



# NEWS RELEASE

**For immediate release**

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## **Beaufort seeks balance to continue city services but with less revenue**

The Henry C. Chambers Waterfront Park, Downtown Marina, holiday lights draped along the waterfront seawall, landscaped roadways and ever-ready police and fire services help make Beaufort a great place to live and keep the city winning “Best Of” contests.

Those same services, though, carry a price – a price that Beaufort city leaders are finding increasingly difficult to pay. Beaufort police and fire services alone cost about \$8.8 million annually, roughly half the city’s operating budget.

“Here’s how we get squeezed,” Beaufort City Manager Bill Prokop said. “The City of Beaufort serves a population of 60,000-plus with our parks, waterfront, police, fire, and public works, and that’s made possible by a budget that is paid for by 12,000 residents. The services provided by the City keep Beaufort a top tourist destination and keep our residents and businesses safe.

“Our citizens have asked for more services – increased police coverage, park and building maintenance, street improvements, quick fire responses and faster permitting services. In order to provide these services we have to find revenues sources, but that’s getting to be like finding a needle in a haystack because of the way the state has limited local government.”

Here’s a quick comparison of how the Beaufort Police Department’s workload has jumped over the past 20 years, even though the number of officers has increased by only three:

In 1994, the Beaufort Police Department:

- Had 43 officers...
- Who covered 10.5 square miles...
- In a city with a 1990 Census of 9,544 people and a service population of about 40,000...
- And in 1994, Beaufort Police responded to **11,319 calls**

In 2014, the Beaufort Police:

- Had 46 officers...
- Who covered 28 square miles...
- In a city with a 2010 Census of 12,900 people... and a service population estimated at more than 60,000
- And the police responded to **70,000-plus calls**.

“When you look at that comparison, it’s absolutely incredible that our Police Department is able to do what they do,” Keyserling said. “Their patrol force hasn’t grown much to speak of, but they are answering almost 60,000 more calls each year. That’s where the public safety fee would play a role.”

The state legislature restricted local governments’ ability to increase taxes with the passage of Act 388 in 2006. Now the legislature is actively discussing how to further take away an important local revenue source in the business license fee. Beyond that, the state isn’t funding local needs for highway and street maintenance, Prokop said.

At the same time, the city faces increases in the cost of the state retirement system and insurance programs, just as the county and other municipalities are having. City leaders can’t opt out of those costs.

“All the services that make Beaufort so appealing to people who live here and to people who visit, those things don’t just happen. They cost money, and for the last several years we’ve seen our costs climbing and our revenues staying flat,” Prokop said.

For the past three years, Beaufort City Council has wrestled with options to increase revenue, including vehicle fees, higher stormwater fees and a public safety fee, even as the state legislature has worked to cap local governments’ abilities to sustain revenue.

For the next fiscal year, Beaufort’s budget-builders are facing a \$700,000 shortfall based on current revenue predictions and budgeted needs.

State law caps increases to property taxes to the increase in the average of the 12 monthly consumer price indices for the most recent calendar year, plus the percentage increase in the previous year in the population of the city.

The public safety fee is an option under consideration by Beaufort City Council. As proposed, the fee would be levied on all property owners in the city and would provide some financial support to Beaufort’s police and fire departments. Together, the city’s public safety departments account for about half the annual operating budget for City of Beaufort.

Last week, Keyserling broached the question of using volunteers to supplement the fire department, or reducing or eliminating the fire department answering medical calls. Those non-fire emergencies account for more than half of all the calls that Beaufort firefighters answer.

“I’m searching for a way to reduce our costs if we cannot come to agreement on how to raise revenues. We have to balance this budget and we have to do it as fairly and equitably as possible

– but in my mind, public safety will always be a primary function of government,” the mayor said.

For the Beaufort-Port Royal Fire Department, in 2014 they answered 2,189 calls, and 56 percent of those were for medical issues and not fires.

Unfortunately, a new dispatch systems installed by Beaufort County and used by the city’s police and firefighters doesn’t prioritize calls for the fire department, Fire Chief Sammy Negron said. That means Beaufort fire trucks will be sent to EMS calls that may not require firefighters, such as people complaining of pain or minor injuries that EMS will cover.

Because of that change in procedure by the County dispatchers, Negron said he expects the percentage of medical calls to increase to 70 percent of total calls his department answers this year.

“We are open to suggestions and new ideas about our budget, and we want to have a program that is fairly shared by all who benefit,” Prokop said.

The City Council’s first public hearing on the proposed budget is set for June 9 at City Hall.

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