

Overview.

The City of Springfield has scheduled a public hearing for September 10, 2015, [click here to see published Notice](#) to consider the rates for the annual special assessment on all properties within the City to defray a portion of the Springfield Fire Rescue Department's annual costs of providing fire protection services, including operating and capital expenses. The City Commission's goal in continuing this assessment, which has been in place since 2012, is to provide an alternative and supplemental means of handling projected City budget shortfalls through adoption of assessment rates that are reasonable and flexible, legally sturdy, and that can be changed efficiently over time.

By considering City policies, practices, the annual fire department budget, the City's overall budget, and other economic conditions, this assessment allows our community to continue making high-quality fire protection services and facilities available while showing responsible financial stewardship. Accordingly, provision of the fire services, facilities, and improvements continues to be funded, in part, by special Fire Service Assessments levied on property within the City limits. The remainder of the fire protection budget can be funded with other legally available revenues (many of which are property-tax based) of the City. This is a challenging balancing process that must be addressed annually.

The proposed Fiscal Year 2015-2016 rates, as shown below under Quick Search, are the maximum rates the City can impose for the coming year. The proposed special assessments for each parcel of property are based on a benefits and burdens analysis that has been recommended by an experienced team of professional advisors and is being carefully considered by the City Commission. The rates are associated with the cost of making continually available fire protection services and facilities every day for all tax parcels within the City. This general process has been validated by the Florida Supreme Court and the City's assessment specifically has been validated by the Circuit Court in Bay County. The approved assessment methodology is based on a two-tiered apportionment (sometimes called 'simplified fire') structure for the rates. Tier 1 is based on the relative improvement value associated with each tax parcel (no land value is generally used in this calculation) and is focused on defraying variable and, possibly, some fixed costs of providing fire protection services and facilities. Tier 2 is a fixed assessment rate per tax parcel focused on defraying the fixed costs of remaining continually ready to respond in the event of a fire-related emergency.

If you wish to learn more, please read further. Additionally, a detailed description of the assessment program is available in City Ordinance No. 511 and in the proposed Annual Assessment Resolution to be considered on September 10, 2015, both on file

with the City Clerk and available for public inspection. Please note that revenue from the Fire Service Assessment may be used only to fund the Springfield Fire Rescue Department, as required by law.

Each parcel of property assigned an identification number by the Bay County Property Appraiser is considered one (1) tax parcel. The proposed rate of assessment for each tax parcel for Fiscal Year 2015-16 is the sum of (i) seventy-six cents (\$0.76) per \$1,000 of the value of improvements attributed to the tax parcel by the Bay County Property Appraiser (Tier 1), plus (ii) eighty-eight dollars and thirty-one cents (\$88.31) per tax parcel (Tier 2), all together with a share of administration and collection costs estimated to be four dollars and fifty-six cents (\$4.56) per parcel associated with the annual assessment.

The dollar amount attributable to each and every tax parcel in the City for Tier 1 and Tier 2 and other information concerning the proposed Fire Service Assessment is available online at springfield.fl.gov/fireassessment.html or accessible upon inquiry at the office of the City Clerk at City Hall. The total revenue the City expects to ultimately collect by the assessment is approximately \$476,242.60 dollars. This annual assessment is for the purpose of funding the continual readiness and availability of essential services and capital facilities and equipment associated with fire protection.

If you have questions or comments about the proposed Fire Service Assessments, you may e-mail dpenton@springfield.fl.gov. Within reason, the City will endeavor to monitor and respond promptly.

Fire Service Assessment - Quick Search.

The City has put in place a quick search tool. You can search and review the assessment for any and every tax parcel in the City in three ways: (1) by owner name, (2) by property address, or (3) by property identification number.

You are invited to view the dollar amount of the Fire Service Assessment attributable to each tax parcel by clicking this link: <http://quicksearch.ennead-data.com/springfield/>, or visit the City Clerk's office, located at City Hall, 3529 E. 3rd St., Springfield, FL 32401.

Fire Service Assessment Payments.

No payments are due yet. This year, the annual assessment will be paid on the same bill as for taxes, rather than via direct bill as has been done in the past. There will be no separate bill. This is called the uniform method of collection of non-ad valorem

assessments and is a commonly used method to keep administrative costs down and is certainly fairer to property owners who might be late in payment. Until paid, the Fire Service Assessment will constitute a lien against assessed property equal in rank and dignity with the liens for all state, county, district, or municipal taxes and other non-ad valorem assessments. Assessments will become delinquent at the same time as property taxes, and, like many other governmental charges, failure to pay the assessment could result in loss of title to the assessed property.

Fire Service Assessments are the Responsibility of the City Commission.

