

## Four hour meeting: Contracts not settled

Written by Lauren Ohnesorge  
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Avery firefighters had a lot of time to discuss their differences last night. The Fire Commission, department chiefs and County Commissioners were scheduled to discuss fire contracts.

The meeting format was a little unorthodox. It began with a two-hour closed session- just Commissioners and Fire Commission. Firefighters left behind were not happy.

Firefighters used the time to discuss amongst themselves concern over the issues. The majority of the firefighters assembled expressed concern that the Commission has mishandled its responsibilities. Firefighters had hoped they would have a chance to share their individual concerns with the County Commission- and were disappointed to learn only the chiefs and fire commission would get that chance. Furthermore, some firefighters were late because the meeting was changed from 6 p.m. to 5 p.m.

Session reopened after two hours- just in time to close again. Commission Chair Kenny Poteat acted against the advice of the county attorney and invited fire chiefs into another closed session. Banner Elk Volunteer Fire Chief Harry Klinger requested the president of the Banner Elk Volunteer Fire Department's Board of Directors, Pete Romonoyski to go in his place, but Poteat insisted that only chiefs be allowed in closed session.

More waiting commenced.

Newland's Junior Sluder expressed annoyance that the Commissioners took up so much of

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the firefighters' time- without adequately informing them of what is going on.

Not everyone was as outspoken as Sluder. Commission members did not have comments for the press.

When session reopened, chiefs had an opportunity to sum up their issues with the contracts. While Newland, Banner Elk and Elk Park Volunteer Fire Department chiefs reiterated contract conflicts, budget issues and allegations against the commission, the majority of chiefs either declined comment, or briefly expressed hope that a compromise could be reached. The Commissioners plan another meeting in the near future- and says it will do its best to oblige.