

OPPAGA Fire District Reviews

Presentation to the House Local Administration, Federal Affairs,
and Special Districts Subcommittee

Emily Leventhal, Ph.D.
Staff Director



OPPAGA

Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability

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Presentation Overview

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Special District Performance Reviews: Section 189.0695, *F.S.* Requirements

Reviews to be conducted by OPPAGA

- ❖ **3** independent special fire control districts located in rural areas of opportunity by June 30, 2023 and every five years thereafter
 - **Walton County: Argyle and Liberty**
 - **Collier County: Immokalee**

Special District Performance Reviews: Statutory Research Objectives

The performance reviews include three previous fiscal years and the current fiscal year's information on several district characteristics.

- Governance and responsibilities
- Service delivery and potential for duplication
- Performance
- Resource management and planning

Special Fire District Performance Reviews: Findings Summary

Argyle

- Not complying with statutory requirements for special district administration
- Volunteers provide limited support because staff are not certified
- Persistently low revenues

Liberty

- Not complying with statutory requirements for special district administration
- Volunteers provide limited support because staff are not certified
- Multiple allegations of misrepresentation of district data
- Expenditures exceeded revenues during the review period

Immokalee

- Complying with statutory requirements for special district administration
- Full-time staffing levels have remained the same, but incident volume has increased
- Expenditures exceeded revenues during the review period

Special Fire District Performance Reviews: Recommendations Summary

Recommendations to the Boards of All Three Districts

- **Achieve statutory compliance or accountability**
- **Improve the extent to which goals are achieved**
- **Improve efficiency or effectiveness of district operations**

Recommendation to the Legislature for Argyle and Liberty Fire Districts

- **Consider dissolving the districts**

Argyle Fire District

Background

Location	Walton County, in a rural area of opportunity
Service Area	95 square miles, 9% of county land area
Revenue Sources	Non-ad valorem assessment Impact fees Grants
FY 2022-23 Budget	\$342,000
Staffing	District reported 32 personnel: 29 volunteers and 3 paid staff
Facilities and Equipment	3 facilities and 11 apparatus

Governance

Issue

The district is not in compliance with several statutory requirements related to special district administration.

During the review period, the district did not:

- Adopt a budget
- Adopt a five-year spending plan
- Maintain a website and post required information
- Verify compliance with ethics, nepotism, and voting conflicts statutes
- Submit an annual audit

Governance

Issue

The district is not addressing administrative matters that impact operations.

During the review period, the district did not:

- Update operating guidelines
- Maintain records of how many and which volunteers are certified to respond to incidents
- Develop policies to guide purchasing and contracting

Service Delivery

Issue

Volunteer staff primarily respond to mutual aid and service calls but can only provide limited support due to a lack of certified personnel.

- Incident calls increased to 1,017 for Fiscal Year 2021-22; the number of reported volunteers declined
- During the review period, most calls district volunteers attended were recorded as mutual aid
 - Many volunteers without a firefighter certification, none with EMS certification
 - Emergency Services must always be present if Argyle responds to fire or medical incidents
- District has not received the full amount of a \$125,000 grant from the county because it has not followed through on a coordination agreement
- Walton County and the district have not considered consolidation to address inefficiencies

Performance

Issue

District goals and objectives are neither board approved nor consistently implemented.

- District uses national standards and insurance ratings to measure performance
 - Meets national standards for timeliness
 - May not meet national standards for number of qualified personnel responding
 - Did not provide documentation of final insurance rating
- County stakeholders reported the district's performance could improve
- District has not taken steps to address stakeholder feedback or assess performance

Resource Management

Issue

District revenues grew during the review period, as did expenditures; expenditures never exceeded revenues.

- Revenues increased \$212,129 (114%) during the review period, mostly attributable to assessments
 - Impact fee revenue was reported, but not utilized
 - FEMA grant revenue was reported but amounts, number, and type not documented
- Expenditures increased 84% during the review period, but no documentation was provided to support the stated expenses
- Administrative costs increased 19%; primarily for software for incident reporting and personnel

Resource Management

Issue

The district reported that staffing and facilities do not meet community needs.

- District reported that the number of volunteers decreased and that the current level of volunteers is too low, but did not provide documentation to support this claim
- District revenues may not be sufficient to fund spending goals
 - Apparatus: acquire two engines or trucks, two additional vehicles, more lifesaving equipment, ladders
 - Facilities: additional property for two existing stations and a rebuild of a third station

Recommendations

Board

1) Achieve statutory compliance and financial accountability

- Increase board oversight to comply with statute
- Seek opinion from Commission on Ethics regarding stipends for board
- Recruit administrative volunteers or fund administrative staff

2) Improve the extent to which goals are achieved

- Adopt goals for operations
- Measure and track performance

3) Improve efficiency and effectiveness of district operations

- Develop more strategies to obtain funding
- Support volunteers' achievement of volunteer firefighter certification

Legislature

Consider dissolving the district

Liberty Fire District

Background

Location	Walton County, in a rural area of opportunity
Service Area	89 square miles, 9% of county land area
Revenue Sources	Non-ad valorem assessment on residences and businesses within the district Impact fees Grants
FY 2022-23 Budget	\$478,050 (tentative)
Staffing	District reported 28 personnel: 27 volunteers and 1 part-time paid staff member
Facilities and Equipment	2 facilities and 18 apparatus

Governance

Issue

The district is not in compliance with several statutory requirements related to special district administration.

During the review period, the district did not:

- Adopt a budget by resolution or a five-year spending plan
- File a schedule of its meetings and make meeting records publicly available
- Maintain a website and post required information
- Submit a surety bond for each commissioner and the treasurer
- Verify compliance with ethics, nepotism, and voting conflicts statutes
- Submit its most recent audit

Governance

Issue

The district is not addressing administrative matters that impact operations.

