



*102 Town Hall Drive - Leland, North Carolina 28451
(910) 371-0148 - Fax (910) 371-1073*

There have been many items in the news referencing the Town of Leland in the past few months. One of the most recent is the Leland Fire/Rescue. At the same time, the Town of Leland has finalized its budget for fiscal year 2016-2017 which begins on July 1st. Other happenings around Town include the on-going construction of the Senior Center on the Leland municipal campus. With several of these issues, there seems to be some confusion in regards to the Town's involvement, and how these issues are interrelated, so the following is offered to help clarify any misconceptions or misunderstandings.

Fire Services

First, Leland Fire / Rescue is a private organization and not a department of the Town of Leland. The firefighter employees are not town employees in any way. The Town of Leland, along with Brunswick County and the Town of Belville, contracts with this private non-profit organization to provide firefighting services within the North Carolina State Legislation enabled, and Brunswick County established, fire district area that includes the Town of Leland's jurisdiction, the Town of Belville's jurisdiction, and many parts of the unincorporated areas of northern Brunswick County. Any shortfalls, or perceived shortfalls, that this private organization has experienced are not the fault of the Town of Leland. Furthermore, the fire district, and subsequently the Leland Fire/Rescue with whom the three entities contract for fire services, is not funded by ad valorem or sales/use taxes. It is funded by a separate fire fee that was established by the State Legislature, set by a Brunswick County led fee-setting committee in which the Brunswick County Fire Marshal is the chairman and members include the Fire Chief, the Fifth District Brunswick County Commissioner, the Mayor of each town, and a community member chosen by the Brunswick County Commissioners. The fees assessed are not collected by the Town of Leland in any way. The fees are collected by Brunswick County and distributed directly to Leland Fire/Rescue under the existing contracts. A property owner will see the fire fee listed separately on the individual tax bills sent by Brunswick County each year.

While the fire fees are separate, the Town of Leland has gone above and beyond its responsibility established in the contract with Leland Fire/Rescue and provided additional funding, equipment, and facility. The Town of Leland purchased four (4) fire trucks in 2006 and built the fire station on Hwy 133 in 2007, costing \$1,500,000 and \$2,200,000, respectively, at the expense of the Town of Leland citizens (their tax dollars) without any assistance in funding from Brunswick County, the Town of Belville, or any contributions from fire fees, yet these additions benefit the entire fire district, not just the Town of Leland. The debt service for the four (4) fire trucks was paid off this year, but the debt service for the fire station of \$165,465

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annually will continue until 2023. By these actions, the Town has shown the priority it places on the fire services.

Fire services, along with all public safety issues, continue to be a high priority for Town officials as evident by the recent special meeting to learn more about the issues with Leland Fire/Rescue that include the Brunswick County Fire Marshal and a representative from the State Fire Marshal's Office. Furthermore, a study of fire operations along with the feasibility of providing fire services as a department of the town was initiated by the Town Council. The Town Manager is leading this study and will report back to the Town Council later this year with possible options.

Fiscal Year 2016-2017 / Taxes

Another indication of the priority in public safety issues is the increase in town personnel. With the adoption of the fiscal year 2016-2017 budget, the Town Council has provided funding to hire nine (9) additional police officers. The increase in the tax rate from 15.15 cents per \$100 valuation to 18.33 cents per \$100 valuation is directly related to a major increase in town personnel. The Town Council made a tough decision to increase the tax rate to cover the expense of hiring the nine (9) additional police officers along with four (4) other staff members. About one-third (1/3) of the expenses associated with the thirteen (13) additional employees was covered in the existing tax rate. Historically, the Town has kept the tax rate consistent and had not initiated a tax increase in over a decade. In the course of this consistent tax rate, the Town has been able to expand service and build facilities because of the growth within the town limits. The two main facilities, the new town hall and the new arts center were completed in 2015, but the debt service started in 2013 and will continue for another twelve years. These two facilities have become a great asset to the citizens and the community and have greatly improved the services provided by the Town staff.

Over the past five years, the Town staff has endeavored to be frugal with the citizen's tax dollars by finding efficiencies in operations while continuing to provide the same, or a higher, level of service. About \$5,000,000 has been saved over the past five years through efficiencies and increased revenues. The result is that the Town has experienced an increase in the general fund reserve balance, some of which has been allocated to capital projects.

Prior to the Town Council adopting the budget, the Town held a series of public meetings over the past six months in which the Town Council has discussed the needs of the Town, discussed priorities, and allowed citizens to comment and express their views. This process will start anew this fall with meetings for setting goals, objectives, and priorities for the next budget cycle, fiscal year 2017-2018.

In spite of the current increases and expenses, Leland continues to have one of the lowest tax rates in the region.

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An example of a tax bill calculation:

Given: A 3,500 sf home with a tax appraised value of \$300,000.
The Town of Leland tax rate is 18.33 cents per \$100 valuation.
The Brunswick County tax rate is 48.50 cents per \$100 valuation.
Fire District Fee ranges from \$50 to \$800 based on square footage.

Calculation: $\$300,000 / \$100 = 3,000$
Leland Tax = $3,000 \times 0.1833 = \$549.90$
Brunswick County Tax = $3,000 \times 0.4850 = \$1,455.00$
Fire District Fee (3,500 sf) = \$300.00

Total Tax Bill: \$2,304.90

Prior to the tax rate increase by the Town of Leland, the total tax bill would have equaled \$2,209.50. The \$95.40 increase is the amount related to the Town of Leland tax rate change from 15.15 cents per \$100 valuation to 18.33 cents per \$100 valuation. The overall increase is 4.32% in this example.

Senior Center

Finally, a Brunswick County Senior Center is being built on the Town of Leland municipal campus. It is progressing nicely and will be a first class facility when completed in the winter of 2016-2017. The senior center is not a town facility. It is being built by Brunswick County with Brunswick County tax dollars collected from all the citizens and property owners of Brunswick County. The expense of constructing the senior center is not related with Town of Leland taxes in any way. The only involvement the Town has with the facility is that the Town leased the land on which the center is being built to the County. This land has been owned by the town for over a decade, so leasing it to the County comes at no expense to the Town. The facility will be a nice addition to the municipal campus and will help to consolidate some of the activities in which many citizens engage to one general location. Furthermore, this new location places the senior center on the existing bus route that will improve access for many citizens in the northern portion of Brunswick County.

Invitation

The hope is that this information is helpful in clarifying misconceptions and misunderstandings. The best way to avoid this circumstance is to become more involved in the process and the decisions that are being made. Everyone is welcome to attend the Town Council meetings to learn more about the Town's operations and speak during the public comment portion of the meeting if they wish. Being informed and being involved is what citizenship is all about and it is welcomed here at the Town of Leland.

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