



TOWN OF JUPITER

Jupiter Fire Rescue Department Moving Forward

In October, petitions to place a referendum on an upcoming ballot, collected by the political action committee (PAC) called “Jupiter Residents to KEEP Palm Beach County Firefighters,” were submitted to the Palm Beach County Supervisor of Elections Office (SOE). This PAC is managed and well-funded by the union that represents Palm Beach County Firefighters, IAFF Local 2928.

Many residents may have seen the paid advertisements and fliers funded by this PAC, and have been approached, called, texted and emailed by them. Their approach has been aggressive, using strong language

to urge residents to sign a petition that attempts to alter the Town’s charter to mandate that PBCFR provide services to the Town in perpetuity. The proposed charter change would also limit the Town Council’s ability to locally-control the make-up of the Town’s departments and services in the future, such as the ability to have its own Police Department. The PAC has reportedly paid “volunteers” to approach residents to gain signatures. Unfortunately, it has been reported that these uneducated “volunteers” often used false and misleading information to persuade residents to sign.



On November 17, 2023, the Town of Jupiter received a notification from the SOE that 5,560 petitions had valid signatures. The claim by the PAC that 10,000 petitions were certified is inconsistent with the SOE’s certification. In the certification letter, Wendy Sartory Link, the Supervisor of Elections, was careful to point out that, “I am only certifying that the signatures match the signatures we have on file and that the electors reside within the municipal limits. I am not certifying the validity or legal sufficiency of the petitions.”

There are several important steps a petition must pass in order to be placed on a ballot:

1. There must be validated signatures on petitions equal to 10% of the registered voters within incorporated Jupiter. This is a requirement of Florida State Statutes. According to SOE records, this would require that 4,494 petitions be validated. The PAC, through their efforts described above, were able to achieve 5,560 valid signatures according to the SOE.
2. The language of the proposed referendum must be deemed legally sufficient in order for the Town Council to provide it to the SOE for inclusion on the ballot. Some of the things that determine legal sufficiency include (but are not limited to): being a one-issue question; using simple, easy-to-understand language; using language that is not in conflict with State Statute or the Town’s Charter or Code. At the November 21, 2023 Town Council meeting, the Town Attorney provided the Town Council with the opinion that the proposed referendum language was not legally sufficient, and therefore he recommended that the Council not provide the language to the SOE for inclusion on either the March 2024 or the March 2025 ballot. A majority of the Town Council accepted this recommendation.

3. The referendum may appear on the next general election of the Town (if validated and legally sufficient). The Town's election cycle runs on a 3-year cycle, with every third year being an "off" year. In 2024, because no Council seats are up for election, the Town is not holding a general election. The next general election of the Town would therefore be March, 2025. Calling a special election (an election held when the Town is not holding a general election), could cost the taxpayers approximately \$100,000. This includes fees charged to the Town by the SOE, but does not include staff time to manage and run the special election.
4. Numbers 1 and 2 above must be accomplished before the SOE's deadline for the printing of official ballots. According to the SOE, they require ballot language be submitted by December 14, 2023 for the March, 2024 election. It is anticipated that a mid-December, 2024 deadline would be established for the March, 2025 election.

Despite the above, members and supporters of the PAC, many of whom are non-residents, are urging the Town Council to include the legally-insufficient question on their petition as a referendum on the March, 2024 ballot.

Information not being provided by the PAC, led by the union, includes the following facts:

- Over the course of 16 months in 2022 and 2023, the Town attempted to negotiate a fair agreement with Palm Beach County leadership to maintain PBCFR in Jupiter. During those negotiations, the County required a 36-month cancellation clause be included in the agreement. Ultimately, the Town approved the agreement in April, 2023, and Palm Beach County Commission approved it in July, 2023. Unfortunately, that agreement, which represented PBC's best and final offer, contained too many cost increases and too much loss of local control to be sustainable for Jupiter.
- A detailed study, conducted by a qualified consultant group from the International City and County Managers Association (ICMA), showed that a municipal fire department would provide significant savings to Jupiter taxpayers, even when considering the investment costs of starting the department. In August, 2023, Town Council decided to exercise the 36-month cancellation clause that PBC required in the agreement, and directed Town Staff to form the Jupiter Fire Rescue Department (JFRD).
- Since the Town decided to exercise the County's required 36-month cancellation clause, PBC Administration and PBCFR Administration have not reached out to the Town with a desire to discuss a mutually-agreeable solution. Instead, the Town has heard only from the union and its political action committee.
- Approximately 80% of the population of coastal municipalities in Palm Beach County are successfully served by municipal fire departments. These departments operate with the highest levels of safety and operational excellence.

The Town is in the implementation phase of creating the JFRD. Fire engines and ambulances have been purchased and the process of hiring the first fire chief is underway. On October 1, 2026, JFRD will be in-service, ready to provide service at or above current levels.

The PAC driving this campaign claims to speak for all of the residents of Jupiter. In fact, many residents and resident groups have expressed support for starting the JFRD, and see it as a fiscally-responsible move that will allow for more local control. Feel free to let the Council know of your support by emailing towncouncil@jupiter.fl.us. For more information on the formation of the JFRD, please visit www.jupiter.fl.us/firerescue, where you'll find links to documents and presentations on the formation of JFRD, as well as frequently asked questions and plans for the future.