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PRESS RELEASE: Chatham County Fire Department Began Providing Fire



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Chatham County Board of Commissioners
124 Bull Street, Savannah, GA 31401



Chatham County Fire Department Began Providing Fire Services Today

For Immediate Release

Chatham County, GA (July 1, 2024) - The Chatham County Fire Department began providing fire services for Unincorporated Chatham County today, July 1, 2024.

On Friday, June 28, 2024, the Chatham County Board of Commissioners voted to approve the transition of fire services from Chatham Emergency Services (CES) to the newly created Chatham County Fire Department. The Board of Commissioners vote approved 152 fire department personnel, lease agreements for 14 stations and purchases of associated fire apparatus and equipment.

Chatham Emergency Services (CES) has proudly served as a dedicated provider of fire services in Unincorporated Chatham County for over 60 years. Recognizing the evolving needs of our community, the Chatham Emergency Services Board of Directors expressed their confidence in Chatham County taking on the responsibility of fire services.

This thoughtful decision is aimed at ensuring the best interests of Chatham County residents and enhancing the collaborative efforts between Chatham County and CES to foster a safer and more resilient community for everyone.

"For the past year, County staff has been working with CES to determine the best path forward in providing fire services to our Unincorporated residents. Both the CES Board of Directors and the Commission feel that path is for the County to establish a Fire Department. We will be transferring the CES Fire Department employees to the County and leasing their fire stations to ensure uninterrupted continuation of services", said Chairman Chester A. Ellis. "Public Safety is one of the highest priorities of the Commission, and we share that priority with Chatham Emergency Services. We know this decision is in the best interest for our community," continued Chairman Chester A. Ellis.

Chatham County Manager Michael Kaigler has appointed Chatham County Police Chief Jeff Hadley to oversee the transition and implementation of the Chatham County Fire Department from a private entity (CES) to a county government department. Hadley has served Chatham County as the Chief of Police since the department transitioned from the joint Savannah-Chatham Metro Police Department in December 2017. Under his leadership, the Chatham County Police Department (CCPD) has maintained a modern, community-oriented policing focus with a reputation for transparency and accountability in all of its operations. Previously, he served for over 9 years as the Public Safety Director in Kalamazoo, Michigan, managing the largest cross trained public safety department in the country – which included police, fire, and EMS.

"I am excited to assist the County Manager's Office in the transition of the Chatham County Fire Department," said Hadley. "Over the past six months, I have had the privilege of working with County staff and Fire Chief James Vickers in the development and transition of fire services to the County. I am confident that the development of the Chatham County Fire Department will provide the necessary professional fire services to the residents of Chatham County," Hadley said.

In recent months, Hadley has played a key role in various aspects of the Fire Department transition, and it has become increasingly apparent that the complex change would require several years of a focused leadership effort.

"Chief Hadley's exceptional qualifications and wealth of experience garnered from his tenure in Kalamazoo, coupled with the relationships he has cultivated in Chatham County, uniquely position him as the ideal person to oversee this transition and implementation. I recognize there will be challenges ahead, and I am confident in his capabilities and vision to guide the County through this process. He has already built a department from scratch, and I believe in his capability to do it again," said County Manager Kaigler.

With Chief Hadley's departure from the day-to-day operations of CCPD, the County Manager has appointed Assistant Chief Julie Tolbert as the Acting Chief of Police. Tolbert brings a wealth of experience from her 40 years in law enforcement. She served as the Interim Chief of Police of the Savannah- Chatham Metropolitan Police Department before retiring and transitioning to the role of Assistant Police Chief for Chatham County Police Department. At CCPD, Tolbert has commanded the Criminal Investigation Division and the various offices that provide operational support to the department.

"I also strongly believe that Chief Tolbert is the ideal leader for our Police Department moving forward until Chief Hadley returns to the Police Department. Having had the privilege of knowing and collaborating with her for many years, I am deeply impressed by her profound understanding of our community. Chief Tolbert's extensive knowledge, along with her exemplary leadership skills, assures me that our Police Department will continue to thrive and progress in the right direction." Kaigler said.

Fire Chief James Vickers, who has also played a pivotal role in the transition process, will be the Chatham County Fire Department Chief.

"Under the leadership of Chatham County, we are excited to continue serving our community as your new Chatham County Fire Department. This transition presents us a valuable opportunity to enhance services through increased outreach and collaboration. Leveraging Chatham County's strong community ties and extensive network, we will be well-positioned to provide support and protection for every resident. Together, we will provide the highest level of services possible for our cherished community," said Vickers.

With over 30 years of dedicated service in Public Safety, Fire Chief James Vickers is a seasoned leader in emergency medical response, fire suppression, prevention and

community risk reduction, training, emergency management, marine and industrial response, and special operations. His unwavering commitment to excellence and extensive experience in organizational management make him a respected figure in the field, driving positive change and ensuring the highest standards of service delivery.

Chief Vickers' leadership philosophy emphasizes transparency, empowerment, and strategic planning, reflecting his deep-seated belief in the importance of building strong relationships and fostering professional growth within the organization. Chief Vickers holds a Master's degree in Public Administration and Emergency Services Management and a Master's Degree in Leadership and Organizational Management. Chief Vickers is also a graduate of the National Fire Academy Executive Fire Officer Program and received his designation as a Chief Fire Officer through the Center for Public Safety Excellence. He also maintains numerous state and international level certifications, is a Georgia Certified Emergency Manager and a licensed Paramedic.

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