

Whatcom County Fire District #21
9408 Odell Street, Blaine, WA 98230
11:00 a.m.
April 21, 2022
Regular Board of Fire Commissioners Meeting

CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Ansell called the regular Whatcom County Fire District #21 Board of Fire Commissioners meeting for April 21, 2022, to order at 11:09 a.m.

ROLL CALL

Attendees: Chairman Bruce Ansell; Vice-Chairman John Crawford, Commissioners Rich Bosman, and Kimberly McMurray; Fire Chief Jason Van der Veen; Division Chief Shaun Ward; Local 106NW Representative Scott Brown.

Commissioner Scott Fischer was excused from this meeting.

MOMENT OF SILENCE

The Board requested a moment of silence to honor NWFR Tender Support Volunteer Paul Van Dyken and WCFD7 Assistant Fire Chief Dean Crosswhite. Both recently lost their battle with cancer.

APPROVAL OF CONSENT AGENDA

1. Meeting Minutes
 - a) March 17, 2022 – regular
2. Staff Reports – Chiefs / Operations / Training / Technical Support
3. Financial Report
 - a) Total Revenue – March \$576,277.82
 - b) Total Expenditures – April \$836,521.72
4. Voucher / Payroll / Benefits
 - a) NWFR Employees Direct Deposit Payroll: \$332,239.02
 - b) Payroll Taxes Voucher: \$69,465.66
 - c) Benefits Voucher: \$273,327.35
 - d) Monthly Expenditure Voucher: \$160,853.17
 - e) Capital Projects Apparatus: \$636.52

MOTION: Vice-Chairman Crawford moved to approve the Consent Agenda as presented. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Bosman and approved 4-0.

NW FIRE COMMISSIONER MONTHLY REPORTS

Chairman Ansell and Chief Van der Veen met with District 4 Chairman Lann and Bellingham Fire Chief Hewitt on Tuesday, April 17, 2022, regarding the current and future City of Bellingham's annexation issues into District 4's area.

Chairman Ansell voiced a concern that if the districts move forward with the Regional Fire Authority (RFA) process, the district may be taking on an underfunded liability. If the City of

Bellingham continues to annex all the valuable property in District 4's area, there will not be enough tax revenue for the RFA to provide adequate service.

After the discussion with Chief Hewitt, Chairman Ansell does feel more optimistic. It is in the City of Bellingham's best interest to maintain the level of service that the district is currently providing out of Britton Loop Station 12 since the district also provides auto aid into the City of Bellingham (500 calls per year). In addition, it is not feasible for the Bellingham Fire Department to add another crew to cover those calls.

Chairman Ansell referred to a 1997 agreement between the City of Bellingham and Districts 2 (SWFA), 4, and 8 regarding the maximum annexations allowed (60%) before the City of Bellingham would be required to take over any one of those fire agencies. With upcoming annexations potentially leading to additional annexations in the near future, the 60% threshold may be reached in District 4's area. The precise timeline is unknown.

Chief Van der Veen noted that the City of Bellingham is aware of the 1997 agreement and will need to take action on this issue soon.

This agreement is legally binding and supersedes any RCWs regarding annexations and the 60% rule. In addition, the agreement contains other guiding documents which further clarify the RCWs. Some agencies and not others have adopted this document.

The District 4 Board will be sending a formal letter to the City of Bellingham outlining their position, current funding situation and reminding them about the 1997 agreement. They will also request that the provided information be kept in the forefront and that any annexation impacts on either entity be negotiated. District 4's attorney Joseph Quinn is expected to review the letter before it is delivered.

LEGAL ISSUES

The Board packet contained an Open Public Meeting Act changes in 2022 interpretation by Attorney Brian Snure. The district is in compliance with the changes.

- Commissioners can join via Zoom if not able to attend in person
- Public can attend in person
- Public access to view (Zoom) at no cost to the taxpayer (libraries provide a no-cost option to view or participate via the internet)
- Allow for public comment

IAFF LOCAL 106 MONTHLY REPORT

Local 106NW Representative Scott Brown thanked all those who assisted with the memorials for both Tender Volunteer Paul Van Dyken and WCFD7 Assistant Chief Dean Crosswhite.

Scott Brown noted that he had discussions with Chief Van der Veen regarding the 1997 agreement and District 4's predicament.

The members are pleased with the addition of the new Training Captain, Mike Finley. There has been a lot of favorable feedback.

The two probationary firefighters are in the process of completing their six-month evaluation. One has already successfully completed the assessment, and the other is scheduled for the near future.

