

Do I smell smoke? No it's just the County cutting funding for Fire Departments

-Chris Smithson, Southern Pines native, resident, and Councilmember

In Moore County, there are a number of fire departments. There are municipal fire departments, like those in Southern Pines, Pinehurst, Aberdeen, etc. and there are rural “county” departments like Crestline, Eastwood, etc. Each has their own district and they do not overlap.

Municipal departments like Southern Pines serve properties within the town as well as properties outside town, but in their districts. The County has a separate fire district line item on property tax bills for all property owners who do not live in municipalities. For those living in towns with municipal fire departments, fire protection is included in their municipal property taxes.

Where a town’s fire department covers areas outside town, the fire district tax paid by the out-of-town resident to the County is passed through to the town to be added to the fire department’s budget. Historically, this has meant that a resident of the fire district has paid the same share of the department budget that someone in town pays through their town taxes (if \$.10 of in in-town resident’s tax rate goes to the FD, the “district” tax is \$.10 for out of town property too) .

Unfortunately, things didn’t work that way last year and don’t promise to do so this year either. The Moore County Board of Commissioners, despite dwindling revenues and stressed budgets, keep cutting taxes. Nobody wants high taxes or a wasteful government, but you can only cut so much before basic services are affected. Last year, they wanted to cut taxes, so they told all County departments to cut their budgets. They also lowered the fire district tax rates for the municipalities even though municipal fire departments are not part of the County budget and even though that revenue is just passed through to the municipal departments.

Residents living in Southern Pines’ fire district benefit from having the best fire department in the county. With the department’s excellent equipment as well as a substantial paid staff, their property and lives are better protected through quicker response times and more firefighting capacity. This also translates into lower property insurance bills.

By cutting the fire district tax rates last year and saying they will do so again this year, the County Commissioners are not cutting the budget of the Southern Pines Fire Department. They are just shifting the load over to in-town residents to help subsidize fire coverage for those outside the town limits. Though the Commissioners may be choosing to sacrifice fire protection in the name of saving “county” residents a few cents a month and perhaps gaining a few votes in November, Southern Pines not going to cut corners on one of our fundamental services.

The County needs to stop messing with the tax rates for the districts served by municipal fire departments. They don’t affect the County budget but do act to force town residents to subsidize protection for others.

Chris Smithson -Southern Pines Town Council