

Citizens of Ballinger:

The City Council and I want to take a moment to clearly and accurately address the relationship between the City of Ballinger and the Ballinger Volunteer Fire Department.

For many years, the City and our volunteer fire fighters worked side by side to find solutions that best served both our citizens and Runnels county. Historically, the City of Ballinger paid for the majority of the volunteers' expenses, including equipment, water, insurance, fire trucks, fuel, hotels, repairs or damages to trucks **both inside and outside city limits**. That support was provided with good intentions, but over time it placed a significant financial burden on our City and our city taxpayers. The City sought additional funding from Runnels County for county fire suppression but was not successful in its efforts. The City was left with no choice but to find a solution that did not require City resources to continue to pay for County expenses while still preserving fire service for county residents.

Over the past several months, the City has worked closely with the Volunteer Fire Chief and the Volunteer Fire Department President to move toward a solution that is fair, sustainable, and responsible. These discussions took place over numerous meetings—here at City Hall, and even in executive sessions with the current and previous Councils. Throughout that process, the Council listened carefully and made multiple adjustments in response to requests from volunteer leadership.

The City and Volunteers jointly agreed on a plan to separate operations while continuing to support public safety. This included transferring five fire vehicles for the volunteers to own and operate outside city limits, while still allowing the use of two City-owned trucks. This separation allows the volunteers to operate independently, make agreements with the county, seek donations, and fundraise as

other volunteer departments across the state do—rather than relying on a city budget that was, over time, highly taken advantage of.

We also want to acknowledge that the volunteers have worked hard to secure grant funding for vehicles. However, many of those grants were not 100 percent funded. In order to receive and properly equip those vehicles, the City of Ballinger provided required matching funds totaling over \$200,000 over the past several years. All of those vehicles are housed at the fire station, and the City is still allowing them to be utilized by the volunteers. Additionally, when equipment was transferred to the volunteers, all equipment was left intact and as-is; nothing was removed or stripped and the volunteers in agreement still have access to what is needed for any situation.

Let us be clear: the City's first obligation is to its residents. We arrived at what we believed was fair for all concerned and that the volunteer firefighters were accepting of. However, no solution pleases everyone, and the City cannot control conversations, emotions, or reactions that occur after meetings between volunteers and we cannot control rumors and misinformation that has been spread. We can only attempt to tell the whole story. Change can be difficult, but the City has tried to be as transparent as possible with its goals and objectives. Our responsibility is to do what is right for the City of Ballinger taxpayers—many of whom have effectively been double taxed while City resources were being used to fight fires throughout the county.

This change also ensures that when volunteers are responding outside city limits, Ballinger will no longer be left without fire protection. Our City Fire Department and equipment will remain available to protect our residents and businesses inside the city limits.

The City has not made these decisions lightly. We have consulted with surrounding cities, volunteer departments, the Council of Governments, Texas Emergency Management, and some Runnels County Officials. Every recommendation we received was consistent: a city fully backing a volunteer fire department in this manner is not typical and is not sustainable. Separation between city operations and volunteer operations was strongly advised.

We deeply respect and appreciate the men and women who volunteer their time to serve our communities. This decision is not about diminishing their service, it is about accountability, sustainability, and ensuring that both city residents and families throughout the county are protected in the most responsible way possible.