



NORTH WHATCOM REGIONAL FIRE AUTHORITY COMMITTEE

SPECIAL MEETING #7

via Zoom Meeting

10:00 a.m.

February 4, 2021

CALL TO ORDER

Vice-Chairman Scott Fischer called the Regional Fire Authority (RFA) Committee Meeting for February 4, 2021, to order at 10:02 a.m. via Zoom Meeting.

ATTENDEES

Committee Members

Vice-Chairman Scott Fisher (D21), Commissioner Dave Hanson (D4), Commissioner Bruce Ansell (D21), Commissioner Harry Andrews (D4), Commissioner Rich Bosman (alternate D21), Commissioner John Crawford (21).

Guests

Fire Chief Jason Van der Veen, Division Chief Shaun Ward, Consultants Karen Reed and Heather Logan, Board Secretary Jennie Sand (21), Local 106 NW Kenneth Cunningham and District Administrator/Board Secretary Kris Parks (D4).

1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Consultant Karen Reed welcomed the group and reviewed the agenda.

2. REVIEW AND APPROVAL OF AGENDA

All committee members have reviewed the agenda.

MOTION: Commissioner Crawford moved to approve the February 4, 2021 agenda. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Andrews and approved 5-0.

3. APPROVAL OF MEETING MINUTES

MOTION: Commissioner Crawford moved to approve the January 14, 2021 minutes. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Andrews and approved 5-0.

4. UPDATES

Board: With Chairman Chamberlain's resignation as a District 4 Commissioner, the District 4 Board posted the open position. With only one applicant, the District 4 Board made the decision to extend the deadline to February 21, 2021.

Website: Neither District has had any further inquiries regarding the RFA.

As mentioned in the last meeting, Kris Parks did have a positive phone conversation with a District 4 community member and provided general RFA information.

Consultant Karen Reed reiterated that it is crucial regardless of who is providing the information, the message remains the same.

Other: Consultant Karen Reed reviewed the schedule stressing that much of the hard work remains ahead of the committee including financing, levy rate, public outreach, plan approval (early May), and the election (Aug. 21).

5. ELECTION OF CHAIRPERSON

With everyone on the same page, it was agreed that it was not critical to have representation from both Boards in a leadership position. Vice-Chairman Fischer stated that he is content to remain as the vice-chair.

Consultant Karen Reed noted that the Charter does not require a representative from both Boards to be in the leadership positions.

MOTION: Commissioner Crawford moved to approve Commissioner Ansell as Chair. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Andrews and approved 5-0.

Crawford left the meeting at 10:15 a.m. returned at 10:19 a.m.

6. RFA PLAN PARTS 1-5: Consultant Karen Reed reviewed the technical edits to the RFA Plan requested from the last meeting.

- Corrected name (North Whatcom Regional Fire Authority)
- Clarified Governance (Interim Governing Board)
- Input date (2011) regarding how long the NWFR has been providing District 4 with fire and emergency services.

Kenneth Cunningham joined the meeting at 10:25 a.m.

7. STATUS REPORT AND DISCUSSION: BASELINE AND BASELINE PLUS SCENARIOS

Consultant Karen Reed noted that the idea is to complete a seven-year financial plan so everyone has reasonable expectations (roadmap) regarding where the RFA is starting, supporting the current level service as the RFA continues to grow, and when there will be a need to request more funding for capital projects or staffing.

Consultant Karen Reed noted that it is not unheard of to go back to the voters to request additional monies before the seven-year mark. Inflation will always outstrip

the growth in property tax since the Districts are capped at a yearly one percent increase.

The idea is to figure out the minimum amount of staffing and equipment needed to maintain response times over seven years and to maintain personnel safety as the RFA grows.

Chief Van der Veen stated that the subcommittee continues to provide Financial Analyst Bill Cushman with financial information. It is expected that Bill Cushman will provide some initial numbers on Friday, February 5, 2021. It is anticipated that he will request additional information.

Recently, Chief Van der Veen began in-depth research into district history and past documentation including financial, capital facilities, and strategic planning. NWFR has provided the same level of service with the same levy rate that has been steadily going down, as assessed valuations increase. Doing so has required staff to give up raises and defer replacing a lot of equipment we know has exceeded its useful life. We are pretty much at the end of our ability to continue to maintain service levels within current declining funding.

