

# Towns Not Agreeing On Fire Aid Area

An agreement to establish automatic mutual aid between the Wilkesboro and North Wilkesboro fire departments was approved by North Wilkesboro commissioners Tuesday but tabled by Wilkesboro councilmen Monday.

The agreement was tabled by the Wilkesboro council at the request of Councilman Russ Ferree, chairman of an ad hoc joint fire committee that drafted the agreement.

"We came last week to a conclusion to what we thought was a final agreement," Ferree said. He was referencing the latest version of the agreement, prepared by joint fire committee Jan. 28.

While the two towns agree on language in the contract, said Ferree, the agreement's defined automatic mutual aid area in Wilkesboro isn't consistent with what Wilkesboro requested.

The agreement will automatically dispatch Wilkesboro and North Wilkesboro fire departments to assist each other with "working structure fires" in specifically defined areas of each town. The fire departments currently assist each other under unwritten agreements that don't call for automatic dispatch. If help is needed, one fire department tells the Wilkes Communications Center by radio to dispatch another department.

Despite Wilkesboro's concerns with the defined areas, North Wilkesboro commissioners chose to pass the agreement as presented at their meeting Tuesday.

Ferree said in an interview that he had no comment on North Wilkesboro's decision to pass the agreement. "As far as I know from our side, the agreement is not complete," he said. "What we've seen in writing for the agreement itself, we are pleased with that. But it is the territory that each fire department is covering that we need to work out."

The joint fire committee consists of each town manager and fire chief, as well as two elected officials from each town. From Wilkesboro, they are Ferree, Councilman Michael Testerman, Town Manager Ken Noland and Fire Chief Jason Smithey. Representing North Wilkesboro are board members Bart Hayes and Bert Hall, Town Manager Larry South and Fire Chief Jimmy Martin.

Firefighters from both towns have also attended the joint meetings, Ferree said.

Conversations about the mutual aid contract and areas to be included occurred at joint fire committee meetings and between individuals since the process began in September.

Ferree said the committee met twice as a group. He said that at those meetings, the main focus of discussion was the language of the contract itself, rather than response areas.

Those two meetings were held in September and November. Following those meetings, Hayes said, the North Wilkesboro commissioners gave South and Martin the authority to lead the remainder of the effort.

"We felt both groups were far enough along that we felt staff could handle any additional changes or conversations," said Hayes.

## **A question of territory**

Smithey said that since November, he has shared maps with Martin outlining the requested mutual aid area within Wilkesboro. That area extends from the northern and eastern town boundaries, to the U.S. 421 Bypass, to Curtis Bridge Road.

Martin said that after he received the maps from Smithey, he sent Smithey maps showing the area in Wilkesboro that the North Wilkesboro Fire Department was willing to cover with automatic mutual aid.

The last map drawn by North Wilkesboro staff of the mutual aid area in Wilkesboro has Wilkesboro Boulevard as the eastern boundary including Myers Tire.

It has Main Street as the southern boundary, including businesses on both sides of the road and the Tyson Foods processing complex, businesses along Curtis Bridge Road and the Two Rivers Cinemas, Lowe's Companies Inc. corporate offices, Holiday Inn Express and businesses in Mall Square.

"We never wavered on where we would cover," Martin said. He said there are areas of Wilkesboro, like Oakwoods Road, he believed should be covered by surrounding volunteer departments like Moravian Falls or Goshen in future automatic aid agreements, rather than by North Wilkesboro now.

Smithey said it's important for North Wilkesboro to be the department automatically dispatched to those areas. He said that while surrounding volunteer departments may be geographically closer, they still don't tend to respond as quickly as North Wilkesboro could, based on time trials he ran with members of those departments.

"The way I determined the area was by response time only, not geographic locations of the fire stations," Smithey said. "That takes into account delays in a volunteer station not being manned, normal highway speeds, stop signs and stop lights, things of that nature."

"It's just going to take them longer," he added.

