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Melton, Grafton named to leadership spots in Chester Fire District

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Apr 14, 2026



When the Chester Fire Board enters a new era at the start of the next fiscal year on July 1, they will do so with leadership already in place.

On Monday, the District announced it had formally split leadership responsibilities into two key areas, those being operations and administration in an effort to position itself “for a stronger, more focused future in service to the community.”

The first step was naming the District’s first-ever employee in Stewart “T” Melton as chief of administration.

“Chief Melton brings nearly 41 years of experience in the fire service to the role, along with a long record of leadership and public service,” a statement read. “He previously served as chief of the Richburg Fire Department, where his leadership helped establish the department as one of the leading departments in the county, and where, through Chief Melton’s leadership skills and integrity, he garnered the support of the entire department and the community as a whole.”

In his new role as chief of administration, Melton will oversee all administrative functions for the Chester Fire District, which will include payroll, operations, training, ISO inspections, running the fire training center, Fleet management services and all state and all state and federal grants.

“I’m grateful for the opportunity to serve the citizens of the Chester Fire District,” Melton said in the release, noting that he would be committed to “ensuring our firefighters have the resources, training and leadership they need to do their jobs safely and effectively.”

The District also announced that Kim Grafton, the present chief of the Chester Fire Department, would serve as fire chief of operations. He will maintain responsibility for firefighting management activities district-wide, including emergency response.

“I’m beyond excited to continue serving as fire chief in the Chester Fire District. I’m looking forward to working with Chief Melton in his newly created role as we move the Chester Fire District even further, while maintaining the highest standards of service and safety for our citizens and firefighters,” Grafton said in the statement.

Likewise, Melton said he was looking forward to partnering with Grafton to “build a strong foundation for the District.”

Both Melton and Grafton will report directly to the Chester Fire Board as it moves into independent operations. The new dual-leadership model is designed to create accountability, improve organizational focus and support a high standard of service for the citizens of Chester.

In the statement, Eddie Nunnery (chairman of the Chester Fire District) called the moves “an exciting and truly historic moment for the Chester Fire District.”

“By establishing this new structure, we are creating a stronger foundation for the District and better positioning ourselves to serve our community with excellence, professionalism and accountability for years to come,” he said.

Chester County acknowledged to The News & Reporter that Melton tendered his resignation of chief of the Richburg Fire Department. Last September, Chester County Council voted to “remove, without cause, each member of the board of commissioners of the Richburg Fire Protection District and to pass an emergency ordinance to remove each member of the Richburg Fire Protection Board and dissolve the administrative authority of the district, placing it under the direct authority of the county administrator and to make the district part of the county.” That action included placing Melton on paid administrative leave, though it was stressed that there was no direct accusation of misconduct of any kind by Melton or any individual member of the Board and that the

action was standard when an investigation is ongoing. The Chester County Sheriff's Office reviewed the matter and referred it to the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division, which confirmed two weeks ago that an investigation remains ongoing.

At the end of March, Chester County received its audit for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2025. The audit gave some insight into the Richburg Fire situation. One finding mentioned a U.S. Forestry Commission fire grant, which was awarded based on having at least 80% volunteer firefighters. "Various rosters" were provided and auditors stated, "We could not tie the amounts used on the grant application to the rosters given." Another finding was that the Richburg Fire District "did not use actual hours worked and equipment usage by individual assignments" for a FEMA grant related to Hurricane Helene cleanup.

Another finding dealt with failure to follow Chester County procurement policy related to the purchase of a Chevy Silverado truck.

The hiring of Melton and retention of Grafton by the Chester Fire Board comes after the entity announced it was officially ending its long-time relationship with the City of Chester last summer. Since its creation as a special purpose tax district in 1972, the Board has contracted with the City of Chester for fire services (the City is located within the district but accounts for only 3.3 of the 38 square miles of the district). The fire service in the district has at times been referred to over the years as "the three-headed monster." Chester County has provided funding for the district, the board has always negotiated budgets with the City and purchased equipment and the City has run and administered the fire department.

A rift began to develop between the Board and the City early last year. City officials accused board members of involving themselves in personnel matters, which Mayor Carlos Williams and then-Administrator Malik Whitaker said they had no right or business doing. The Board said it had questions about finances that had not been answered and wondered about the high turnover rate at the department.

Subsequently, Williams wrote a letter to State Senator Everett Stubbs asking for two members of the Board to be replaced. The board is comprised of two members appointed by the City, two by the legislative delegation and one by the board itself.

In late June, the Board published an open letter noting that the board felt “profound disappointment” that Williams, (now former City Administrator) that Williams, Whitaker and now-former Chief James Jackson failed to attend negotiations on a new fiscal year budget and contract, despite being invited to do so weeks in advance. The Board claimed no one even acknowledged the invitation, though a few members of Chester City Council did attend as observers. Because of that “lack of engagement” the Board voted to cease any negotiations with Williams, Whitaker or Jackson and instead to only engage with Chester City Council, “which the Board recognizes as the City’s governing authority.” The Board expressed a hope that the Council would be responsive to the offer. Williams countered that the entire scenario was an attempt wrest control of operations from the City.

Stubbs ultimately sought an opinion from the Office of South Carolina Attorney General Alan Wilson on a number of matters in dispute between the parties. His opinion found that the board and district were not obligated by law to contract for fire services with the City of Chester. The request for opinion from Stubbs actually asked other questions, including whether or not the Board could submit a fire services budget for County approval that had not been mutually agreed upon by the Board and the City of Chester; whether taxes collected pursuant to the millage for the District could be spent on anything other than carrying out fire protection services in the district and whether equipment and assets (like fire trucks) belong to the City or to the District. No clarification was ever publicly offered.

The City and Board did end up having another meeting but no completed fire contract was announced.

When Chester City Council met last July, in a divided vote, the Council ordered Whitaker and Jackson to apologize to the board for hurting the feelings of some board members and making them feel disrespected.

By August, though, the Board announced it would “transition to independent operations for the provision of fire protection services” and took the first major steps in that direction with Monday’s announcement.