

Newland fire chief skates around a solution

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Avery County Fire Departments have issues, and that's putting it mildly, according to Newland fire chief Dale Benfield.

"The county's trying to take ownership of our trucks and buildings and equipment," Benfield says.

The deadline to sign a county fire contract was July 1- and even though a new draft has been presented to chiefs, several departments, including Newland, have not signed, and it's not just about the Fire Commission's intent to title equipment to the county and not individual departments. According to Benfield, the contracts do not even have an expiration date.

"Sign this contract, you're bound for a contract for eternity," he says- and that's not all.

Signing the contract would close his department, Benfield says.

"We've been dedicated to fire service for over 40 years, trying to provide the best service we can and, if the county takes over the equipment and buildings, all the volunteers are going to leave. They're not going to work for the county. They do it for their individual communities," Benfield says.

If the county wants to control fire service- they can, Benfield says. In fact, he has a serious suggestion some may find radical.

"Whoever wants to buy them, we'll sell them our trucks and equipment and keep our building, and our building would make an awful fine youth center. We're thinking about maybe a

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roller skating rink and family gameroom with a snack bar in it," he says.

And he's not joking. While insurance rates may rise, Crossnore and other surrounding departments might be able to fill the void until the County develops a paid fire department in Newland. Benfield hopes it doesn't come to that- and that a compromise can be reached.

"County Commissioners and the Fire Commission keep thinking that we're a bunch of redneck, uneducated firemen, and they're going to keep shoving this down our throat until we sign," he says.

Chiefs have a closed meeting Monday night to discuss the contracts- and the fate of firefighting in Avery County.