

# Greene, RSA at odds over hydrants

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The state of fire hydrants in the county is a public safety hazard, according to two Greene County volunteer fire chiefs and other county officials.

"If (Rapidan Service Authority) properly maintained the hydrants, I would go to, like, five of them and it takes four

people to open them," Ruckersville Volunteer Fire Company Chief David Morris said during the September Emergency Services Board meeting. "That tells me (the hydrants) haven't been tested in at least a year. I can take you to three that are half-buried under the ground; if they were properly maintained, that wouldn't be the case. They'd go

out and do their yearly maintenance and flow testing and they would know they need to dig the hydrant out and that alone tells me they're not properly maintained."

The National Fire Protection Association's 2022 standards note that flow tests should be done on all public hydrants every five years and that the hydrants should be flushed annually by the

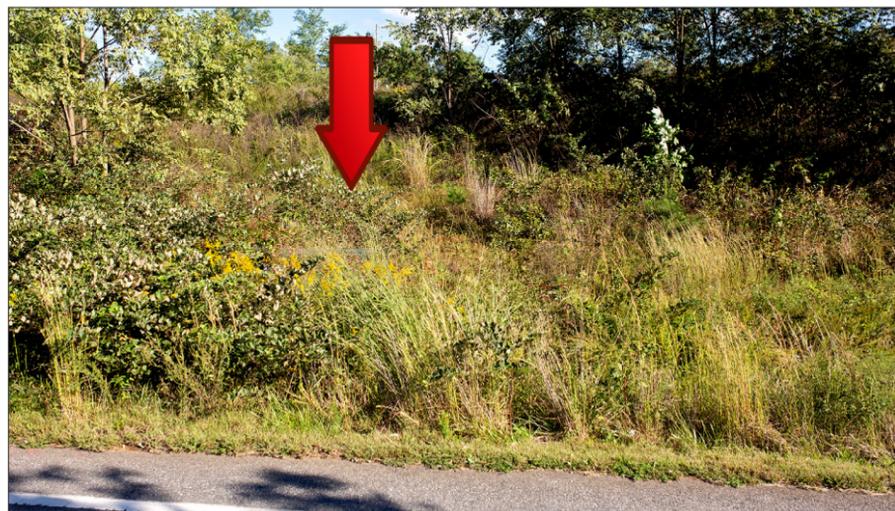


PHOTO BY TERRY BEIGIE/GREENE COUNTY RECORD

Where is the fire hydrant? It's nearly impossible to see this hydrant off Stoneridge Drive across from Lowe's in Ruckersville unless you're purposely looking for it.

"authority having jurisdiction."

RSA General Manager

Tim Clemons did not answer whether those standards had been fol-

lowed or who he believes would be responsible for

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that in Greene County.

At the Aug. 24 Board of Supervisors meeting—and in the Aug. 26 edition of the newspaper, Greene County Administrator Mark Taylor alleged that an estimated one-third of the 265 fire hydrants on the RSA water system in the county don't work, which could cost someone's life during a fire emergency. Taylor noted that RSA had been aware of the situation and had not communicated with the county regarding a plan.

Clemons responded by saying, "public safety is of utmost concern to Rapidan Service Authority. We pride ourselves on our water quality meeting and/or exceeding state and federal guidelines. We also take seriously the safety of our firefighters and citizens." He said no one from the Board of Supervisors had reached out to RSA regarding inoperable hydrants.

However, in an email obtained by the *Record* through an open records request, Mike Jones with Major Security Consulting—hired by Greene County—followed up a phone conversation with Clemons with an email dated March 3, asking for a meeting regarding the hydrants.

"I have not heard from Mr. Clemons or anyone from RSA," Jones told Taylor via email, dated Sept. 3. "Based on information that I provided to the RSA verbally and in writing, I find it reprehensible that a government agency—when informed by a public safety professional about issues that were deemed to be a 'potentially life-threatening' set of concerns with

the lack of fire suppression water, along with the reports by the fire chiefs about the malfunctioning fire hydrants—utterly failed to follow up with myself, Greene County Emergency Management, Greene County sheriff, Greene County administration and/or the fire chiefs of Greene County."

Jones went on to say that in his professional opinion there is "no ability to suppress a fire if there is no water to do it with. ... This is an RSA problem that has become a (Greene County Volunteer Fire Departments) problem; a problem that could cost a Greene County citizen their life and property should a fire occur."

Clemons did not respond to questions by the *Record* regarding fire hydrants.

In his published Op-Ed, Clemons said RSA would begin checking all of RSA's hydrants in Greene County beginning the week of Aug. 30.

The *Record* requested the documentation of that work as of Sept. 23, 2021, under Virginia's Freedom of Information Act, and was provided maintenance sheets for 14 hydrants that had been checked along Moore Road in Ruckersville—all on Sept. 21.

The maintenance sheets do not show that the hydrants' water lines were flushed and do not show whether the water pressure was tested during the inspections.

