

**Whatcom County Fire District #21
Whatcom County Fire District #4
Station 61 – Blaine
9408 Odell Rd., Blaine, WA 98230
9:00 am
November 9, 2019
Budget Work Session**

CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Bosman called the special Whatcom County Fire District #21 Board of Fire Commissioners meeting for November 9, 2019, to order at 9:00 a.m. at Station 61 – 9408 Odell Street, Blaine, WA 98230.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

ROLL CALL

Chairman Rich Bosman; Vice-Chairman Bruce Ansell; Commissioner Larry McPhail.

Commissioner Crawford and District 4 Commissioner Marybeth Neal were previously excused from this meeting.

Other Attendees: District 4 Commissioner Harry Andrews and Anna Melillo; Interim Fire Chief Joe Noonchester; Division Chiefs Herschel Rostov and Jason Van der Veen; Business Manager Benita Williams; Administrative Assistant Jennie Sand; Human Resource Assistant Kelly Freeman; Finance Assistant Kris Parks; Labor Representative Kenneth Cunningham; Volunteer Mike Peetom; Community member Kathy Berg.

PUBLIC COMMENT

- None

2020 BUDGET WORK SESSION

Chief Noonchester provided a recap of the breakout sessions from the September 14, 2019 budget study work session.

2020 vision suggestions included enhanced in-house communication, improved volunteer and career retention, transparent leadership and relationships, apparatus and equipment replacement planning, mitigation fund planning, resolution with NWFR / District 4 for a possible merger, create a unified Board, become a leader in the community, take care of district's needs and keep up with anticipated changes.

Program needs identified include community education, utilizing social media, public education and district representation at public events. It is expected that the prevention department will take over all CPR and first aid classes and provide them as a part of a community risk education program.

Facilities needs identified include a surplus of unused equipment, division head of facilities, renovate Birch Bay Station 63 and Laurel Station 69, relocate the headquarter office and possibly add another station.

Tools identified include purchasing technical equipment, replacing self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBAs) and oversight of hydrant maintenance.

It was suggested that all apparatus be evaluated before purchasing any additional vehicles.

New position suggestions include a division chief of training, volunteer coordinator, deputy fire marshal, public information officer, specialized positions, maintenance civilian, staffing a BLS transport aid unit, and the addition of a 4th full-time career firefighter at each station.

Labor and Management are reviewing a nearly complete collective bargaining contract which contains competitive wages that may assist with retention.

Chief Van der Veen continues to work diligently with district partners around the county to better response times and become more efficient.

Chief Van der Veen hopes the district will better reflect the surrounding community with regards to station structure and active members. The district is currently in the process of hiring up to five new members.

Chief Noonchester envisions the district becoming more visible in the community and participation in a variety of community events.

Chief Rostov expressed the importance of putting an investment into our firefighters and officers by providing various individual training opportunities.

The district continues to struggle with concurrent calls and longer response times due to lengthy travel times across the district. Currently, the district is seeing a twenty-two percent higher call volume compared to the same time frame in 2018. The district has made the decision to continue to provide mutual aid to Point Roberts however, the rendezvous point will now be located within the City of Blaine to help alleviate prolonged response times.

Commissioner Bosman stated that during the past eight to twelve months the Board has made a concerted effort to be unified and continue open communications with all members in the district. The Board recognizes that they are stewards of taxpayers' money and continue to try to realize the big picture. In addition, the Board wants to create a department where everyone wishes to be involved. The Board continues to meet with labor to ensure transparency and move the department forward.

PRESENTATION

Chief Noonchester reviewed the revenue highlights. Revenues include property taxes, delinquent taxes, ambulance transport fees, contract fees, grants, rents, Ground Emergency Medical Transportation (GEMT), state parks, investment interest, donations, insurance reimbursements, and mitigation fees.

