

Commission discusses property taxes, training academy

Hector Flores

At Tuesday's Charlotte County Commission workshop, board members reviewed presentations on potential property tax reform and a proposed Public Safety Training Academy.

Staff explained that the Florida House of Representatives created a Select Committee on Property Taxes last session. During this year's session, which began Jan. 13, multiple proposals filed before the session began are already being heard in committees. It is likely lawmakers will settle on one proposal to put to voters on the 2026 ballot.

All of the proposals would prohibit any reduction of law enforcement funding, but none propose an alternative source of funding. All of the proposals also exempt school taxes. Whatever proposal goes on the Nov. 3 ballot will not contain an implementing bill that would put the measure into law and codify the chosen reforms. That implementing bill would be voted on by the Legislature next year.

Property taxes are how local governments and special districts pay for public services, such as emergency management sheriff and fire departments, road maintenance, parks and recreation, libraries and public health services. Property taxes also fund constitutional office services, such as the clerk of the circuit court, property appraiser, sheriff's office, supervisor of elections and tax collector.

If your community or neighborhood group would like someone to discuss the property tax issue at an upcoming meeting, call 941-743-1200.

Public Safety Director and Fire Chief Matt McElroy discussed his proposed Public Safety Training Academy with the board. His presentation showed an urgent need for new first responders around the state due to unfilled positions (1,469), expected growth (3,961) and large number of existing first responders (2,490) expected to retire in the next five years. Charlotte County Fire & EMS currently has 66 vacancies among the 368 authorized positions in its budget.

A training program could work in a variety of ways or all of them combined. It could partner with a local college like Charlotte Technical College. It could hire non-certified candidates and sponsor their training and career development. It could create a stand-alone Training Academy, hire non-certified recruits and put them through EMT and firefighter training.

McElroy showed commissioners artist renderings of a training academy facility with two structures outfitted with equipment to simulate structure fires. Classroom and administrative space would also be needed. The county intends to seek state workforce development grants to help fund the academy structures. Revenue from regional fire departments paying the county to put their recruits through the academy would also support the program. Combined with the Aircraft Rescue and Fire Fighting prop the department operates at the Public Safety Complex,

the training academy would turn Charlotte County into one of the premier first responder training locations in the state.

Commissioners offered their enthusiastic support for the concept and McElroy will provide an update at a future meeting as the plan is fully developed and funding is identified, possibly through the 1% local option sales tax, which will be on the ballot on Nov. 3.

Readers may reach Charlotte County Administrator Hector Flores at Hector.Flores@CharlotteCountyFL.gov.