Two of the sheets noted that on two hydrants, "main line valves" could not be located, but do not note whether corrective action needs to be taken and what that would be.

"The hydrants either don't work or you actually have a compromised pressure," said Steve Catalano, the citizen member on the

Emergency Services Board, when told about the main line valve issue. "If you're loading up tankers with water and taking them to a fire scene it means they will be slower filling. But if you're using that fire hydrant to pump out of it to fight a fire, it is a disaster."

"It says to me that they're out of service," said Catalano, who has also served as a firefighter.

Jones said it's critical to know the functional status for each fire hydrant at all times.

"Fire departments plan their response based on suppression water available," he said. "It is especially critical in a rural county because if a hydrant is not working, a water tanker has to be dispatched to provide suppression water. The nightmare situation we can have here is for a structure fire to be called in, fire dispatched, arrives at a hydrant to find it dysfunctional; (now) fire suppression efforts will require a delayed tanker response and/or a trip to find a functional fire hydrant nearby. This is an unacceptable situation."

Jones said to test a hydrant properly it must be turned on and off on a scheduled basis.

"There is no room for error in the maintenance of critical fire suppression hydrants," Jones said. "Fire hydrant valves need to be 'exercised' (physically opened and tested and then closed) to ensure adequate water flow. This is basic maintenance 101. Loss of life and property is at stake here."

Catalano agreed, saying firefighters are trained to open up the hydrant and not hook up a hose until the water clears up, no matter how recently it had been flushed.

"This is very danger-

ous," he said.

In Clemons's letter, dated Aug. 31, he said RSA's staff engineer has run calls with the fire departments for at least 30 years, serving as a liaison between the authority and the volunteer fire departments.

However, according to the Stanardsville and Ruckersville fire chiefs and the director of emergency services for the county, no one knew there was a liaison.

"Who is the liaison? That's my question," Ruckersville Volunteer Fire Company Chief David Morris said at the September Emergency Services Board Meeting.

Melissa Meador, director of emergency services, said she believed it was Lynn Clements, who both chiefs did acknowledge has ridden on calls with them, but Meador added she wasn't aware Clements was ever given that title.

"And that's who I'm supposed to go to with an issue?" Morris asked.

"Now, if they're not getting the information there's a problem with a hydrant, OK, maybe that's on us. I didn't know who to call," Morris continued. "I've told people about issues that never got addressed and that's when I just stopped telling."

Clemons did not answer whether RSA had a memorandum of understanding regarding a liaison between the authority and the fire departments or if there was correspondence that would show that information had been given to someone in the county.

Jones reported in his email that since he was hired last year to help Greene County implement the recommendations in the Fire and EMS (emergency medical services) study per-

formed by the Virginia Fire Services Board, he has heard from the fire chiefs that they have been unable to locate hydrants due to heavy vegetation, hydrants with stuck valves which cannot be opened and hydrants that just have no water for unknown reasons.

"This is why I reached out to RSA multiple times," Jones said. "As a public safety professional, RSA should have immediately reached out to Greene County emergency management, county administration and the fire chiefs and should have asked about this critical response issue. Instead, RSA was silent and allowed a potentially life-threatening condition to remain unchecked until six months later."

Other service authorities—both similar-sized authorities and larger ones—throughout the state have their written testing procedures on their websites and responded to the *Record* that they do perform annual hydrant maintenance programs for their localities—sometimes in concert with the fire departments.

Private hydrants—those located on private property—are left to the owners of the property for testing and maintenance; including apartment complexes and shopping centers such as Lowe's.

When asked whether RSA had an easement to access the hydrants for testing, Clemons did not answer. Greene County Director of Planning and Zoning Administrator Jim Frydl said the water meters for the Lowe's/Walmart shopping center are set at the roads but the internal piping is private and up to them to maintain.

As of Sunday, sev-

eral hydrants in the Stoneridge Shopping Center in Ruckersville had been repainted, though others remain hidden behind heavy vegetation. It was unclear if RSA or the county had documentation of the hidden hydrants.

Catalano said during the September Emergency Services Board meeting that he would like to see that board draft a letter to RSA regarding the situation.

"What we're talking about does not reflect any bias on the pending litigation that's going on between the county and RSA," Catalano said. "We'd like to have our hydrant locations. We'd like to have a written demonstrated policy and procedure that RSA expects out of the fire chiefs to deal with a broken hydrant. I think our job is response. I just find it horrifying in this day and age, with all the documentation, that something as simple as locations—let alone a maintenance procedure or reporting procedure—is not already there with RSA."

Meador added the letter should include a requirement that RSA notify E-911 when a hydrant is out of service.

Jones has recommended that Greene County geo-locate all fire hydrants within the county and develop a system where RSA has "real time" knowledge of each fire hydrant that is integrated into the county 911 system so when a fire call is dispatched, the nearest hydrant(s) are displayed as well as whether it's working.