OPPAGA Walton County Fire District Reviews

Presentation to the Joint Legislative Auditing Committee

Emily Leventhal, Ph.D.
Staff Director
Presentation Overview

1. Statutory Requirements and Research Objectives
2. Findings Summary
3. Recommendations Summary
4. Findings for Individual Districts
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: Liberty and Argyle
  - 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

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

Argyle

• Not complying with statutory requirements for special district administration
• Volunteers provide limited support because staff are not certified
• Persistently low revenues
## Special Fire District Performance Reviews: Recommendations Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendations to the Boards of Argyle and Liberty Fire Districts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Achieve statutory compliance or accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Improve the extent to which goals are achieved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Improve efficiency or effectiveness of district operations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation to the Legislature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Consider dissolving the districts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Liberty Fire District
## Background

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

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

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
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
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
Argyle Fire District
## Background

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

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

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

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
FLORIDA LEGISLATURE OFFICE OF PROGRAM POLICY ANALYSIS AND GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY

OPPAGA supports the Florida Legislature by providing data, evaluative research, and objective analyses that assist legislative budget and policy deliberations.