

Commissioners' Journal
March 18, 2025

The Geauga County Board of Commissioners met for a work session on March 18, 2025, at 11:30 a.m. in the Commissioners' Offices located at 12611 Ravenwood Drive, in Room B303 in Chardon, Ohio.

It is declared and determined that all formal actions of the Board of County Commissioners concerning and relating to the adoption of all resolutions that were adopted in this meeting, and that all deliberations of the Board of County Commissioners that resulted in such formal action were open to the public and were in compliance with all legal requirements, including section 121.22 of the Ohio Revised Code.

The President of the Board, James W. Dvorak, opened the meeting at 11:30 a.m.

Department of Emergency Services Director Roger Peterson and Assistant Chief Larry Gasper, Chardon Fire Department asked to meet with the Board of Commissioners to talk about the Special Teams in Geauga County, including the Dive Team, the Fire Investigation Unit (FIU), Haz-Mat Team, Drone Team, and Technical Rescue that includes Rope and Water.

Mr. Peterson explained that currently the Hazardous Materials (Haz-Mat) Team falls under DES through the umbrella of the Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC) and they would like to bring in other teams under that same umbrella. Mr. Peterson explained that the five teams got together and reviewed numbers and are looking for \$25,000.00 annually that would assist with annual training and equipment. Mr. Peterson added that they are looking to have grant matching funds, citing a recent ODNR grant that Mr. Peterson's local fire department applied for and was awarded for \$15,000.00, that has a 50 % local match, which would provide them with funding to replace equipment.

Mr. Gasper explained that about a year ago, Michael Santilli, who heads up the Fire Investigation Unit (FIU), asked for funding to purchase equipment to keep the team going. Mr. Santilli explained that Russell Fire Department would purchase the equipment for the team. With fourteen departments in the county, he feels that it isn't fair for one department to cover the cost of something that is used for the entire county. Mr. Gasper explained that when the Chardon Fire Department would receive funds from donations, they would ask the teams if they needed something. Mr. Gasper feels that the teams should be brought together under one umbrella. Mr. Gasper explained that the county is full of talented first responders and we shouldn't have to pull resources from surrounding counties for special teams in our county that could end up billing us for those services. Mr. Gasper added that when you are pulling resources from other areas and then they get an incident, it pulls them from our incident and also delays response to their own, so it is beneficial to keep these teams in our county and then have coordinators oversee the individual teams. Mr. Peterson explained that EMA would be in charge of it overall, then the HazMat, Dive, and Drone teams would each have their own team leader, who would be responsible for the team, the immediate needs, and what the training needs are. Mr. Peterson used the example of the Dive Team that is required to be certified every three years, Mr. Peterson asked do you do them all every three years, or do a third of them each year? This is the planning we want to assist them with. Mr. Peterson explained that all the equipment for the rope rescue team has been purchased by Burton and Middlefield Fire Departments. Mr. Peterson also noted that all the departments are purchasing equipment, and some members of the team have purchased their own equipment.

Mr. Gasper briefly went over the information provided to the Board about the individual Special Teams:

Gauga Water Rescue Team

Mr. Gasper explained that the team rescues individuals, adding that during cold weather rescue, they have more time to rescue children versus an adult, because children use less oxygen than adults. They also assist law enforcement with evidence recovery.

Mission: To provide Geauga with an organized, well-trained group of professional public safety divers and water rescue personnel, ensuring safety during water-related incidents.

Team responsibilities include:

Rescue of individuals, recovery of bodies, evidence recovery and lost property retrieval

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Team Composition:

Comprised of regional fire and law enforcement personnel dedicated, organized, and trained for water-related incidents. One of the ten teams that comprise the Ohio Region 2 Water Rescue Team.

Standards and Qualifications:

Team members work within the NFPA 1006 Standard for Technical Rescue Personnel Professional Qualifications. Water Rescue Teams adhere to the NFPA 1670 Standard on Operations and Training for Technical Search and Rescue Incidents.

Team Membership:

Sixteen (16) Total members, 9 fully qualified Public Safety Divers (PSD), 7 in progress of obtaining PSD Qualification, and 2 trained in Flood and Swift Water Operations.

