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## Southern Blue Springs looking at effects of split fire and ambulance coverage

BY LUKE RANKER - SPECIAL TO THE STAR  
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A fire began on Charles Smith's back porch in Edgewood just after 1 a.m. on Oct. 24, 2011. Smith, who now lives outside St. Louis, said he awoke to fire alarms and smoke filling the kitchen. The fire caused close to \$300,000 in damages. CHARLES SMITH/SUBMITTED PHOTO

Concerns about safety have residents in southern Blue Springs questioning their fire and ambulance coverage.

Blue Springs has no city-operated fire department, so two districts — the Central Jackson County Fire Protection District and the more rural Prairie Township Fire Protection District — split the city.

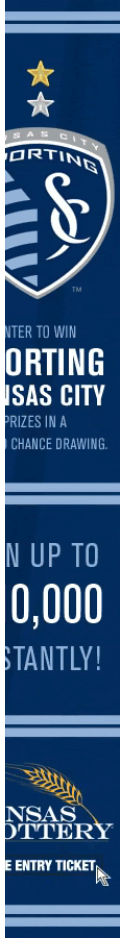
Residents south of Liggett Road, an area that has recently seen increased housing development, are concerned that Prairie Township's sole station at 11010 Milton Thompson Road is too far away to provide adequate emergency services. That area of south Blue Springs includes more than 300 homes in the Edgewood, Southgate and Lake Village subdivisions.

Meanwhile, Central Jackson County, which covers most of Blue Springs north of Liggett Road, operates five stations. Some are closer to south Blue Springs homes than Prairie Township's station.

Blue Springs Councilwoman Susan Culpepper, a former Edgewood community resident whose district includes part of both fire districts, led the initiative to investigate the city's fire coverage.

With the council's consent, Culpepper plans to organize meetings with Blue Spring residents under Prairie Township coverage and the law firm of Zerger & Mauer, to discuss the issue and possibly request they be annexed by Central Jackson County instead.

For that to happen, the Prairie Township Fire Protection District board would vote to drop the residents from its coverage, and Central Jackson County would have to approve annexing them in. If Prairie Township denies the residents' request, the residents could take the fire district to court, lawyer Steve Mauer said.



The council agreed to pay \$5,000 for the legal advice with a cap of \$50,000 should the process drag on.

Prairie Township Fire, which employs 12 full-time employees and 24 part-time employees covering 36 square miles and 10,000 people, is smaller than Central Jackson County, which has 130 full-time employees covering 60 square miles and 75,000 people.

Culpepper said parts of Blue Springs are six to seven miles from the Prairie Township station, but Central Jackson County has stations within four miles, like those at 1000 W. U.S. 40 and 2590 S.E. Adams Dairy Parkway.

The move to question Prairie Township's coverage is not personal, but logistical. Prairie Township is a good fire department, Culpepper said, but just too far away.

"We want the residents of Blue Springs to have the same, good protection," she said.

Residents in the Edgewood neighborhood say they don't feel safe because Prairie Township's distance leads to slow response times. Delays and no automatic aid agreement with Central Jackson County compounded the issue in 2011 when two house fires caused a combined \$500,000 in damage.

In both cases, Prairie Township's response time was greater than 10 minutes, and residents say being covered by Central Jackson County or having an automatic aid agreement with them would have reduced response times to closer to 5 minutes.

Georgiann Manz, a resident of Edgewood, said the first fire in May 2011 caused about \$200,000 in damage and the residents, who were not home at the time, lost most of the inside of their house.

According to dispatch records that Manz obtained, Prairie Township arrived 11 minutes after the 911 call at 10:42 a.m. They immediately called Lake Lotawana, and later, at 11:10 a.m., the Lee's Summit Fire Department for assistance, but never contacted Central Jackson County.

The second fire began on Charles Smith's back porch just after 1 a.m. on Oct. 24, 2011. Smith, who now lives outside St. Louis, said he awoke to fire alarms and smoke filling the kitchen. As he called 911, his wife hustled their grandchildren outside. Not wanting to wait for a fire department, Smith and a neighbor attempted to extinguish the blaze.

"We tried to save what we could," he said, noting that the fire caused close to \$300,000 in damages.

According to Manz's records, Prairie Township received the 911 call at 1:11 a.m. and was on the scene 12 minutes later at 1:23. Lake Lotawana Fire Department arrived shortly after, and Central Jackson County arrived at 1:38 a.m.

"Those 20 to 25 minutes seems like forever when there's a fire and you're trying to save stuff," Smith said.

Prairie Township officials said the response records came from a different dispatching entity, so they could not vouch for their accuracy. They said that information would be reviewed as part of an independent study the district is planning.

On May 21, the Prairie Township Fire Protection District

announced it would request a new automatic aid agreement with Central Jackson County with no added stipulations.

The two fire departments currently have a mutual aid agreement which means one department would have to request assistance from the other. In an automatic aid situation, the fire department closest to the fire, regardless of district boundaries, responds first. An automatic aid agreement existed from August 2013 until February when the agreement was dissolved after Prairie Township failed to meet conditions that Central Jackson County had set.

Harry McLane, president of the board for Prairie Township Fire Protection District, called the original agreement a “cat and mouse game” of conditions.

“Every we time we turned around there was something new,” he said.

Those conditions included developing a strategic plan and working to improve fire coverage in the southern part of Blue Springs.

Lisa Bohanon, administrator and treasurer for Prairie Township Fire, said the fire department is always updating and reviewing its strategic plan. It has discussed putting a second station in Blue Springs, but she said funding has been too tight to make that a reality.

Fire departments have the power to raise the property tax rate to boost revenue, but Bohanon said that with the slow economy, Prairie Township Fire had decided not to raise taxes. She could not say how much of the district’s tax base is in the disputed area.

This new agreement would create an area in southern Blue Springs from Moreland School Road to Wyatt Road where both fire districts would respond to the same emergency. That area is currently covered only by Prairie Township.

Prairie Township submitted the proposal last week to Central Jackson County. CJC Fire Chief Steve Westermann said his board would have to review it.

According an email from Bohanon, Prairie’s response time to Blue Springs averages 8 minutes, 25 seconds. Across the rest of the district the time is just under 7 minutes. The district receives 210 fire or medical calls annually, about 70 from inside Blue Springs.

Culpepper said the automatic aid, if Central Jackson County agrees to it, is a step in the right direction, although she’ll continue to explore bringing Blue Springs under one fire district.

But even with it and the study, Manz is not satisfied. She said she’s afraid the agreement won’t work out or will be dissolved again.

“We want a permanent solution,” she said.