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Sam Evans  
Ron McFarland  
Montie Robinson, Sr.  
Todd Wilson



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**NEWS ARTICLE: Gainesville Times on January 14, 2014**

## **Oakwood addresses fire tax inequality**

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Oakwood Mayor Lamar Scroggs and Councilmen Sam Evans and Ron McFarland were sworn in at Monday night's City Council meeting. Councilman Todd Wilson was also appointed mayor pro tem.

Oakwood City Council voted Monday to formally contact the Hall County Board of Commissioners about fire tax inequalities between the city and unincorporated areas of the county.

Currently, property owners in Oakwood pay a higher millage rate than unincorporated areas of the county due to the way the city and the county use the state insurance premium funds they receive. The county chooses to use the funds to offset the fire tax by rolling back the millage rate in unincorporated areas, whereas the city applies it to the general fund.

Oakwood's tax rate is 1.43 mills higher than in unincorporated areas. One mill is equal to \$1 for each \$1,000 in assessed property value. The county assesses property at 40 percent of its value.

This arrangement is the same as every city in the county, with the exception of Gainesville, which has its own fire department. What separates Oakwood from the rest is its large amount of business and commercial properties and lower population, which creates a disparity between the amount of money the city receives from the state on the tax of insurance premiums and the amount of money paid by property owners for fire services from the county.

The city receives \$205,000 in state tax payments, while Oakwood property owners pay about \$800,000 in fire taxes, which is roughly \$300,000 more than county residents.

Monday night's motion would offer to surrender the city's insurance premium tax payments to the county in exchange for the same rollback that residents of unincorporated areas of the county receive.

County Commissioner Craig Lutz, who attended the council meeting, said he believes the commission would be open to discussing the proposal.

“In my mind, I would have them turn it over and they would be treated as unincorporated Hall County,” he said. “But if they wanted a special circumstance just for Oakwood that could get kind of complicated.

“Overall, I would welcome the discussion.”

If the county rejects the proposal, some members of City Council and residents are prepared to establish an independent fire department.

“We just wanted to express our support of the City Council at looking at viable alternatives to the problem,” said Paul Maney, an Oakwood property owner who addressed the council with his wife, Glenna.

“The No. 1 thing is to try to work something out with the county, to build a working relationship with them and get the problem solved.

“If not, I think it is good to look at alternatives such as a city fire department.”

Lutz said an Oakwood fire department would remove funding from the county’s fire services, which were designed to cover the city, and could force the county to relocate fire stations, which would be a costly endeavor.

“It is going to cause problems because we have built services to cover Oakwood, and now we are going to have holes that we have to go around,” he said in an address to the council.

“It is going to harm the county. If that happens, I can pretty much say you don’t stand much of a chance of getting a mutual aid agreement because the county is already going to have to shift resources around and potentially move fire stations.”