During the review period, the district did not:

- Maintain records of how many and which volunteers are certified to respond to incidents
 - Limited documentation that current volunteers meet basic qualifications
 - A few active volunteers should have been prohibited from volunteering based on physical exams
 - Incomplete data on personnel certifications
- Adopt policies to guide purchasing and contracting
- Update district operating procedures

Governance

Issue

There have been multiple allegations of misrepresentation of district data and staffing issues.

- OPPAGA received multiple allegations of the chief and assistant chief misrepresenting apparatus condition and reimbursement data to national entities.
- Lack of a board chair affects the board's ability to manage the district, including
 - proper certification of the fire chief
 - voting impasses

Service Delivery

Issue

District volunteers primarily responded to rescue and EMS incidents.

- Incident calls increased to 897 for Fiscal Year 2020-21
- District mostly supports Walton County Emergency Services on calls
- District has not received a \$125,000 grant from the county because it has not followed through on a coordination agreement
- Walton County and the district have not considered consolidation to address inefficiencies

Performance

Issue

District goals and objectives are neither board approved nor consistently implemented.

- District uses national standards to measure performance
 - Did not provide evidence it meets national standards for timeliness
 - May not meet national standards for number of qualified personnel responding
 - Insurance rating improved during the review period
- County stakeholders report that the district's performance could improve
- District could not document steps taken to address performance

Resource Management

Issue

District expenditures exceeded revenues in every year of the review period.

- Revenues decreased \$180,957 (28%) during the review period
 - Largest revenue source was the non-ad valorem assessment, which was the only revenue category that increased (2%)
 - Impact fees declined 47%
- Expenditures decreased \$409,205 (46%) during the review period
- Board was not aware, that on average, the ratio of expenditures to revenues was 121%
- District reported that administrative costs increased, but did not provide detailed salary or FEMA reimbursement costs

Resource Management

Issue

The district reported that the condition of apparatus and facilities does not meet district needs.

- District reported that staffing is sufficient, but did not provide supporting documentation on qualified volunteers or paid employees
- District revenues may not be sufficient to fund spending goals
 - Apparatus: acquire a mini-pumper for the short term
 - Facilities: replace one station and build a third station

Recommendations

Board

1) Achieve statutory compliance and financial accountability

- Increase board oversight to comply with statute
- Seek opinion from Commission on Ethics regarding stipends for board
- Recruit administrative volunteers or fund administrative staff

2) Improve the extent to which goals are achieved

- Adopt goals for operations
- Measure and track performance

3) Improve efficiency and effectiveness of district operations

- Develop more strategies to obtain funding
- Support volunteers' achievement of volunteer firefighter certification

Legislature

Consider dissolving the district

Immokalee Fire District

Background

Location	Collier County, in a rural area of opportunity
Service Area	234 square miles, 12% of county land area
Revenue Sources	Ad valorem tax Impact fees Grants
FY 2022-23 Budget	\$11.4 million
Staffing	District reported 53 personnel: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 34 full-time firefighters• 3 administrative personnel• 16 contractor personnel
Facilities and Equipment	3 facilities and 20 apparatus

Governance

Issue

The district is in compliance with statutory requirements related to special district administration, but did not address administrative matters that could improve operations.

During the review period, the district:

- Submitted its annual audits, with no repeat findings
- Did not address some administrative matters that may impact its operations
 - Cannot readily identify which or how many staff are certified, but state data shows all district firefighters meet qualifications to be career firefighters in Florida
 - Temporarily stopped reporting incident data to the state system
 - Did not routinely update operating procedures

Service Delivery

Issue

Incident calls increased during the review period, but number of personnel remained the same.

- Incident calls increased to 4,673 for Fiscal Year 2021-22
- District volunteers primarily responded to rescue and EMS incidents
- District and countywide emergency operations overlap, but provide complementary supports
- District provides non-transport response capabilities and basic life support medical services
- Collier County and the district have considered consolidating to address inefficiencies, but the district does not see a benefit at this time

Performance

Issue

The district's new goals and objectives do not all have performance standards.

- District did not meet national standards for timeliness or number of personnel responding to incidents
- District insurance rating worsened during the review period, in part due to the district's fire suppression system
- District does not systematically assess performance
- County stakeholders had not received complaints about the district and had no concerns about the district's service delivery

Resource Management

Issue

District expenditures totaled \$44 million, exceeding total revenues of \$41.2 million during the review period.

- Revenues increased 17% during the review period
 - Ad valorem taxes increased 42%, parallel to an increase in assessed value of property
 - Impact fees increased 68%
- Expenditures increased 36% during the review period
- Administrative costs increased 14%

Resource Management

Issue

Limited housing values and limited tax base constrain resources available to the district.

- OPPAGA determined that district staffing levels are below communities of comparable populations
- District reported that the condition of apparatus and two of three facilities does not meet district needs
- District revenues may not be sufficient to fund spending goals
 - Apparatus: acquire new trucks
 - Facilities: replace one station and secure property for another
 - Maintain reserves
 - Plan for district growth

Recommendations

Board

1) Improve accountability

- Review operating procedures
- Update personnel records
- Monitor data reporting
- Develop additional strategies for managing multiple revenue streams

2) Improve the extent to which goals are achieved

- Reduce and revise goals and objectives
- Measure and track performance

3) Improve efficiency and effectiveness of district operations

- When finances are sufficient, seek approval from County to provide advanced life support

Contact Information

Emily Leventhal, Ph.D

Staff Director

 (850) 717-0525

 Leventhal.emily@oppaga.fl.gov

Chris Hilliard

Legislative Policy Analyst

 (850) 717-0386

 hilliard.chris@oppaga.fl.gov

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