



## NORTH WHATCOM REGIONAL FIRE AUTHORITY COMMITTEE

### SPECIAL MEETING

via Zoom Meeting  
12:00 p.m.  
September 24, 2020

#### CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Mark Chamberlain called the Regional Fire Authority (RFA) Committee Meeting for September 24, 2020, to order at 12:00 p.m. via Zoom Meeting.

#### ATTENDEES

##### Committee Members

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

##### Guests

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

#### 1. INTRODUCTIONS

Consultant Karen Reed provided information about her history and involvement with various RFA processes. Her goal is to focus on the process so it will be successfully accepted by the voters.

Since the first meeting Consultant Karen Reed has completed interviews with each commissioner, Chief Van der Veen and Kris Parks.

#### 2. APPROVAL OF MEETING MINTUES

**MOTION:** Commissioner Andrews moved to approve the August 26, 2020 minutes. The motion was seconded by Vice-Chairman Fischer and approved 6-0.

#### 3. RFA OVERVIEW

Consultant Karen Reed reviewed a short briefing outlining the powers of an RFA and how an RFA is formed.

Consultant Karen Reed noted that once an RFA has been formed, it is simpler for an outside agency to join the existing RFA.

**Planning Committee Mission:** The Committee adopted the “Mission of the Planning Committee” document during the Thursday, August 26, 2020 meeting.

**Creating a Regional Fire Authority (RFA) vs Merging:** The group reviewed the similarities and differences between an RFA and a merger. It was noted that an RFA gives more flexibility in the timing of the initial year of tax collection, and in governance structure options than a fire district merger.

There was discussion regarding the how the District 4 EMS levy and the County EMS levy are processed. Kris Parks will write up a summary of how it works for the next meeting. There was discussion regarding discontinuing the District 4 levy once the RFA goes into effect.

An RFA requires that all staff from each entity must transition to the RFA, while a merger does not guarantee that staff will be retained. Commissioner Ansell questioned how an RFA can be efficient if all staff are retained. Consultant Karen Reed noted that efficiencies can be found in other areas including evaluating stations and equipment.

**NWFR and WCFD4 Comparison:** Chief Van der Veen presented a side by side comparison of the districts including date established, current population, projected population, area in square miles, population density, annual calls for service in each district for 2019, major land uses, other points of interest, assessed values for 2020, tax levy rates, current government structures and other pertinent information.

Information from the County regarding the median assessed value of a home for property tax purposes in 2020 is expected to be reported in the near future.

Chief Van der Veen will investigate when NWFR last asked the citizens for a levy lid lift. Other than the current EMS levy, District 4 was unsure when the last time they had requested a levy lid lift.

**Issues List:** Consultant Karen Reed presented an RFA issues list that will need to be addressed in future meetings. Issues include over-arching issues, operations, financing, governance and labor.

There was discussion regarding investigating whether a financial consultant should be utilized. Both Consultant Karen Reed and Chief Van der Veen noted that Bill Cushman was highly recommended to assist with the RFA financial analysis. Chief Van der Veen will investigate his fee and availability and report back to the group.

**Draft Project Schedule:** The group reviewed the projected timeline and schedule.

- September 2020 – April 2021: Develop RFA plan
- May 2021: RFA Plan adopted by NWFR and WCFD4 and ballot measure submitted to Whatcom County Elections
- August 2021: Primary Election
- October 1, 2021: Effective date of RFA

- January 1, 2022: RFA taxes imposed from this date forward

#### **4. COMMISSIONER THEMES**

Consultant Karen Reed presented her findings from the recent Commissioner interviews from both NWFR and District 4.

- Reasons for pursuing an RFA include supporting continued fire service to District 4 as Bellingham continues to annex, improve efficiency in operations and governance and provide better service, move away from current contract which is causing conflict between the two agencies and to create a platform for additional agencies to join in the future.
- Concerns include interpersonal conflicts between commissioners impacting the RFA discussions, the levy rate and whether voters will support any increase.
- There was no consensus as to how success will be defined.
- Barriers to success include interpersonal conflicts between the commissioners and the ability to reach an agreement on the RFA organization. Commissioner Hanson noted that since his interview with Consultant Karen Reed, he no longer has issues or concerns with the organizational chart and has every confidence in Chief Van der Veen to establish the chart to best fit the needs of the RFA.
- There was strong consensus regarding the current positive public perception of the level of fire services delivered.
- Most agreed they preferred an RFA board with fewer than the current eight commissioner total. There was no consensus as to whether the RFA board should include districted or at-large positions or a combination of the two.
- Concern was expressed regarding the differing levy amounts between the districts.
- There was a notable lack of consensus about whether additional funding is needed to address staffing, facility or apparatus needs of the two districts.

