## LEE COUNTY LEGISLATIVE DELEGATION

## Florida Southwestern State College, Fort Myers, Florida

## Thursday, January 19, 2017

## For the record, I am Ed FitzGerald an elected Bonita Springs Fire Commissioner, and as you know - one of eighty-five commissioners serving the seventeen independent fire districts in Lee County.

## I am here to speak in favor of passage of Representative Caldwell’s proposed legislation which will take a fifty-year old volunteer based fire organization into the 21st century, eliminating the duplication of functions to bring to the taxpayer a streamlined professional efficient and effective Consolidated Lee County Fire Department – that they deserve.

## Representative Caldwell knows that the residents of Lee County are not supportive of the present disjointed, unorganized and overly expensive system of seventeen independent fire districts. They are dissatisfied with the unquestioned absolute authority by which local decisions are made. They will demand change if you give them the opportunity to do so.

## I am sure that you will not be surprised by the notable absence of support from the Fire Commissioners of the independent fire districts, nor surprised by the cowardly neutral position postured by the Fire Chief’s Association in Lee County. It is exactly the intolerance one might expect from those with the most to gain with the continuance of the local independent districts. Their reaction reminds me of the recent rejection of a consultant’s recommendation to consolidate the Bonita Springs, Estero and San

## Carlos Park fire districts; after spending months in study at a cost of $120,000 – the fifteen elected fire commissioners voted 14 to 1 to ignore the recommendation by their own consultant.

## At no time in the ten years that I have served as a fire commissioner did the Bonita Springs Board of Commissioners proactively demonstrate that the interests of the Bonita Springs’ taxpayer were equal to the desires of the senior fire chief, his staff and the fire-union leadership. The Chief’s suggestions had priority over the taxpayer’s rights.

## I cannot and do not speak for the 17 independent fire districts, but by attendance at many Florida Association of Special Districts’ conferences with large number of Fire Commissioners, Chief Officers, staff personnel and their attorneys, I can tell you that the attitudes, beliefs and the desires of my peers is to continue operating with a focus on serving the agency over serving the people.

## You might question the efficacy of locally managed independent fire districts by considering that the following situation currently exist:

## There are a preponderance of firefighters and their family members serving as fire commissioners in Lee County – spurned on, supported and encouraged by other firefighters, officers and their union leadership.

## There is a high rate of attrition among newly elected fire commissioners due entirely to the cold-shouldered reception and consistency of resistance to their new ideas. Too often the newly elected commissioner finds quitting is the best option.

## The common union contact approved by the local Fire Commissioners provides most firefighters with over 10 weeks of excused time-off annually – unheard of in the private sector. Motions to make fair adjustments to the contracts are resisted by the fire commissioners.

## Labor union negotiations in the independent fire district are most frequently conducted by the local fire chief – not exactly a demanding negotiator.

## Most local Fire Commissioners are anonymous within their own districts - with the result that the taxpayers feel an absent of representation.

## An example of the closed nature of local fire district has been the silence of the Fire Commissioner to address the public, as well as to the state legislators, of the monumental local costs in supporting firefighter pensions of 75% to 100% of their salary, as well as their failure to promote and support the adoption of the defined contribution pension plans to replace the defined benefit plans.

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## Matt Caldwell’s bill requires more than passage – it requires your total support to assure that the public is given a fair chance to make an educated decision when it is time to vote. A positive program is required to withstand the obvious negativity coming from those with personal and organizational reason to have the bill or the vote fail.

## Your moving this bill forward is an exercise in democracy at work when you consider that the that the public has a right to vote on Representative Matt Caldwell’s initiative.

Edward P. FitzGerald, 13100 Southampton Drive, Bonita Springs

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