

October 24, 2025

**Blount County Fire Protection District
Employee Correspondence to County Leadership**

Mayor Ed Mitchell
Blount County Board of Commissioners
Blount County Government
Maryville, Tennessee

Subject: Request for Oversight and Corrective Action Regarding the Blount County Fire Protection District

We, the undersigned employees of the Blount County Fire Protection District, respectfully submit this correspondence to bring forward serious and ongoing concerns regarding leadership, operations, and the work environment within our department.

Each of us remains committed to serving the citizens of Blount County with professionalism, integrity, and pride. However, the current administrative culture has created an atmosphere of fear, mistrust, and operational inefficiency that threatens both firefighter and public safety. Due to a credible fear of retaliation, this letter is being submitted collectively and without individual attribution. Employees have been explicitly instructed not to communicate with the governing board or outside officials without prior authorization from Chief Doug McClanahan. This directive not only contradicts the spirit of the Tennessee Open Meetings Act (TCA § 8-44-101 et seq.) but also creates an environment where employees are afraid to report unlawful or unsafe practices, actions protected under the Tennessee Public Protection Act (TCA § 50-1-304).

We have previously voiced our concerns to the Utility District Board; however, no action has been taken, nor have any of these matters been addressed. Therefore, we now appeal directly to the County Commission and the Office of the Mayor for oversight and corrective review.

1. Financial and Legal Concerns

Following the public announcement of Station 10's opening, several citizens paid twice for service fees. Many customers had already paid, in some cases nearly a full year in advance. No efforts were made to notify these customers of their double payments or to issue refunds/credits. This practice may violate the Internal Control Act (TCA § 9-18-102) and could constitute a breach of TCA § 39-16-402 regarding the mishandling of funds.

2. Lack of Transparency and Ethical Conflicts

A recent investigation by the Tennessee State Comptroller's Office regarding missing money has severely eroded employee and public trust. No information regarding this investigation

was shared with employees or mentioned in public Commission Meetings until the findings were published. This critical failure of transparency caught employees completely off guard, placing them in a position of public distrust.

This failure is compounded by ongoing ethical conflicts. Chief Doug McClanahan directly supervises his spouse, Vicky McClanahan, who is employed in the district office. This arrangement is a clear violation of the Uniform Nepotism Policy Act of 1980 (TCA § 8-31-101 et seq.). In addition to being a violation of the Nepotism Act, this knowing violation of state law may also constitute Official Misconduct under TCA § 39-16-402(a)(2) (knowingly violating a law relating to the public servant's office).

3. Leadership and Communication Failures

Department communication is inconsistent, resulting in confusion and conflict among personnel. These leadership failures have created a hostile work environment and contributed to an extremely high employee turnover rate that significantly exceeds the 10% to 20% national average for fire departments, further destabilizing the district's operations and expertise.

- **Pattern of Denial:** Chief McClanahan frequently informs employees of one course of action, but when confronted later, denies ever making the statement. This pattern of denial and reversal creates miscommunication and undermines employee confidence.
- **Incomplete Projects:** Several board-approved projects—including the purchase of commercial extractors for each station and the preparation of Station 1 property for the training maze trailer—remain incomplete, with excuses provided instead of accountability.
- **Destructive Pay Policies:** In 2024, the board approved a raise for employees. However, Chief McClanahan simultaneously eliminated the department's one-hour minimum overtime policy for both off-duty and on-duty responses. This action effectively reduced overall pay. Now, if a fire alarm is canceled mid-response, the customer may still be charged \$750 while firefighters are paid pennies for being awoken in the middle of the night.

4. Critical Safety and Operational Deficiencies

The department is failing to meet basic safety and operational standards, placing both firefighters and the public at risk.

- **Certification Failures:** Of the twenty full-time shift personnel, thirteen (65%) are not certified to the Firefighter I & II level. This is in direct violation of the department's own Standard Operating Guidelines (SOGs), which mandate full-time firefighters obtain Firefighter I certification within 18 months of employment and Firefighter II within 30 months. The department has failed to schedule or facilitate this required testing.
- **Inadequate and Unsafe Staffing:** The district's staffing model is critically insufficient for its 300-square-mile coverage area. With a minimum on-duty staff of only seven personnel (and a maximum of ten) for the *entire district*, response capabilities are dangerously thin, averaging just one firefighter per 4,000 residents. This thin staffing

forces the deployment of single-person engine companies as initial responders to emergencies. This practice is a severe breach of established firefighter safety standards, most notably the "two-in, two-out" principle (codified by OSHA 29 CFR 1910.134(g)(4) and NFPA 1710), which prohibits firefighters from entering a hazardous atmosphere (like a structure fire) without a backup team in place. Consequently, the first-arriving firefighter is forced to operate alone for extended periods—unable to safely initiate interior suppression or perform a rescue—until a second unit arrives, drastically increasing the time for effective intervention and placing both the public and department personnel at extreme, unnecessary risk.