#### **5. SAMPLE RFA PRESENTATION/DISCUSSION**

Consultant Karen Reed reviewed a sample RFA plan from South Snohomish County; this provided an example of what the Planning Committee is tasked to develop. It was noted that once an RFA is established, many aspects of the plan can be revised without going back to the voters. The levy could be raised or lowered depending on the needs of the RFA. Other potential monies could be collected through various bonds, either voter or commissioner approved, within statutory limits. If the initial levy rate for the RFA is set below the maximum, legal counsel advise that the difference between the starting levy rate and the maximum is considered “banked levy capacity” that can be accessed by action of the RFA Board.

Chief Van der Veen expressed concern that if the levy rate was raised without tax payer’s approval, it would affect the chance of approving a benefit charge, if needed, in the future. Chief Van der Veen will share additional information from the district’s attorney as it becomes available.

Commissioner Ansell suggested developing a long term financial plan which would include the day to day financial needs of the RFA. The current master plan can also be accessed to identify any known deficiencies.

The required sections of an RFA plan include the following:

- Section 1: Background and Needs Statements
- Section 2: Definitions
- Section 3: Formation Authority - The planning committee will draft a regional fire protection service plan
- Section 4: Jurisdictional Boundaries
- Section 5: Governance - Elected official numbers vary for each RFA.
- Section 6: Funding and Finance - May include a fire levy, emergency medical services levy or a fire benefit charge. A fire benefit charge requires an additional 10% voter approval.
- Section 7: Organizational Structure
- Section 8: Operations and Services
- Appendixes will include jurisdictional maps, organization structure, real property and person property.

Consultant Karen Reed noted that the committee can input information into the draft template with what is known and then focus discussions on what remains.

Commissioner Ansell questioned whether the group would benefit from forming sub-committees. Consultant Karen Reed stated that in her experience, sub-committees are not generally times savers and it is best to keep everyone involved in all aspects of the plan.

## **6. COMMITTEE RULES AND PROCESS**

**Ground Rules:** The group reviewed the proposed ground rules.

### **How we will work together:**

- Respect the right to be heard - only one person talk at a time.
- Stay on topic. We are here to develop an RFA plan.
- Stay on task consistent with the Committee's role.
- Monitor your airtime. Be concise so we can hear from everyone.
- Be constructive and solutions oriented. Do not re-litigate the past.
- Be respectful of differing points of view.
- We will operate by consensus wherever possible. We will take votes if necessary.
- Focus on interests, not positions; treat people as individuals.
- Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good.
- Keep a sense of humor.
- New ground rules can be added by the Committee at any time.

### **The Process:**

- Meetings will start on time.

- Meetings will end on time, unless there is agreement to extend for a specific amount of time.
- The facilitator will keep track of requests for information from Members; we will confirm together staff's capacity to respond, and whether the answers are of general interest to the Committee or simply need individual follow up.
- At each meeting we will discuss plans for the next agenda. A final agenda will be circulated by email in advance of the meeting. Meeting materials will also be circulated in advance if reasonably possible.
- If you can't attend a meeting, please let the facilitator know as soon as possible.
- A summary of each meeting will be prepared by staff and the facilitator and submitted for approval by the Committee at the next meeting.
- The facilitator will keep us on schedule during meetings.

**MOTION:** Commissioner Ansell moved to accept the committee ground rules and process as written. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Andrews and approved 6-0.

**Review of Draft Charter and Operating Rules:** Consultant Karen Reed presented a draft charter and operating rules for discussion. The committee will review the document and any changes will be made, if needed, before it is adopted during the upcoming meetings.

The document includes the RFA mission, membership, process, public input, public education, Chair and Vice-Chair, resignation and appointment of replacement members, agendas, decision making, staff support for planning committee(s), funding and approval, and amendment of the charter.

There was discussion regarding the importance of remaining transparent throughout the entire process. The public will be notified of upcoming RFA meetings, given online access to all agendas, meeting notes and other materials and allowed to submit comments. The districts' websites will also include an RFA overview and frequently asked questions section in the near future. It is expected that there will be additional avenues to promote public awareness. More discussion is expected regarding public communication during the next meeting.

At this time the committee does not have an official position on the RFA, so any committee members offering comment to others should take care to distinguish their personal views from the views of the Committee.

Consultant Karen Reed along with Chief Van der Veen will work with the Chair and Vice-Chair to set the agenda for each meeting.

Consultant Karen Reed noted that most agencies forming RFAs she has worked with, split all legal costs equally. The charter proposes that both district's attorneys will be utilized, although NWFR's attorney will take the lead.