Geauga County Fire Investigation Unit

Mr. Gasper explained that the FIU is very busy, including responding to two fires just last Friday. Mr. Gasper added that all of the teams have NFPA standards that they have to meet.

Mission: The Geauga County Fire Investigation Unit (GCFIU) is to professionally and accurately investigate the origin and cause of fires occurring within the member communities and governmental jurisdictions.

Response:

The FIU has twenty-two members. It is important to know how fires start. FIU is called out to investigate the origin and cause of fires.

Examples of fire cause:

Arson, intentionally set fires. We work with law enforcement to bring the criminals to justice. Product Recalls. Many products in your house may have recalls for hazards i.e., refrigerators, dishwashers, coffee makers, and kids' toys to name a few. These items can and do cause fires. Accidental fires: there are times where people just make mistakes.

Standards and Qualifications:

Team members work within the NFPA 472 and NFPA 1072 Standards.

Geauga Water Hazardous Materials Team

Mr. Gasper explained that there is a lot of training that goes into Haz-Mat to protect themselves from getting hurt, or from exposure that can cause contamination or cancer.

Mission: To respond and mitigate any hazardous material incident within Geauga County or surrounding counties. The Haz-Mat team is primarily a combustible / flammable liquids spills team. We carry numerous items and equipment to ensure all hazardous materials spilled within the county can be mitigated.

Response:

Middlefield Fire Department has the primary response trailer which contains all the entry, decontamination, metering, and rope equipment. Middlefield FD also houses a reserve / back up spills trailer in case the other departments are unable to respond. Burton FD has basic entry equipment, primary spills response for the southern side of Geauga County. Burton also houses all the rope rescue equipment. Hambden Fire has basic entry equipment, primary spills response for the northern side of Geauga County. Parkman Fire operates a fire engine equipped with firefighting foam, spills equipment and metering capabilities.

Standards and Qualifications:

Team members work within the NFPA 472 and NFPA 1072 Standards

Team Membership:

The team has 25 Haz-Mat Technicians, (Highest Level of Training). The team has 50 Operations level members (Second Highest Level of Training).

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Geauga County Technical Rescue Team

Mr. Gasper explained that they handle rope rescue, for example, if someone went over a cliff, confined space rescue, like a tanker or small space, and trench rescue. Mr. Peterson added that they would also respond to the parks for rope rescue or the gorge on Hale Road. Mr. Peterson brought up an incident a few years ago. A gentleman fell from a cell tower and perished. Had he become entangled, the team would have gone up to rescue him. Mr. Peterson stated that they had to take the drone out to take live aerial footage of the tie-off points.

Mission: To provide a local response to emergencies within Geauga County that involve technical, rope, high angle confined space and structural collapse incidents. The Technical Rescue Team is a branch of the Geauga County Hazardous Materials Team.

Response Equipment:

2 Tri pods, 8 harnesses, 8 helmets, 1 pre-built 4:1 haul system, 800 feet of life safety rope, various hardware (old technology) bar racks and figure 8's, no mechanical devices, multiple Stokes baskets, SKED device, half back, various other victim packaging devices, tree climbing equipment and various carabiners, ascenders and anchor straps.

Standards and Qualifications:

Team members work within NFPA 2500, 1006, 1858 and 1983

Team Membership:

The team has twenty members

Commissioner Dvorak explained that when he was a Township Trustee, the idea had come up of a county fire department, but this concept is the beginning of something you control. Mr. Gasper added that the Haz-Mat equipment is staged across the county to handle incidents. Mr. Dvorak added that a county-wide, everything-under-EMA is a smart move. What do you need for initial dollars? Then would the Board have to pass something for matching grants?

Mr. Peterson explained that the \$25,000.00 annually would cover matching grant money. They don't want to spend everything, maybe \$20,000.00 and save the rest to create a reserve fund. Mr. Dvorak asked for a maximum for the reserve fund, and what is the long-term plan. Mr. Peterson explained that when there are extra funds available, there is always gear and equipment to be updated along with training. Mr. Gasper expressed that long term, mostly through grants, the team would like to have a unit that would keep all the equipment needed to respond. This program would allow them to apply as a region instead of individually.

