

Contracts to be settled tonight

Written by Lauren Ohnesorge
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Tonight's the night several Avery County fire departments have been waiting for- contract discussions.

Present along with fire chiefs and the Fire Commission will be the Avery County Commissioners. The three groups hope to settle a debate that's been raging for over a month. The deadline to sign contracts with the county was July 1- and the majority of Avery County fire departments have still not signed.

Issues with the contracts include budget cuts and a clause about equipment ownership. Many firefighters feel there will be more on the agenda than contracts, however. The contract debate is the latest of many conflicts some departments have had with the Commission. Earlier this year, Commissioners caused controversy by saying that all equipment bought with county money would be titled to the Commission and not individual departments. Compromise had barely been reached on that issue when the Commission announced plans to require paid firefighters to wear shirts saying "Avery County" and not the individual departments. Most recently, Elk Park Volunteer Fire Department officials have brought allegations against Fire Department Coordinator Butch Sholar, claiming he posed as an Elk Park firefighter when paying a loan.

While the press was notified of the meeting last week, firefighters say they did not get the official word a meeting would be held until after eleven a.m. today, via radio. The meeting is now scheduled for 5 p.m. in the Commissioners' boardroom this evening. The press has yet to be notified of that change.

Since contract negotiations will be discussed, it is unclear whether the press will be allowed to attend.