The use of data derived from the County property tax roll (both in form and content), which is a statutorily required and uniformly maintained database of all tax parcels employed by the Property Appraiser and Tax Collector, represents an accurate, fair and efficient data which is standardized and carefully certified to the Florida Department of Revenue each year. This data reflects every parcel of land in our City, and gives each parcel a unique 'tax parcel' identification number for each lot, condominium unit, or tract of land in the City and the Property Appraiser determines various required valuation for improvements and land. The City, in turn uses this data in its 'simplified fire' approach as a means to allocate or distribute appropriate Fire Department costs associated with standing ready to provide fire protection and associated services and facilities.

Please understand that the Fire Service Assessments are imposed and levied by the Springfield City Commission, not the Property Appraiser or Tax Collector. Any activity of the Property Appraiser or Tax Collector associated with the Assessment process is solely ministerial. The patience, work, and responsibilities of these local County officials are greatly appreciated as they carry out their constitutional and general law duties; so please keep in mind that these local County officials have no policy responsibility with regard to the City's Fire Service Assessments or the method of apportionment, the fire protection budget, the annual rates imposed, or collection and enforcement procedures employed. The City just smartly uses the accurate data our local County officials are constantly producing.

Want to Learn more? Please Consider the Following as a Means to be Better Informed About Fire Service Assessments, and the Concept Called 'Simplified Fire'.

The constant and continued preparedness to provide fire protection services, facilities and programs (1) protects the value of the improvements and structures through the continual availability of fire control and provision of fire protection and associated rescue services; (2) protects the life and safety of intended occupants in the use and

enjoyment of real property; (3) serves to lower the cost of casualty or liability insurance by the presence of a fire protection and associated rescue services; (4) provides, in part, a safety net of protection for uninsured or underinsured property and property owners; and (5) serves to limit liability and contain the spread of fire incidents, sometimes occurring on vacant or undeveloped property, with the potential to spread and endanger the structures and occupants of nearby improved property.

The 'simplified fire' approach embraced by the City acts to remove the underlying land values from consideration and reasonably focuses upon the built environment on the land protected by fire services, facilities and programs (Tier 1). But we have come to also understand that the mere availability of fire protection services and facilities also benefits each tax parcel of real property in the City in a substantially uniform fashion by relieving the common burden placed upon City services and facilities collectively created by individual tax parcels (Tier 2). Fundamentally, the presence of each tax parcel within the City creates a comparable and similar requirement to stand ready to serve and continually maintain a preparedness to provide fire protection and associated services and facilities for all tax parcels. Both Tiers recognize that costs occur whether a fire event occurs or not. Separately, and together, the recognition of these relationships and circumstances present a direct and logically related means to share benefits, burdens and costs of fire protection services, facilities and programs among all property owners in our community.

Instead of recreating the wheel, the City looks to carefully kept and always updated public data derived from the property tax roll prepared by the Property Appraiser which allow for the recognition of the relatively higher benefit accruing to properties which face greater financial loss in the event of fire incident. This is a durable or 'evergreen' approach so that from year to year in accordance with market conditions and other factors such variation will be adjusted automatically in accordance with the updated improvement value determined by the Property Appraiser. If the improvements on a given tax parcel were to increase or decrease in value with the passage of time relative to the updated improvement value city-wide, that tax parcel's relative percentage to the total amount assessed for that tax parcel and all tax parcels will also increase or decrease proportionately.

The Fire Service Assessment rates developed in the 'simplified fire' approach present a combined approach to achieve equity. They serve to share the constant cost of a community burden where the mere availability of fire protection services and facilities benefits each tax parcel of real property in the City in a substantially uniform fashion by relieving the common burden placed upon City services and facilities collectively created by individual tax parcels - whether a fire event occurs or not. Fundamentally,

the presence of each tax parcel within the City creates a comparable and similar requirement to stand ready to serve and continually maintain a preparedness to provide fire protection and associated services and facilities for all tax parcels.

So the Fire Service Assessment really is made up of two methods (Tier 1 and Tier 2) each equitable alone, but together creating further equity by diversity of cost sharing methods.

From a budgetary standpoint the City's core preparedness costs are generally those necessary to maintain the readiness of fire personnel to respond in the event of random emergency calls and to assure an effective network of coverage for basic insurance ratings. Such preparedness is continual and predominantly lies in wait for the emergency of a fire incident.

The City Commission and its staff and advisors have carefully considered the 'simplified fire' special assessment apportionment methodology to arrive at the rates shown. Please see <http://quicksearch.ennead-data.com/springfield/>. These rates only fund about 41.65% of the City's annual Fire Department expenditures incurred in maintaining the continual readiness to provide fire protection to all parcels! The rest of the budget is funded with what are called legally available funds – mostly property taxes.