Chief Van der Veen reviewed the 2016 Capital Facilities Plan (CFP) documentation regarding future plans that were identified and for whatever reason have not been achieved. These plans included capital facilities/apparatus needs and facility/apparatus financial planning. Levies that had been planned for specific years were never undertaken. The CFP mirrors the report completed by Emergency Services Consulting International (ESCI) completed in 2020.

Chief Van der Veen inquired as to what services the RFA wants to provide to our customers over the next seven years and at what levy rate. All Board members from both Districts will need to work together to decide the best course of action for both internal and external customers.

Chief Van der Veen reiterated his belief that an RFA is the correct course of action.

Karen Reed noted the last paragraph in the ESCI report under Section 6, Current and Projected Level of Service.

“ Any significant development within the District, whether residential, commercial, industrial, or institutional uses, has the potential to move the District into a deficiency mode of operation unless appropriate capital facility improvements (and adequate staffing) are provided. This plan identifies new and improved capital facilities required to serve existing development and projected growth. Therefore, with planned improvements, it is anticipated that both NWFR and Fire District 4 will meet the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan Level of Service standards for fire protection over the 20-year planning horizon. ”

Commissioner Crawford suggested asking the County what other taxing districts may request in additional funds in the future, so as not to overburden our taxpayers.

Karen Reed polled the group regarding next steps:

Chairman Ansell noted that the financial information is unsettling and how the Plan will be marketed to the public will be crucial. The information will need to be shared with the public honestly. He suggested letting the public know that \$1.50 is the max levy the RFA could ask for, but we anticipate asking for less than that. In addition, the public will need to be aware that the RFA will likely have additional funding needs in the future. He further suggested that all Board members from both Districts participate in a special work session to review the financial situation and what is needed to support stable service levels going forward. Commissioner Hanson concurred.

Commissioner Andrews noted that how the information is disseminated to the public will be vital in getting the RFA passed. He stated that if the levy amount is released to the public prematurely, it will be harder to pass. Chairman Ansell agreed.

Vice-Chairman Fischer noted the correct amount will be determined by first solving the station, equipment, and personnel needs.

Commissioner Crawford is not opposed to a special meeting provided it results in a plan that can be presented to the community in a transparent manner, providing real numbers.

Commissioner Bosman agreed that a special meeting to discuss finances is a good place to begin. All board members, as elected officials, will need to take ownership and be able to present the Plan to the public with confidence.

The group agreed to have a special work session meeting to include both Boards the week of February 22 to have more in-depth discussions regarding:

- Create RFA with enough money to operate initially
- Identify baseline staffing and funding needs to citizens (capital/operations)
- Identify the phases or layers anticipated responsibly and with transparency
- How best to educate and prepare the citizens

Karen Reed noted that Financial Analyst Bill Cushman will be utilized to assist with determining the various financial scenarios available to support operations and capital going forward, based on the Commissioners' direction.

Chairman Ansell noted it may be more beneficial to conduct the meeting in person (Board members), following all COVID-19 Open Public Meeting protocol. Support staff could attend the meeting remotely. Chief Van der Veen will investigate.

RECESS

The group took a five-minute break at 11:00 am.

8. PREPARING FOR COMMUNITY OPEN HOUSE

Consultant Karen Reed reminded the Committee that if a group desires to create an RFA, there is a requirement by law to provide some public outreach and engagement throughout the process.

Karen Reed introduced Public Communications Consultant Heather Logan who has worked alongside Karen on another RFA project.

Karen Reed reviewed the cover letter that outlines the plan basics, the advertisement that will be posted in local media, newsletters, and social media, to connect with the most community members as possible. Chief Van der Veen will review the PowerPoint that will be presented at the public meetings.

Cover Letter: Karen reviewed the dates and agenda for the virtual public meetings via Zoom. The intent of the initial outreach is to inform the public that the Districts are in the early stages of RFA discussions. Information will be provided regarding why the Districts are having the conversation and what recommendations the RFA Planning Committee have thus far.

Karen Reed reviewed the proposed key messages for this initial round of public outreach:

- After years of thrifty management, the time is now to complete the integration of District 21 and District 4.
- Creating an RFA will ultimately enable voters to remove a level of government while maintaining the new commission's authority.
- The time is now because we must preserve fire and basic life support services and maintain response times and service levels that our community deserves in the face of continued population growth.
- Property taxes have not been raised in NWFR in 11 years (2009); in District 4, they have not been raised in 27 years (1994).
- We are beginning the inquiry into what the financial plan looks like.
- We are proposing that initially, all Commissioners from both Districts will serve on the RFA Board, each with one vote, for an initial board of eight. The initial board will transition to a new board of five commissioners elected at large (all voters can vote on all five positions) would be on the ballot. The election for these new five seats would be in November 2023; the terms of office would start in January 2024.
- We will conduct another round of public outreach later this spring to provide additional information to you, particularly about the proposed finances for the RFA.