Local 106NW sent the district a letter regarding upcoming contract negotiations. A reply is forthcoming. Chairman Ansell noted that they are searching for a local negotiator and would appreciate any suggestions.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

District 4 Update: Tim Johnson has been appointed as the interim District 4 fire commissioner. He recently met with Chief Van der Veen to review District 4's history and financial situation. A follow-up meeting is expected.

Chief Van der Veen and Bellingham Fire Chief Hewitt met a month ago to discuss the two pending annexations and one land acquisition. The two also discussed the sixty (60%) annexation rule. Chief Van der Veen provided pertinent information to the District 4 Board from the meeting. The situation puts District 4's planning on hold until more clarity regarding which agencies need to meet and make decisions.

The RFA is also on hold until a clearer direction is determined.

Both the district and the City of Bellingham assured Chairman Lann that District 4 would not be abandoned. The goal is to figure out what will be best for all of the taxpayers moving forward.

Chairman Ansell's concern remains taking on a service burden that is not the district's, as it is already struggling. His understanding following the meeting is that there may be some funding options through the City of Bellingham to keep District 4 solvent until a final solution can be determined.

A more extensive discussion is happening around Washington State involving forming larger RFAs. Chairman Ansell stated that possibly in the future, the Bellingham Fire Department could be included in RFA discussions, which would be a significant shift for the entire fire service in Whatcom County.

Future Funding: Chief Van der Veen noted that he does not have much to report due to the recently increased activities around the district that took much of his attention.

Chairman Ansell noted that whatever funding avenue is chosen will require support from the voting population.

Chief Van der Veen will investigate how other county fire agencies deal with reduced funding, specifically in Arizona. He will pass on any pertinent information.

To continue building relationships with the community, Chairman Ansell and Chief Van der Veen recently met with Semiahmoo Resort Association's new Manager, David Franklin. Discussions included upcoming Semiahmoo, Horizon, and Birch Bay area developments, including multi-family housing. The Semiahmoo community has concerns regarding the lack of communication or input that has been requested by the developers and the City of Blaine. Some residents are also uneasy about how the district will be able to provide service, given that the levy was not approved. They are currently voicing their concerns on Nextdoor.com.

Mr. Franklin has agreed to provide the district with specific connections within the Semiahmoo area who are also part of the concerned citizens' on the Nextdoor group's site. Although these future developments will eventually be built, concerns can be revisited. It may prove a more

opportune time for the district to return to the voters for financial support to staff Semiahmoo Station 62.

In addition, Mr. Franklin was provided a lot of fire service education during the meeting, including where the administration office is located and the district's vast response area.

Facilities and Maintenance: Chief Ward provided an update on the district's maintenance and facilities.

Assistance to Firefighters (AFG) Grant: Chief Ward announced that the district continues to move through the grant funding process. The grant will allow the district to purchase \$148,000 worth of new communication equipment for apparatus and personnel if awarded.

Semiahmoo Station 62: Chief Ward continues to move forward, collecting bids to replace/repair the station siding, stairs, gutters, and water rot, both in and outside the building.

It is expected that the leaking water heaters installed in the station in 2003 will be replaced in the near future.

Since the goal is to staff the station with a career crew 24/7, the station will eventually require significant upgrades and furnishings. There was discussion regarding utilizing mitigation funds for some of the upgrades involving growth. Chief Van der Veen will discuss the possibility with the district's attorney and report his findings to the Board.

The previously approved lighting project is moving into phase two on the front of the Semiahmoo Station 62 and other stations to alleviate some safety issues. Vice-Chairman Crawford inquired about adding security fencing to safeguard the area and personnel vehicles. The district will investigate. Chief Van der Veen noted that with the strict retention requirements of adding security cameras, that option is too costly for the district.

The district continues to struggle to receive bids from very busy contractors on various projects.

Sale of Wisner Lake Station 70: Chief Van der Veen had previously emailed each Board member individually regarding an offer of \$725,000 for the purchase of the station. The only contingency is the septic inspection. All members replied to the Chief separately with a positive response. Commissioner McMurray provided a comment regarding the septic inspection. No other Board members had any additional concerns.

Based on those emails, Chief Van der Veen has signed the offer, and the closing date is scheduled for May 1, 2022. The septic inspection is scheduled for April 27, 2022.

Since the title to the building is under Whatcom County Fire Protection District 3, additional documents were provided outlining the legal path to District 21 and Chief Van der Veen's signing authority.

MOTION: Commissioner Bosman moved to approve the \$725,000 offer and septic contingency for the sale of Wisner Lake Station 70. The motion was seconded by Vice-Chairman Crawford and approved 4-0.

