

PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY COUNCIL
COMMITTEE REPORT
2023 Legislative Session

Reference No.:	APPT-21-23
Draft No.:	1
Committee:	Health, Human Services, and Public Safety
Date:	7/6/2023
Action:	UNFAV

REPORT: Unfavorable 4-1: Council Members, Dernoga, Burroughs, Blegay, Oriadha. Opposed Franklin

The Prince George's County Health, Human Services, and Public Safety Committee convened on Thursday, July 6, 2023, to consider the appointments of three individuals to the Prince George's County Fire Commission.

The Commission provides operational and administrative support for Volunteer Fire Companies, including operating and maintaining individual fire stations and equipment; and purchasing fire suppression and rescue apparatus.

The Office of the County Executive was represented by Barry Stanton, the Deputy Chief Administrator Officer (DCAO) for Public Safety, Sakinda Skinner, Liaison to the County Council, and Miriam Brewer, Appointments Liaison. An overview of the current process followed in selecting the nominees, relevant information about the appointees' experience, and the responsibilities of the Commission were discussed. DCAO Stanton and Ms. Skinner explained some of the operational challenges and savings achieved recently and how this was done. Chair Dernoga questioned statements about the history and process for making appointments and confirmed that in 2012 the process changed to allow the County Executive to make the appointments.

Ms. Miriam Brewer provided additional highlights from each appointee's background. Chair Jonathon L. Bolden has 32 years of experience and is deputy fire chief. Ms. Vanessa E. Surles has over 30 years of experience and still regularly volunteers and advocates training. Ms. Surles is the associate director of finance for a nonprofit. Mr. Antwan D. Holbert is a three-time recipient of the Public Safety Valor Award for heroism. Each nominee addressed the committee briefly and shared additional information about their background and personal experiences that motivated them to serve.

Mr. Jeramie Jordan, President Volunteer Fire Fighters Association, asked the committee to reject the nominees based upon the process that has been put in place and not keeping all stakeholders involved all the way through the selection process.

Don Wells, Deputy Chief of his department, spoke about the work that went into creating the MOU that was replaced with a general order, which he feels created a problem. He has been a volunteer since 1987 continuously and would like to remain a volunteer.

Janet Demeritt spoke about the importance of including everyone, as was done when the original MOU was established and creating a process.

Christopher Madello, a union representative at Steamfitters Local 602, spoke in support of Mr. Bolden's appointment.

Oleg Pelekhaty, from the Kentland Volunteer Fire Department, spoke in support of the appointees.

Pete Mellits stated that the process is flawed and does not follow the county code because of how a general order was implemented and other concerns.

Lee Lutz requested that the Council reject the nominees because the process has been opaque to the volunteers.

Daryl Lowery, Chief of the Oxon Hill Fire Department, favors the nominations. Mr. Lowery is a lifelong resident that has been with the department since 1984 and has witnessed over time how the administration's new procedures are making it easier for the Oxon Hill station to accomplish its mission.

Tony Perez representing the International Association of Fire Fighters Local 1619, and President Pantellis spoke in support of the appointments. He noted that the union leadership has seen positive changes in the Fire service. The current commission has streamlined the processes and created better collaboration.

Council Chair Dernoga, in response to Mr. Perez, noted that the point made about collaboration is the point. Everyone says we need to talk, and it has not happened. He reminded everyone of warnings about moving forward with the appointments before all parties meeting and discussing issues of concern before moving forward with the committee work session. Until that happens, he still feels the appointments should not move forward and made an unfavorable motion.

Council member Franklin stated that he wouldn't be supporting the unfavorable motion and that he would vote in favor of all of the nominees and applauded Mr. Bolden for his community service and business success. Mr. Bolden was said to be a stalwart example of excellence in business with many years of experience. Councilman Franklin stated his reluctance to bring up the topic of race and noted that when he arrived on the council, the commission was not reflective of the community and reminded everyone of the work done to address diversity and how the committee better reflects the residents of the County. Pursuant to the Charter, the County Executive has sole authority to make appointments. The County Council has the right to the approval authority. CM Franklin noted that until new appointees are selected, the current

members will continue to serve until they are replaced, he agrees we need to work on the process, but these nominees are excellent and should not be held up.

Committee Chair Oriadha noted that it is important that we try our best to have a process that is inclusive. A meeting was requested to ensure that everyone was heard and included before voting. There may be an opportunity for resubmission of some of the same appointees.

Council Vice Chair Blegay noted that the process of determining nominees is important and that the nominations should be held until the volunteers have the voice they deserve.

Council member Burroughs noted that there were issues that were not resolved prior to the meeting despite efforts, and for that reason, he would vote in opposition.

The Health Human Services and Public Safety Committee voted unfavorably 4-1.