- 1% increase over last year allowed
- Unanticipated revenues – Ground Emergency Medical Transportation (GEMT) / Mitigation fees
- D4 contract payment \$501,996.50 quarterly
- Transport fee increase (\$63 per transport = \$100,000 per year)
- Up approximately \$600,000 in revenues for 2020
- County EMS Program expected to pay backfill positions for two paramedics attending school

Other revenue potential includes:

- Delinquent taxes
- Sale of surplus fire stations
- Training consortium
- SCBA grant

The property tax figures have yet to be finalized by the County. In addition, new construction has not yet been added to the revenue budget.

Vice-Chairman Ansell noted that in the past, the district has always budgeted conservatively since not all taxes are paid in the allocated year and can remain delinquent for a number of years. The Board hopes to have the budget more closely reflect the projected taxes in the future.

Administration

Chief Noonchester reviewed the administration highlights.

- Legal fees \$30,000
- Computer upgrades \$28,500
- IT support \$60,000
- Ongoing training for administrative staff
- Election costs \$16,000 (approximately \$25,000 in 2019)

Healthcare

The Healthcare committee consisting of both admin and line staff, met on multiple occasions to review and compare health care programs and make an informed recommendation for 2020 that best fits the needs of the district. The committee made the recommendation to switch to Law Enforcement Officers and Firefighters (LOEFF) Trust Plan versus the current Coastal Administrative Services (CAS) self-funded plan. The plan is expected to be easier to manage and budget in the future. Early firefighter retirees, administration and fire commissioners can also participate in this plan.

Operations

Chief Van der Veen provided information regarding operations.

- Salary and Benefit Increases / Healthcare (Collective Bargaining Agreement in process)
 - Will help with retention
- Overtime increase \$400,000
 - Minimum staffing of three at each station
 - Five current firefighter openings
- 3rd party billing service costs \$50,000
 - Includes GEMT admin fees
- Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) \$15,000
 - Request to utilize some GEMT monies to help fund 2nd set of gear for all firefighters to deter cancer risk
- Ambulances purchases
 - One ordered
 - 2 or more to be purchased in near future
- Tender and engine replacement
- Tools and equipment
 - Continually update
 - Self-Contained Breathing Apparatus (SCBA)

Contract Negotiations

Vice-Chairman Ansell reviewed the contract negotiations process and highlights. There was overall good communication and professionalism between all members of the bargaining team. A goal of the team was to deliver a competitive wage in an order to retain members and also transparency with regards to the budget. Other incentives included education and longevity pay. A tentative agreement was reached in five sessions. The Local will be voting on the contract on Tuesday, November 11, 2019, before being presented to the Board for approval. Once approved, the contract will go into effect on January 1, 2020.

Chairman Bosman further noted that the fire chief did not take part in the process in an order to remain focused on the daily operations of the district. Lead negotiator Kevin Taylor and Vice-Chairman Bruce Ansell did an excellent job of representing the district.

Vice-Chairman Ansell stated that a comprehensive salary review may be completed on the administration and chief officer (non-represented) positions in the near future.

Vice-Chairman Ansell noted that his goal is to have every person who has left the district, want to return.

Prevention

Chief Rostov reviewed the prevention division highlights.

- Mapping software (over 10 years old) \$13,500
- Investigative tools and equipment \$750
- Overtime for callbacks \$10,000

- New revenue sources
 - Construction permits
 - Inspections
 - Operations
 - False alarms (City of Blaine)
 - Mitigation
 - Fines

Chief Rostov provided an overview of the five areas of a community risk education program.

1. Construction services permits / inspections
2. Existing building safety
 - Engine company inspections district-wide annually
 - Operational permits (fees) take up to 3 years to be implemented
 - Confidence testing
3. Public Education Program
 - All ages, school, business, retirement homes, elderly community risk education
4. Investigations
 - Skilled people provide training (increase skill level of others)
 - Call back time
 - Support our neighbors
5. Operations Support
 - Help firefighters do their jobs better
 - Auto fire false alarm intervention
 - Maps consolidating multiple information from other areas (mapping software)
 - Pre-fire Information

Chief Rostov noted that although the district has the ability to do various inspections across the county, the district is not responsible to conduct inspections outside the City of Blaine. Since the county does not currently have the manpower, Chief Rostov noted that by providing those additional services, the district will be helping out our neighbors, benefitting our citizens and providing our responders with vital information.

