

City to split public safety department, will hire separate police and fire chief

By BRANTLEY STRICKLAND editor@lowcountry.com | Posted: Thursday, May 29, 2014 6:00 am

The public safety era for the City of Walterboro will soon be over.

Following a 75-minute executive session during Tuesday night's regular meeting, Councilman James Broderick moved that council authorize city manager Jeff Molinari to draft a resolution to transition from its current organizational structure of consolidated police and fire services (public safety department) into separate police and fire departments.

The city has operated under the public safety model for the past seven years. Council voted for consolidation in 2007, hoping to reap the benefits of an improved insurance ISO rating, a figure that is partially based on the number of full-time staff devoted to fire services. Current employees were encouraged to cross-train in both fire and police, while new employees were required to do so.

Walterboro obtained an improved Class 3 ISO rating in 2013, down from a 5.

Molinari said ISO Services has assured him the shift back to separate departments would have minimal, if any, impact on the city's current rating.

"This will essentially be a first step," Molinari said. "The immediate impact won't be very noticeable."

Tuesday's change of course would appear to be mostly police-related. Council and city staff ranked public safety, specifically crime rates, as its top issue for 2014 during an April retreat.

Last year, council commissioned an independent study of the city current public safety department, which has been without a permanent chief since May, 2013. The study returned more than 50 recommendations for improvements.

Discussion at the retreat quickly moved to the subject of re-separating the departments, prompting Councilman Jimmy Syfrett to tell council that he had written a plan that would address the possibility of splitting services.

The city's current public safety department employs 38 sworn officers. Half are cross-trained for fire and police, Molinari said.

Going forward, the city will now hire separate police and fire personnel. That would extend to a permanent police and fire chief, rather than a public safety director. All cross-trained personnel would be retained.

"It gives us a lot more flexibility from a recruitment standpoint," Molinari said.