Chairman Ansell suggested clarifying that NWFR approved a commissioner bond in 2010 which did not affect the levy rates. Taxes have not been raised by NWFR since 2009.

Virtual Meeting Information

- Thursday, February 18 at 3:00 p.m.
- Tuesday, February 23 at 7:00 p.m.
- An hour in length dependent upon the question and answer section.
- Chief Van der Veen will be the spokesperson
- It was suggested that all Board members attend

Commissioner Andrews suggested utilizing the local radio station (KGMI). Vice-Chairman Fischer suggested utilizing the Bellingham Public access channel. Consultant Heather Logan will investigate.

Karen Reed provided text for the proposed flyer for review.

PowerPoint: Chief Van der Veen reviewed the draft PowerPoint that will be presented during both scheduled open public meetings. The Committee was encouraged to provide feedback.

The PowerPoint will include:

- Board member introductions
- History of both Districts
- RFA definition
- Response area (map)
- Potential Benefits
- RFA formation
- RFA Governance
- Current property tax levy information
- Current and future needs
- What will happen to existing fire districts?
- Project timeline
- Question and comment section
- Additional information

The group provided feedback, including the following comments and suggestions:

Be open that it has been difficult to maintain service levels with no revenue adjustments

It was suggested to add a slide outlining the distinctions between the EMS levy and fire levy

Chairman Ansell suggested clarifying the services the Districts provide.

Chief Ward suggested clarifying the difference between the County and District 4's EMS levy.

There was discussion regarding discussing possible future levy increases. Consultant Heather Logan recommended not mentioning the highest allowed levy rate at this time since the levy is not yet known and may cause alarm. Instead focus on conveying that the Planning Committee will be transparent and keep the public up to date with rates as more detailed information is collected.

Vice-Chairman Fischer agreed with the recommendation made by Heather Logan.

Commissioner Andrews believes that mentioning the highest possible levy rate may alarm the public needlessly. Commissioner Hanson concurred. He further suggested that talking points should be developed for the commissioners for consistency.

Commissioner Crawford wants to ensure that the message is clear and concise.

Commissioner Bosman noted that the levy figures may become a hot topic and suggested switching slides 9 and 10 and talk more about the benefits and only briefly touch on the levy. Any funding questions can up be deferred to the next meeting when more will be known.

Chairman Ansell suggested supplying our internal customers with talking points since they have more frequent interactions with external customers. It was noted the importance of sending the same message. Chief Van der Veen will send out a memo to the members prior to the meetings.

Karen Reed suggested having some type of business card with minimal information, that can be distributed as questions arise in the community. The information will direct the public where to go to receive more information. Chief Van der Veen believes the cards will be beneficial to hand out on calls when inquiries are made.

Kenneth Cunningham noted that Local 106NW will be involved in the campaign process. He intends to attend both informational meetings to support Chief Van der Veen. The Districts can only provide fair and balanced information consistent with the past communications (*can educated but cannot advocate*). The labor group can advocate for votes—but not using any public resources or facilities.

The Planning Committee members agreed to proceed with the implementation of the Outreach Plan.

Karen Reed and Heather Logan will circulate a revised PowerPoint, staff memo, and commissioner talking points.

A committee meeting will be scheduled surrounding financial planning.

9. NEXT AGENDA(S)

- Meeting #8: Friday, February 19th @ 10:00 a.m.

- Financial plan assumptions
- Final preparations for Open House
- Facility and Asset transfers

10. CLOSING COMMENTS

Consultant Karen Reed thanked everyone for their participation.

Commissioner Hanson noted that he appreciates all the time and hard work of everyone involved.

Chief Van der Veen thanked everyone for their participation and is looking forward to more in-depth discussions on financing and strategic planning.

11. ADJOURN

MOTION: There being no further business Commissioner Andrews moved to adjourn the meeting at 11:55 a.m. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Ansell and approved 5-0.

Respectfully Submitted by:



Jennie Sand, Recording Secretary

ATTEST:



Bruce Ansell, Chairman