

## Avery Fire Coverage Funded with Stop-Gap

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Fire and emergency response in Avery is assured—at least for the time being—after the Avery County Commissioners met with the Fire Commission, the Avery Fire Association, and Fire Chiefs along with Attorney Katherine Hemphill representing the Fire Association Tuesday night.

Firemen addressed a list of serious problems that exist over funding, vehicle ownership and others. Attorney Katherine Hemphill said that the Fire Commission's withholding funding for 11 of the 13 Avery Departments who offered only 6 month contracts showed a lack of respect for the Fire Association and its representative departments. President of the Fire Association, Paul Buchanan said he has never seen the mission statement for the Fire Commission and that they never voted on a number of issues that affect departments, making them feel they've been dictated to based on documents fire departments and their association have never seen. He said that has lead to years of frustration. Hemphill called the language in the 2013 contract 'ridiculous' and requested that the 6 month contracts offered by the 11 fire companies be signed as a stop gap until all parties have reviewed and agreed to the terms. She also questioned the makeup of the Fire Commission, stating that Darryl Smith has been the Chairman of the Fire Commission, holding that position without an election. Fire Chiefs expressed concerns over the lack of communication, what they perceive as a double standard between the County employees and the paid employees of the Fire departments. They said fire department personnel are the first to arrive at any emergency scene and need the County's full support. In the end, a six-month extension of current contract was agreed to by the Avery County Commissioners with operating funds for the 11 departments to be released retroactive to July 1st. A committee of all parties was formed to represent all concerns and take that six months to work out their differences. Stated issues to be resolved include but are not limited to budgets, pay, titling of vehicles, buildings, benefits and personnel, that before the Fire Association and the departments would sign a 4 year contract. Darryl Smith of the fire commission agreed that better communication is needed and agreed to do whatever is necessary to resolve these issues.