Commissioner Brakey stated that most people are familiar with the fire district resources, but this is a type of hybrid approach of combining resources in an effective way to serve the people better and in a more cost-effective manner. Mr. Peterson stated that only one organization is a 501c3, so this would be the first time they would operate in an organized manner.

Acting County Administrator Linda Burhenne asked Mr. Peterson if they would need an action from the political subdivisions to get buy-in to be a part of this. Mr. Peterson replied that none of the teams technically belong to any political group. Ms. Burhenne added that Mr. Gasper works for who he does, and Mr. Peterson works for the county. Ms. Burhenne replied that she was really asking, for example, who is going to carry the liability insurance? Mr. Peterson replied that if a fireman for Middlefield responds to an incident for Haz-Mat, they will still be covered under their home Fire Departments worker's compensation and insurance. Mr. Peterson used the Drone Team as an example. That they won't take anyone on the team that is not already on a public safety / political organization.

Ms. Burhenne asked what the governance structure was going to be. Mr. Peterson replied that they wanted to take the by-laws for LEPC and see if they can modify them to cover the special teams, and vet it through the Prosecutor's Office. Mr. Peterson wanted to make sure they have the support of the Board before moving forward. Mr. Dvorak asked if the Fire Association was in support. Mr. Gasper explained that this really started from the Fire Chiefs' Association, and they are very much in support of this. Mr. Dvorak asked for documentation of that for Mr. Peterson.

Mr. Peterson added that right now there is a county-wide agreement with Emergency Management and all the townships and municipalities. They could also put together a mutual

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aid agreement for the special teams that would be signed off by all the chiefs. Ms. Burhenne asked if there are other counties that are doing this and if so, can you get a copy of what they have done? Mr. Peterson replied that Trumbull County already has 3 of the 5 teams we have under their umbrella. Mr. Peterson explained that this is the first step, and they have a lot of homework to do. He feels they now have an idea of what they can move forward to do.

Commissioner Spidalieri brought up the 9-1-1 sales tax and that it is not always used so it goes back into the general fund. He suggested that might be something to be looked at, since it is collected on everything that is purchased. Mr. Spidalieri inquired if \$25,000.00 was going to enough. These services are very important and in public safety we sometimes make concessions to be conscious of the dollar, and sometimes it shorts the result of the service or the piece of equipment.

Mr. Spidalieri asked if we have sonar equipment for underwater rescue. Mr. Gasper said we do not. Mr. Spidalieri noted that Portage County has three. Mr. Spidalieri stated that we have a lot of water in this county, with people having ponds in their yards, the two reservoirs, and multiple lakes, that have deep water. Mr. Spidalieri expressed that it would be huge to have sonar in the tool bag. Mr. Spidalieri felt that the Board should be able to support the program. Mr. Peterson expressed his appreciation. Having nothing right now, they are starting from scratch, but starting with \$25,000.00, after a year, they can review the need. Ms. Brakey added that if grant opportunities come up, please come before the Board and ask. Government exists to protect life, liberty and property and that is what this function will do which will benefit the county. Mr. Dvorak asked about the Lake County dive team, of which there is only one, unless Mentor has their own. Mr. Spidalieri added that Lake County also get assistance from the Coast Guard.

Clerk, Christine Blair inquired about the \$25,000.00 being in a fund, and the idea of rolling funds from year to year, how it budgetarily could be handled. Mr. Peterson expressed that knowing they can request grant match funding takes a lot of worry out of it. Ms. Blair added that it might be easier to request the matches from the Board as they come. Mr. Dvorak added that startup money is also needed for trailers.

BEING NO FURTHER BUSINESS TO COME BEFORE THE BOARD

Motion: by Commissioner Brakey, seconded by Commissioner Spidalieri to adjourn the meeting at 12:02 p.m.

Geauga County Board of Commissioners

James W. Dvorak

Carolyn Brakey, Esq.

Ralph Spidalieri

Christine Blair, Commissioners' Clerk

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