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## **Florida Legislature Approves Creation of an Independent Fire District for The Villages**

*Awaiting Approval by the Governor, Villagers will ultimately decide to move forward via referendum November 8*

**TALLAHASSEE**— A local bill, filed by Rep. Brett Thomas Hage and approved today by the Florida Legislature, creates an independent special fire control district to be known as The Villages Independent Fire Control and Rescue District (District). While testifying before various House Committees, Rep. Hage stated that “the District is created for the purposes of providing improved fire control, fire prevention, emergency medical, rescue response, and public safety services to the residents within the boundaries provided by the bill.”

In September 2021, the Sumter County Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) approved to maintain two distinct Fire operations and two distinct EMS transport operations, then in October 2021 the Sumter County BOCC formalized their support for the establishment of a District serving The Villages. “The creation of a District will allow transparency, independent Board oversight in providing more responsive urban services to the residents of The Villages,” said Edmund A. Cain, Fire Chief, The Villages Public Safety Department. “We wish to thank Rep. Hage for his effort shepherding this issue on our behalf through the process in Tallahassee; the voices of many Villagers were heard in Florida’s Capitol this session.”

According to Kenneth C. Blocker, District Manager, The Villages Community Development Districts, the boundaries of the District will encompass only the Sumter County portion of The Villages and some surrounding areas of unincorporated Sumter County, as this represents approximately 94% of our fire department’s current response area. The balance of the response areas outside of Sumter County will be addressed via various inter-governmental agreements and include portions of Marion County, Lake County, Lady Lake, Fruitland Park and the City of Leesburg. The bill also provides the boundaries may be modified, extended, or enlarged upon approval or ratification by the Legislature.

The District is authorized to hold and exercise all powers and duties set forth in chs. 189 and 191, F.S. The bill restricts the District’s ad valorem taxing authority by requiring a majority of district electors voting in a referendum conducted by the Supervisor of

Elections of Sumter County to approve the exercise of such authority. The District is also authorized to exercise other powers regarding the levy and collection of additional non-ad valorem assessments as provided in ch. 191, F.S.

The bill creates an independent Board of Commissioners for The Villages Independent Fire Control and Rescue District (Fire Control Board). The Fire Control Board consists of five commissioners and is elected, organized, and operated under ch. 191, F.S. For the inaugural appointment of members, two members shall be appointed to serve an initial term of 2 years each and 3 members shall be appointed to serve an initial term of 4 years each. Thereafter, each member shall be elected for a 4-year term. Under the statute, fire control districts can levy ad valorem taxes on property. However, the bill provides for a referendum in November to limit taxes to not exceed 1 mil.

The referendum of qualified electors residing within the District is anticipated to be held on November 8, 2022. The bill provides a ballot question for the referendum. The ballot question provides for a blend of revenue sources to assure fairness, caps any ad valorem taxes at 1 mil and annual non-ad valorem assessments at \$124.00 per parcel plus \$0.75 per \$1,000 of value of improvements thereon. Unless the majority of the electors in the affected area vote to approve the creation of the District, the substance of the bill will not go into effect.

According to Chief Cain, The Villages Public Safety Department responded to over 24,000 Incidents in the 2021 - 22 Fiscal Year. 70% of those Incidents were Rescue and Emergency Medical Service calls for incidents such as Medical Emergencies, Medical Assists, Motor Vehicle Crashes, and Extrication. 17% of the Incidents were Service calls, such as persons in distress, water leaks, smoke/smell of smoke, and smoke detector assistance. The other 13% of the Incidents were calls related to Fires, Hazardous Conditions, False Alarms, Good Intent, and Severe Weather.

Chief Cain said "I believe there is good recognition in our community that this is a smart way to move toward improved and more urban EMS transport and fire protection. Of course, we will continue to work to inform so our electors can decide in November."

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