Training

Chief Van der Veen reviewed the training budget highlights.

- Training overtime \$14,000 (slight increase)
- Instructors \$3,000
- Recruit Academy – North Bend State Fire Academy (potential 5 firefighters)
- Training Consortium discussions with NWFR, SWFA and the City of Bellingham continue.
 - Involves the campus at Britton Loop Station 12 including administration offices, building D and the training grounds as well as the district's training captain and part-time data entry assistant.
 - Potential to increase the amount of training for all departments

- Draft Inter-local agreement in the process
- May provide additional revenue

Chief Rostov suggested that to increase stability, improve morale and excitement based around training, the district might consider increasing the overtime funds and tuition for both line and administrative staff. Vice-Chairman Ansell agreed noting that due in part to limited funds, this area has been neglected in the past and the hope is to improve the training program moving forward.

Facilities

Chief Noonchester reviewed the facilities highlights.

- Will use the results of our master plan for facility reduction
- Upgrades to Station 63 and Station 69 possible
- Investigating internet service alternatives

Apparatus

Chief Noonchester reviewed the apparatus highlights.

- Maintenance for fire engines increased from \$20,000 to \$35,000
 - Equipment aging
- Master plan apparatus surplus recommendations expected

Bonds

Benita Williams provided information regarding the District 21's commissioner approved bond payment.

- December 1, 2019, will be the final payment for three engines and the ladder truck purchased in 2009.

Britton Loop Station 12 Property

Kris Parks provided information regarding District 4's voter-approved bond payment.

- Last payment for the Britton Loop campus is due in June 2020 (\$217,140)

Capital Items

Chief Noonchester reviewed the requested capital item requests for 2020.

- Pre-fire/mapping software for the prevention division \$15,000.00
- Forcible entry prop for use at Station 63 \$6000.00
- Nitrous Oxide systems (2) \$8000.00
 - Manages pain for patients during long transport time to the hospital
 - Minimal funds needed to maintain systems
- SCBA approximately \$500K – Reserve fund
- Fire engine \$600K - Apparatus fund
- 3 Ambulances \$540K – GEMT monies
- Station 63 upgrades
- Total approximately \$1.6 million

Expenditures

Chief Noonchester reviewed the expenditure summary which does not reflect any salary increases at this time.

Benita Williams provided the current fund balances. Benita noted that the expense funds need to be carried over until April 2020 when the district will receive the collected tax monies.

Vice-Chairman Ansell noted that although the district has been conservative in the past and built up reserves, the district may need to investigate raising the mill rate in the future.

With the Birch Bay area and City of Blaine looking into forming a library district, the district will need to determine whether it will impact the fire district tax. Benita Williams agreed to investigate and report back to Vice-Chairman Ansell.

Chief Noonchester further noted that a potential merger with District 4 may also impact the budget and may require the district to ask for a levy lid lift in the near future.

Vice-Chairman concluded by noting that although the district does not have enough money to support everything, the Board will make every attempt to do what they can.

Additional expenditure discussions include:

- Additional training/conference tuition
- Grant writer
- Admin salary increases
- Light duty position (prevention division)
- Maintenance, facilities, and inventory management civilian (part-time/retired) position (approximately \$75,000)
 - Will allow division chief to better focus on operations

Emergency Services Consulting International (ESCI) Master Plan

With the completion of the district master plan in sight, it is expected that ESCI will allow the district to make well-informed plans for the future. A technical review will be sent in November and the completed master plan will be presented sometime in December. It was suggested that the current draft 2020 budget may need to be amended or altered to reflect any updated decisions.

ADJOURNMENT

MOTION: There being no further business Vice-Chairman Ansell moved to adjourn the meeting at 12:41 p.m. The motion was seconded by Commissioner McPhail and approved 3-0.

Respectfully Submitted by:

Jennie Sand, Board Secretary

ATTEST:

Rich Bosman, Chairman

Bruce Ansell, Vice-Chairman

Larry McPhail, Commissioner

Jason Van der Veen, Division Chief of
Operations