

7 local fire departments refuse contracts

Written by Lauren Ohnesorge
Thursday, 05 July 2007 21:28

Budgets are in- and the deadline for fire department contracts passed earlier this week- without signatures from chiefs of seven Avery County Fire Departments.

Those departments, Newland, Banner Elk, Elk Park, Crossnore, Green Valley, Seven Devils and the Ladder Company, were dissatisfied with several changes in the contracts, including budget cuts and, according to Newland Chief Dale Benfield, a clause disputing individual department's private property

The Fire Commission, established as a liaison years ago between the departments and the county commission, threatened to stop funding to departments if contracts weren't signed by Monday. According to Newland fire chief Dale Benfield, this prompted a meeting between County Commission chair Kenny Poteat and Fire Association president Kenny McPhee. The two met and called fire chiefs individually.

Fire Departments agreed to continue providing fire service until a meeting can be arranged to discuss the matter further. In the meantime, Poteat promised departments would not lose their funding.

This is not the first conflict the departments have had with the Fire Commission. A debate over truck titles earlier this year threatened to split the Association.

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While most agree the Fire Commission worked for a few years- many firefighters are questioning its current authority in Avery County, according to Benfield.

He says they are trying to control internal workings of individual departments instead of just overseeing budgets and employees.

Adding to the controversy- many firefighters felt they had been stood up. Benfield and others arrived to Beech Mountain Fire Station #2 at 6:00 yesterday, a time the Commission is alleged to have agreed to meet. The Commission decided to meet next Thursday instead- and while the press was informed, according to Benfield, many firefighters were not.

Fire Departments who did sign the contract include Linville and Beech Mountain. Beech Mountain chief Jim Brooks expressed hope after last night's Fire Association meeting that the situation would resolve itself.

Fire Commission members had no comments for the press earlier this week, and Tuesday, County Manager Robert Wiseman was unaware of any conflict.