Smithey said that he reviewed the structure fires the Wilkesboro Fire Department responded to last year, and found that had the automatic mutual aid agreement been in place for the area he is requesting, North Wilkesboro would have been automatically dispatched to 11 fires for the entire year.

"It's a very small amount, actually," he said. "Even in a very busy year, I'd say we're looking at less than 20 times a year."

#### **Jan. 28 meeting**

On Jan. 28, Ferree, Testerman, Noland and Smithey met to review the draft agreement Martin presented to North Wilkesboro commissioners during their work session the night before.

Noland said that when the group had questions about the agreement, they contacted South and Martin. When South and Martin arrived, he said, the group made minor changes to the language of the contract, such as what the definition of a working structure fire would be and how often the two departments would train together each year.

Smithey said he again shared the map of the requested response area within Wilkesboro with South and Martin. He said he did not remember any further discussion on the territory.

"I don't remember us actually saying, 'do you have a problem with this,'" Smithey said.

At the meeting, said Martin, the group focused on three issues: definition of a working structure fire, annual group training requirements and the defined mutual aid areas.

Martin said it was made clear on Jan. 28 that North Wilkesboro didn't agree to respond to the southern portion of Smithey's map, from Main Street to U.S. 421.

Following the meeting, South said he wrote a description and drew a map of the mutual aid areas in both towns, according to his understanding of the meeting.

"Jimmy and I both felt like when we left that committee meeting, things were clear, and that we were all on the same page," South said. "So I'm not real sure where we went astray on the area."

Noland expressed similar uncertainty regarding the two versions of the map, but was optimistic the differences can be reconciled.

"I thought we were pretty close, but the real crux was the map, and we thought we had an understanding of the map, but we did not."

“We’re willing to adjust, but there are some things we have to have,” he added. “I think we’re probably really close on this, but like any government activity, it can move slowly.”

### **Moving forward**

It isn’t yet clear what the next steps will be following the votes this week.

As North Wilkesboro has already passed the agreement, Wilkesboro Town Clerk James Byrd said there seem to be three possible courses of action available to the Wilkesboro Council: the councilmen can also approve the agreement as is; they can approve an amended version of the agreement, which the North Wilkesboro Board of Commissioners would also have to agree to or they could take no action.

The agreement passed by the North Wilkesboro Board of Commissioners states that the North Wilkesboro Fire Department will respond to the following areas within Wilkesboro:

“From Myers Tire (400 E Main Street) and all business and structures on Main Street to Tyson Foods (115 Factory Street). All businesses and structures from Tyson Foods to Curtis Bridge Road to include businesses and structures on Curtis Bridge Road, to Two Rivers Cinema. Also the following businesses: Two Rivers Cinema, Lowe’s Corporate Offices, Holiday Inn Express and all business in Mall Square (Papa John’s, Chile Verde, etc).”

The document also states that the Wilkesboro Fire Department will respond to the following areas within North Wilkesboro:

“All businesses and structures on D Street from 11th Street (where the Central Fire District border ends). To include, starting at 101 Sixth Street to the intersection of Sixth and D Streets to the intersection of Eighth and D Streets to the Intersection of Eighth and C Streets and Kensington Avenue, also the portions of West D Street where the Central Fire District ends, north on U.S. 421 to 1611 West D Street (presently Four Brothers Food Store). This agreement will also include the properties of 401 Sixth Street (presently North Wilkesboro Methodist Church, 510 D Street (presently North Wilkesboro First Baptist Church) and 300 D Street (presently Benton Hall).”

Regardless of the boundaries selected for automatic mutual aid, officials from both towns recognize that both departments will be available to assist the other when help is needed.

“If there’s a structure fire in either town, most likely both departments are going to be there,” South said. “It’s just a matter of whether or not both departments are going to be dispatched, or if one is going to get there first and call the other.”

Smitley noted that it’s important to establish automatic mutual aid because it increases response time, and has the potential to help both fire departments lower their ISO rating, which establishes insurance rates.