

# Town Fire Departments To Discuss Collaboration

Officials from the Wilkesboro and North Wilkesboro governing bodies have agreed to collaborate on a study to determine the future paths of the town fire departments.

The study will be funded by money included in a \$1.5 million federal grant received by Wilkesboro in 2011 to help recruit, train and retain volunteers for the department.

"Right now, we don't have any firm ideas on where we could collaborate," Town Manager Ken Noland said. "Perhaps we could share some employees, or maybe have an agreement to share some of the big equipment so the towns wouldn't have to spend so much money.

"We are at a crossroads with our fire department," Noland continued. "We have changed the direction of our department with the two grants we have received in recent years. Now that those grant cycles are winding down, the council members have said we need to conduct a study to determine the direction we'll take.

"We have asked North Wilkesboro officials if they want to be a part of that study as well."

## **Wilkesboro grants**

In August 2009, the Wilkesboro council voted to accept a \$325,400 Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to pay the salary of a full-time chief and three full-time firemen/engineers. With the additional staffing, a fireman is on duty 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The grant required \$427,393 in matching money from Wilkesboro.

Three years ago, Wilkesboro was awarded a \$1.5 million grant to help recruit and retain volunteer firemen, and to pay firemen to be on standby duty at the station. With the SAFER funding, firemen are paid \$12 an hour for emergency calls and \$7.50 for training and standby duties. That funding will end in a year.

Jason Smithey is the full-time fire chief in Wilkesboro. Jimmy Martin was recently appointed as the interim chief in North Wilkesboro, though he is not serving in a full-time capacity.

North Wilkesboro also has three full-time firemen on staff. Volunteers are paid \$13 per call, and an additional \$12 for calls that last for over an hour. The annual budget for the volunteer pay is \$35,000.

Wilkesboro council members Russ Ferree and Mike Testerman (a former town fire chief) were appointed Monday night to work with the consultant. North Wilkesboro Commissioners Bart Hayes and Bert Hall were appointed by their fellow commissioners Tuesday night to represent their town in the discussions.

## **Collaboration ideas**

Officials of the two towns have not yet discussed what will be studied.

"It could be an efficiency study to see if there are any additional ways we could share equipment without hurting our fire ratings," said North Wilkesboro Town Manager Larry South. "We will probably look at the long-term objectives for the two departments.

"I think our current mutual aid agreement works well," South added. "We want to make certain that we have a strong volunteer base, and that we have enough manpower if there is a major fire."

South added, "I don't know that merging the departments is a goal of these discussions. No study criteria has been established. That won't be determined until the representatives from the two towns get together. I'm sure we'll come

up with some strategic plan after we get into the study and the consultants tour the departments and talk with the officials here.

Noland said today, "We need to see how our assets are working and what we want our department to be with the budget constraints we will face when the grant money runs out. The answer may be somehow working together more closely with North Wilkesboro.

"I'd be afraid to throw out any possibilities at this point for what will happen. I want those to come out of this study," Noland added. "I think this is a great opportunity for both towns.

"But who knows what will come out of this?" Noland said. "We're taking the first step by naming the representatives. Now we will talk with consultants and see what we want from a study."