Many of these Fire Department preparedness costs we tend to take for granted. Those are costs of lying in wait for emergency circumstances; and from year to year are largely recurring, almost fixed over the course of a budgetary period, because they are strongly associated with wages, salaries, administration, and overhead which support the constant availability of fire protection related services and facilities. These costs must be absorbed even when firefighting capabilities remain exclusively in standby mode. Each year our City must budget for this state of readiness or level of service; and must consider the committable personnel, necessary equipment and facilities, and the time likely required to extinguish a fire (planning or preparing for the potential incident or event) prior to the emergency allocation of direct resources enabling a fire to be extinguished as quickly as possible (deploying to or intervening in the incident or event itself). The level of service or amount of resources for fire protection service, facilities and programs made available in such a continual preparedness exercise each year is a public administration and policy decision which necessarily focuses in the aggregate on all property within our community.

The combination of the foregoing yields the reasoned 'simplified fire' apportionment methodology premised upon two distinct tiers or classes of apportionment allocation:

Tier 1 – a sharing of benefits, burdens and costs for fire protection services and facilities based upon the relative value of improvements for each tax parcel in the City as compared to the value of improvements for all tax parcels in the City; and, Tier 2 – a sharing of benefits, burdens and costs for fire protection services and facilities on a per tax parcel allocation premised upon maintaining a continual state of preparedness and readiness to serve whether or not a request for actual assistance is ever received. Although either of these two tiers might be used singularly to address a significant portion of the Fire Department budget for special assessment apportionment purposes, together they provide a simplified and powerful equity tool for the City Commission to fairly and reasonably share assessable benefits, burdens and costs among all assessable tax parcels in the City.

What is ‘Simplified Fire’?

‘Simplified Fire’ is the two-tiered fire assessment methodology described above which was originally developed by an attorney, Mark G. Lawson, Mark G. Lawson, P.A. (“MGLPA”) [\[click here for curriculum vitae\]](#), Camilla Augustine, a data and roll expert, Ennead, LLC [\[click here for curriculum vitae\]](#), and Owen M. Beitsch, PhD, FAICP, CRE, an economist, GAI Consultants, Inc. [\[click here for curriculum vitae\]](#). It is based on digesting a public sector budget for availability of essential services, like fire protection. Dr. Beitsch is a recognized expert in economic analysis, apportionment and public budgeting and refers to the method as “Simplified Fire.” The concept is copyrighted and trademarked. Dr. Beitsch and Ennead, in association with MGLPA have produced the concise individualized evidentiary report for the City of Springfield and for several other communities which informs and demonstrates that the ‘Simplified Fire’ method is (1) legally sufficient from a factual standpoint, (2) presents an extraordinarily powerful and low-risk public administration tool to local government managers before implementation, (2) is comprehensive and inexpensive, (3) has already proven durable and evergreen in application for several years; and, (4) if carefully implemented and followed, presents the gold standard for an efficient, transparent two-tiered fire assessment approach responsive to stewardship needs and strictly complies with Florida law. The ‘simplified fire’ approach has been judicially validated by Mr. Lawson in Hernando County, Bay County, Pinellas County, and Polk County and was recently further vindicated by the Florida Supreme Court in upholding a deviation that invited challenge.

Although other consultants have been tempted to copy the concept at great expense to communities involved or have sold approaches without fully explaining the true or full cost of implementation or policy failure, ‘simplified fire’ is different in that it presents the entirety of the rates involved to the City Commission and officials in advance of rate

setting and a implementation for a fraction of the price of other programs. It is also the most transparent and accountable means to share the rates and ramifications to affected property owners and the community. The Quick Search site above show with great specificity every proposed assessment of every tax parcel in the City.

Simplified fire, unlike 'demand-based' or all other programs, focuses on specific and certain data that does not need to be developed a second time by consultants (the City is using already standardized data developed and vetted as required by law, which we all already pay for from County officials). As well, simplified fire presents an approach that does not become stale the moment a consulting report is provided, and by its careful logic and legal structure focuses on automatically updated data every year by the efforts the Property Appraiser. Other methods and the discussion of fire assessments often and generally tend to drive toward 'demand-based' apportionment. Demand-based methods are complex, difficult to understand, hardly transparent, and require considerable recurring costs to retain legal sufficiency.

The City Commission and City officials are cognizant that any system, metric or analytical view of appraising benefits or assessing costs will be open to some criticism or suggestion of alternative methods or approaches. The City Commission and City officials and staff have labored to become informed as to the facts, analysis, law and policy latitudes available to our City in determining the proper costs to legally assess to pay for the Fire Department and a fair means to set the rate of the Fire Service Assessment. This is done in the process of dealing with what is always difficult annual budgeting process. The cost of solid fire protection is 24/7 – it is expensive. The concept of 'simplified fire' sifts quickly through the rhetoric, and efficiently provides a tool and means for our City Commission, City officials and staff to: (1) serve and fairly fund essential public services and capital, in part, from all benefited property owners, (2) lessen burdens on the general fund, and (3) work to be good financial stewards. The use of a Fire Service Assessment and the 'simplified fire' approach presents an efficient and repeatable path for our City and this community to use reliable data every year to legally and fairly share burdens many of us take for granted, and ALL benefit from every day.

Click here to look up a property on Quick Search: <http://quicksearch.ennead-data.com/springfield/>