- **Lack of Proper PPE:** The department lacks appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) for specialized operations. Firefighters are forced to wear structural firefighting gear during wildland operations (increasing heat-related risk), during vehicle extrications (contaminating fire gear with hydraulic fluids), and during low-angle rescue operations (using heavy, restrictive gear not designed for technical rescue). When gear issues are raised, employees are told they are careless rather than receiving proper replacements. This practice is unacceptable and raises serious concerns regarding compliance with the Tennessee Occupational Safety and Health Act (TCA § 50-3-101 et seq.), which mandates employers provide a safe workplace, including appropriate PPE.
- **Willful Refusal of Mutual Aid:** The Chief has publicly stated that he will not request mutual aid from neighboring departments, referring to doing so as an "embarrassment." This policy is not a matter of professional pride; it is a willful and dangerous decision that directly compounds the risks created by the department's critical staffing shortfalls. Mutual aid agreements are a foundational component of modern fire service operations, designed to provide essential backup for incidents (like structure fires or large-scale emergencies) that exceed a single department's capacity. By refusing to utilize these standard, available resources, the Chief is knowingly leaving personnel without adequate backup, further violating the operational safety principles of NFPA 1710 and demonstrating a disregard for employee safety that contravenes the spirit of the Tennessee Occupational Safety and Health Act (TCA § 50-3-101 et seq.).
- **Disruptive Chain of Command:** A clear and functional chain of command is nonexistent. Chief McClanahan publicly claims to have removed himself from fire operations to focus on administration, stating that the Assistant Chief is in control of the "fire side." In practice, he continues to interfere with both, making operational decisions without communicating with officers. This practice leaves the Assistant Chief, Captains, and Lieutenants completely out of the loop and undermines their authority. This micromanagement creates operational bottlenecks, as line officers are prevented from making even basic decisions without first seeking approval from the Chief, a dangerous and inefficient model for emergency services.

5. Misuse of Facilities and Erosion of Trust

While employees are prohibited from keeping personal belongings at department facilities, the Chief has used district property for long-term personal storage. This action represents an unauthorized exercise of official power and a potential misuse of public resources, implicating

Official Misconduct statutes (TCA § 39-16-402(a)). Furthermore, surveillance cameras, accessible only to the Chief, are reportedly used to monitor employees, creating an atmosphere of intimidation and chilling protected communication.

Acknowledgment of Progress

We recognize and appreciate the department's recent growth and the addition of new apparatus and facilities. However, these advancements are being overshadowed by internal mismanagement, lack of transparency, and an increasingly hostile work environment. These conditions have severely impacted morale, hindered progress, and compromised both employee welfare and community trust.

Requested Actions

1. Initiate an independent, third-party investigation into these concerns.
2. Ensure full compliance with all Tennessee Code provisions, including those governing internal controls (TCA § 9-18-102), nepotism (TCA § 8-31-101), and official misconduct (TCA § 39-16-402).
3. Implement immediate and robust anti-retaliation and whistleblower protections for all department employees, in accordance with the Tennessee Public Protection Act (TCA § 50-1-304).
4. Enforce the completion of previously board-approved projects and purchases.
5. Develop and adopt TAUD-aligned operational, safety, and personnel policies to standardize procedures.
6. Commission an independent audit of the department's compliance with the Tennessee Occupational Safety and Health Act (TCA § 50-3-101 et seq.), particularly concerning PPE and operational safety protocols.
7. Provide a confidential, anonymous mechanism for employees to communicate directly with county oversight representatives without fear of reprisal.

We take immense pride in our service. Our fundamental desire is to safely and effectively protect and serve the citizens of Blount County. The concerns outlined in this letter are not brought forward to discredit leadership, but from a professional obligation to restore the accountability, operational integrity, and safety standards necessary to fulfill our duty. We respectfully request your leadership and oversight to address these critical issues and ensure this department functions at the high standard our community expects and deserves.

Respectfully submitted,

Employees of the Blount County Fire Protection District