NEW BUSINESS

Division Chief of Support Services Job Description: Chairman Ansell had previously reviewed and offered suggestions to the draft job description. He is pleased with the new format.

MOTION: Commissioner McMurray moved to approve the Division Chief of Support Services Job Description as presented. The motion was seconded by Vice-Chairman Crawford and approved 4-0.

Proposed New Tender(s) Addition: Chief Van der Veen noted that in 2021, the district reached out to Crimson to obtain the costs for a basic tender replacement. In previous meetings, it was agreed to utilize monies from the sale of Wisner Lake Station 70 to purchase two new tenders. It was noted that many of the tenders are over thirty years old and require an overwhelming amount of maintenance. The tender support volunteers also had a voice in the discussion.

In addition, Chief Van der Veen has reviewed the expense and reserve accounts, noting that there are also funds available to purchase an engine without going into debt or asking the public for funds. When the district receives the new engine, it is expected that the newest engine will be three years old. The current timeline for an engine's arrival once ordered is two years.

Chief Van der Veen requested that \$1.75 million be earmarked to purchase two tenders, an engine, and some additional equipment needed for the new engine. For transparency, Chief Van der Veen requested that those funds be transferred into the capital apparatus fund to pay for the equipment. Payment will not be made until the district receives the vehicles.

Chief Van der Veen pointed out that the district has not yet received the expected tax monies in April and are not reflected in the accounts.

The Board all agreed that it is prudent to make those vehicle purchases at this time and gave their consent.

It was noted that the district will still need to request monies from the voters for bonds and levies in the future.

Operations Chief: There was a discussion regarding Chief Van der Veen's need for more assistance on the operations side of the district. He noted that he loves his job and the people he works for, although he feels overwhelmed at times and would benefit from some additional support.

Chief Van der Veen further conceptualized that the district truly needs battalion chiefs to assist with the district's daily operations, allowing him and possibly a deputy chief to focus on the administrative responsibilities.

He requested to meet with Chairman Ansell to discuss finances regarding alternative command structures, taking into account the best use of the public's money. In addition, Chief Van der Veen would like to dive deeper into what additional help is needed and assess other fire, district models.

Chairman Ansell stated that acknowledging that additional support is needed is in no way a deficiency. He is aware of how many issues continually arise that hamper day-to-day progress. Chairman Ansell is pleased with Chief Van der Veen's role in the district and hopes to keep him around for a long time.

Further discussion is expected.

NWFR/D4 Joint Meeting/Workshop Tentative Dates: Chairman Ansell requested a joint workshop/meeting between the district and District 4 to discuss annexations, proposed annexations, and operational issues.

The meeting will be held on a Saturday morning in May or early June. Once a date has been selected, other pertinent participants will be invited, including Bellingham Fire Chief Hewitt, a Labor representative, and administration staff.

It is expected that background information will be sent out prior to the meeting.

Commissioner Bosman was excused from the meeting at 12:10 p.m.

CORRESPONDENCE

- Oleksandry Tretyak, Mayor of Rivne re: Ambulance request
- Baja Bridges re: Thank you for the equipment
- Whatcom County Auditor re: Submitting a ballot in 2022
- Whatcom County Health Department re: New response systems division announcement
- Snure Law Office re: Open Public Meetings Act Changes 2022
- Northern Light article re: Upcoming housing projects
- IAFF Local 106NW re: Intent to negotiate the labor contract
- The Responder: District newsletter, April issue

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- **May Board Meeting Attendance Query:** Chairman Ansell requested to reschedule the upcoming meeting from Thursday, May 19, to Friday, May 20. All Commissioners in attendance are expected to attend the May 20 meeting in person at Odell Station 61.
- Chief Van der Veen and the Board wished Commissioner McMurray a Happy Birthday.

AGENDA ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING

- Joint Workshop Topics
- District 4 Annexation Update
- Facilities and Maintenance
- Operations Chief
- Fire District Organizational Chart Alternative
- Wisner Lake Station 70 Update

SIGNING OF DOCUMENTS

ADJOURNMENT

MOTION: There being no further business, Vice-Chairman Crawford moved to adjourn the meeting at 12:18 p.m. The motion was seconded by Commissioner McMurray and approved 4-0.

Respectfully Submitted by:

Jennie Sand, Board Secretary

ATTEST:

Bruce Ansell, Chairman

John Crawford, Vice-Chairman

Rich Bosman, Commissioner

Scott Fischer, Commissioner

Kimberly McMurray, Commissioner

Jason Van der Veen, Fire Chief