## **7. REVIEW OF PROJECT GOALS, MAJOR ISSUES, WORK PLAN OPTIONS**

**Project Goals:** Consultant Karen Reed presented a list of potential RFA project goals for discussion.

Commissioner Ansell questioned that since both agencies, for the most part, are working as one agency, how will the RFA improve the efficiency of operations when the district is currently lacking in admin staff? There was discussion regarding additional language that both Consultant Karen Reed and Chief Van der Veen will address before the next meeting. Suggestions included *“to improve the effectiveness of operations, or to strengthen the unification of both districts.”*

**Major Issues:** Consultant Karen Reed pointed out perceived major issues including the organizational chart/staffing, setting the initial fire levy and governance. Following Commissioner Hanson’s comments about the organizational chart, it is expected to be less of an issue as first believed.

Commissioner Hanson stated that he is comfortable asking District 4 community members for an increase in their levy rates and expressed his desire to actively participate in educating the community.

Commissioner Andrews stated that he does not believe they would get the District 4 community to approve a levy lid lift of \$1.50 at this time. It may be better to go for a lower amount and pass a bond if the need arises.

Chairman Chamberlain noted that setting the initial fire levy rate and selling it to the community is going to take a lot of work and public education. Chairman Chamberlain suggested working with a financial analyst to gain much needed information before a fire levy rate is set.

**Work Plan:** Consultant Karen Reed noted that there are areas that can be worked on incrementally and simultaneously throughout the plan. In her opinion, it would be a mistake to hold on to one major issue until the end of the project, since it has the potential to be fatal to the plan.

Since the districts are functionally merged, many aspects of the RFA Plan development could be addressed fairly quickly including boundaries, labor costs, services to be provided and service levels/standards of cover.

Additional work is expected on the organizational chart, levy rate and governance.

Consultant Karen Reed noted that all district employees will become part of the RFA. There may still remain some questions regarding how some positions will function within the RFA and various options may be presented. It is expected that the organizational chart will be addressed sooner rather than later.

Consultant Karen Reed will draft up a work plan, based on the assumption that the group will meet twice per month and to sequence the discussions in a way that will be productive and not overwhelming.

Chair Chamberlain noted that each meeting will include a public comment section to ensure input from Labor.

**Discussion Questions:** The committee reviewed the discussion questions.

Commissioner Ansell suggested that a financial analysis of the districts will need to be completed as soon as possible to not hinder the process. Chief Van der Veen reiterated that he and Consultant Karen Reed have contacted financial analyst Bill Cushman. His fee is \$175.00 per hour. The master plan has already documented some of the pertinent information that he could utilize, thus potentially lowering his fees. Other information that will need to be gathered includes an apparatus replacement plan and how to maintain service levels in the future.

The group discussed how the various RFA planning costs will be disseminated.

**MOTION:** Commissioner Crawford moved to have both boards split any costs associated with the regional fire authority 50-50. The motion was seconded by Vice-Chair Fischer and approved 6-0.

**MOTION:** Commissioner Crawford directed the Fire Chief to seek financial (analysis) assistance for the regional fire authority. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Andrews and approved 6-0.

## **8. COMMITTEE MEETING DATE**

There was discussion regarding when the Committee will meet. Chief Van der Veen will send out a poll to determine the best times and dates to meet consistently. Meetings will be scheduled every two weeks most likely from 3:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.

## **9. AGENDA ITEMS FOR NEXT MEETING**

- Work Plan

## **10. CLOSING COMMENTS**

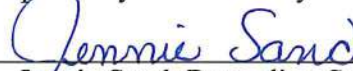
- Chair Chamberlain noted that there were good discussions that will assist the group in moving forward.
- Commissioner Crawford stated that he is happy to move forward.
- Vice-Chair Fischer noted that there were good discussions and he is also happy to move forward.
- Commissioner Hanson noted that has a better understanding of the process and looks forward to the future and getting the information out to the public.
- Commissioner Ansell noted that some significant questions were answered. He appreciates the background work everyone is doing, feels good about the process and stated that this has been a longtime coming.

- Commissioner Andrews noted that he is ready to move forward with the process.
- Labor Representative Cunningham is excited that the process is finally gaining some traction and he is excited to be moving forward.
- Kris Parks thanked Consultant Karen Reed for forwarding all the information.
- Commissioner Bosman noted that he is encouraged by the discussion surrounding the levy rate and the decision to move forward with a financial analysis. In addition, he requested that if any NWFR committee member is unable to attend any of the meetings, to notify him as soon as possible so he can attend as the alternate.
- Chief Van der Veen stated this has been a long time coming and that this organization has tons of future potential.

## 11. ADJOURNMENT

**MOTION:** There being no further business Vice-Chair Fischer moved to adjourn the meeting at 2:00 p.m. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Ansell and approved 6-0.

Respectfully Submitted by:



Jennie Sand, Recording Secretary

**ATTEST:**



Mark Chamberlain, Chairman