stations (re-located station #18, new station #29, and new station #30). This would result in a 10 percent budget decrease equivalent to 1.5 to 2.0 stations, depending upon apparatus assigned.</li> <li>• Cut existing personnel by eliminating/removing from service some apparatus.</li> <li>• Reducing salaries by up to 10 percent on a temporary basis.</li> <li>• Close currently operating stations.</li> </ul> <p>Taking this approach was very difficult for the group since there are no easy reduction targets and the potential consequences of the necessary reductions are not desirable. Nonetheless, the action alternatives for spending cuts identified by the group are discussed below.</p>	See next row.	See next row.	See next row.

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	Declining Tax Digest	<p><u>Option A</u>: Avoid incurring costs that cannot be sustained</p> <p><u>Option A</u> should be considered if the further loss of tax revenues is identified prior to the opening of the three stations currently completed but not yet occupied: re-located station #18, new station #29 and new station #30. With the idea that postponing the hiring of additional staff is preferable to having to lay off employees, our group suggested that costs that cannot be sustained over the long run should not be incurred. Thus, the opening of some combination of the three stations yet to be occupied should be delayed. One possible combination likely to generate sufficient savings is described below:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open new station #29</li> <li>• Open relocated station #18 but without the new ladder company. (Est. savings: \$1.5 million)</li> <li>• Delay opening of new station #30, which has both engine and ladder companies. (Est. savings: \$2.8 million)</li> </ul> <p>Cuts in operating expenses other than personnel costs. (Est. savings \$0.4 million)</p>	Complete	Should Fire and Emergency Services be required to reduce our budgetary appropriations or staff, an in-depth impact study would be required to determine which units to eliminate. A static plan developed today may become outdated based on the environment at the time of implementation and changing call patterns/volume.	No budget impacts at this time.

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	Declining Tax Digest	<p>Option B – Reduce personnel costs through a combination of temporary pay cuts and elimination of positions.</p> <p><u>Option B</u> would be employed in the event the decline in the tax digest occurs after the three completed but unoccupied stations have already been opened. While we believe that salary reductions and layoffs should be considered only in the direst of circumstances, we understand that it is the only feasible approach if the stations are already opened. With such a large portion of the budget for Fire and EMS, 90 percent or more, dedicated to personnel costs, there is no way to cut the department’s budget by \$4.7 million without reducing personnel costs.</p> <p>Accordingly Option B is based on instituting some combination of salary reduction and cutting existing personnel, including eliminating and/or taking out of service selected fire apparatus. One example would include an across-the-board temporary salary reduction of 2.5 percent coupled with layoffs and other cost savings associated with removing equipment from service. The estimated annual savings amounts that can be realized by removing equipment from service are shown below, along with the number of each type of equipment now in service:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ambulance: \$700,000 (23 units in total)</li> <li>• Engine: \$1.3 million (28 units, one in each station)</li> <li>• Ladder \$1.5 million (8 units in total)</li> </ul> <p>We would suggest relying on the fire chief to select the specific equipment to be taken out of service, based on minimizing the unavoidable impact on the ability to deliver service.</p> <p><u>Caution:</u> In order to achieve substantial cost reductions in Fire and EMS, cuts would have to be made to personnel. This would likely have a negative effect on the ISO rating which could potentially cause an increase in the cost of property insurance for homeowners and businesses.</p>	Complete	Should Fire and Emergency Services be required to reduce our budgetary appropriations or staff, an in-depth impact study would be required to determine which units to eliminate. A static plan developed today may become outdated based on the environment at the time of implementation and changing call patterns/volume.	No budget impacts at this time.

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Revenue Options	Declining Tax Digest	<p><u>Property tax increase:</u> In looking at a solution to the budget shortfall in this exercise, we could not ignore the potential effect of staffing reductions on the ISO rating and the impact that a worse ISO rating has on property insurance premiums. Gwinnett is scheduled this spring for its first ISO rating process in over 20 years, so this is of immediate interest. If the rating worsens by even one level, the impact of the resulting increase in insurance premiums for most homes would likely be larger than the additional taxes (0.20 mill increase) required to maintain sufficient funding for Fire and EMS.</p> <p>Here’s how to think about the tradeoff between a millage increase and an increase in homeowner insurance rates:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If the county’s ISO rating worsens, homeowner insurance premiums for a home valued at \$200,000 would likely rise by more than \$50 a year. Should the millage rate be increased by 0.20 mills (enough to cover a shortfall in Fire and EMS services, if the tax digest declines by 10 percent this year), the increase in property taxes would be \$15 or less.</li> <li>• Thus, \$15 a year increase in property taxes could save the owner of a home valued at \$200,000 \$50 a year in added insurance premiums, resulting in a net savings of about \$35.</li> </ul>	Complete	<p>Should Fire and Emergency Services be required to reduce our budgetary appropriations or staff, an in-depth impact study would be required to determine which units to eliminate. A static plan developed today may become outdated based on the environment at the time of implementation and changing call patterns/volume.</p> <p>The ISO review is complete and the results have been published. The County has retained its ISO rating of 4. A summary of the ISO review has been published on the County’s website. In addition, we use standards from NFPA, CPSE, AHA, and trauma criteria to determine “right for Gwinnett” standards.</p>	No budget impacts at this time.
Revenue Options	Declining Tax Digest	<p><u>Sales tax:</u> While a local-option sales tax for county operating expenses cannot happen soon enough to help with budget shortfalls in the next few years, it bears further exploration as an overall option in the future.</p>	In Progress	County staff is currently reviewing and studying the County’s options associated with local option sales tax.	No budget impacts at this time.

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Revenue Options	Declining Tax Digest	<p><u>User fees and other fees for services:</u> We encourage Fire and EMS to continue actively searching for user fees that may be appropriately used in conjunction with the services provided by the department. We also recommend that the County adjust its existing fee schedule periodically to reflect market forces and the actual cost of providing services. However, we have not identified any fee increases that appear productive at this time, so we are not recommending an increase in fees for Fire and EMS services now. Here are our reasons:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Current fees (mostly related to ambulance transport) presently account for 15 percent of the department’s budget.</li> <li>• There are limits to collecting higher fees for ambulance transport services due to reimbursement maximums imposed by Medicare, Medicaid and insurance companies.</li> <li>• Even doubling these fees would not generate substantial funds since amounts above these limits will often end up uncollected.</li> <li>• Gwinnett is already at the high end of EMS transport rates.</li> <li>• Amounts raised through potential new user fees would be negligible, difficult to administer and would not yield enough additional revenue to make a difference.</li> </ul>	Complete	On February 1, 2011, the Board of Commissioners approved increasing the EMS transport rate to \$975 from \$750. This change was based upon the cost to transport a patient and metro area market research. Based upon the payer mix, collection rates, and number of transports, this change should result in approximately \$1.5 million in added revenue. Additionally, re-inspection fees were established to offset the cost of performing re-inspections. Annual revenue varies as the number of re-inspections is expected to be reduced.	\$1.5 million