

**By GARY THOMAS**

I have been frustrated since 2002 about the fire service issue. It has been handled poorly by all the representative governments in Wilson County. The issue has been here since 1986 and finally went to Court in 1995. My feeling is that the court told Wilson County what to do but Wilson County Emergency Management Agency did the very poorest of jobs in carrying out the court decision.

Finally, in 2006, the Wilson County Commission passed a resolution to terminate service to Mt. Juliet. The County Mayor, at that time, established a special committee to present the County Commission a solution to the problem. That body failed in its mission and recommended that the current agreement be extended, thereby, making the problem more difficult for future County Commissions. I attended all those committee meetings and NEVER was there an elected official of the City of Lebanon in attendance. Therefore, there was no input.

Now almost five years later, it is a crisis situation. I have talked with Mayor Randall Hutto about the matter and appreciated his input about working on resolving the situation. I hope that he accepted my input because this needs a resolution. I personally am in favor of Mt. Juliet establishing it own Fire Department and the County working on improving fire service for unincorporated parts of Wilson County. Of the top 50 cities in Tennessee, Mt. Juliet and one other municipality do not have their own Fire Department. Further, 10 counties in Tennessee provide Fire Service for the entire county but none of these counties has a population that exceeds 22,000.

Based on this information it seems logical for Mt. Juliet to establish its own Fire Department and the County to correct fire service issues within the unincorporated area of Wilson County. In order to let Mt. Juliet carry out the necessary actions, the County Commission would approve a binding resolution to provide fire service for no more than two years and establish a tax rate for all property within the City of Mt. Juliet, thereby, eliminating any costs to the rest of the County taxpayers.

Of major concern is the east side of Highway 109. A less desirable solution would be for Mt. Juliet fire service to be continued by WEMA and any costs associated with that service to be paid for by a County Property Tax Rate for residents within the city boundary. It would establish four Fire Districts, each with its own County Property Tax Rate. The Fire Districts would be Unincorporated, Lebanon, Watertown and Mt. Juliet. Each district would agree to provide mutual aid to each of these entities.

I would suggest that Lebanon not try to enter into any cost-sharing agreements with Mt. Juliet as it just clouds the issues further. Once this fire service issue is resolved by the County Commission and Mt. Juliet better understands what, if anything, needs to be done on their part, other agreements between entities would be more appropriate.

I for one do not want Lebanon to enter into agreements with any entities and all the monetary problems associated with such agreements. We need to have a simple resolution (we only have three months) that treats taxpayers fairly and each entity to have the best fire service available.

Mt. Juliet has long benefited (cost-wise) of an inadequate fire service based on being one of the fastest growing cities in Tennessee and possibly the United States. Wilson County taxpayers have even paid to cover the cost of this service. It is time to end the fire issue once and for all.

As Mt. Juliet's web site states "it is rated the most business friendly city in Tennessee," and as it continues to grow it needs to act like the city it claims to be.

Much of it resolves the issue of Mt. Juliet property taxes. While they have one, it is at currently set at \$0.00. Their mayor wants her legacy to be that while mayor the city managed the day-to-day business without a city property tax. As a result, for many years Wilson County taxpayers have picked up the tab for Mt. Juliet fire service. It is time to bring this to a stop. We really have very little time to get this done. No more extensions without final resolution. It is what is fair to residents of both the county and those that need better fire service within the City of Mt Juliet.

I understand that on Monday, Feb. 7, at 4 p.m., will be a special meeting will be held at Mt. Juliet City Hall. I will be there and am hoping for a large turn out of residents.

**Editor's Note: Gary Thomas is resident of Lebanon.**