

**Whatcom County Fire District #21
9408 Odell Street, Blaine, WA 98230
10:00 a.m.**

June 16, 2022

Special Board of Fire Commissioners Meeting

CALL TO ORDER, PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE, ROLL CALL

Chairman Ansell called the special Whatcom County Fire District #21 Board of Fire Commissioners meeting for June 16, 2022, to order at 10:04 a.m. at Station 61 – 9408 Odell Street, Blaine, WA 98230.

ROLL CALL

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

APPROVAL OF CONSENT AGENDA

1. Meeting Minutes
 - a) May 20, 2022 – special
2. Staff Reports – Chiefs / Operations / Training / Technical Support
3. Financial Report
 - a) Total Revenue – May \$1,890,021.39
 - b) Total Expenditures – June \$1,501,135.01
4. Voucher / Payroll / Benefits
 - a) NWFR Employees Direct Deposit Payroll: \$347,911.51
 - b) Payroll Taxes Voucher: \$75,646.98
 - c) Benefits Voucher: \$198,127.45
 - d) Monthly Expenditure Voucher: \$97,407.07
 - e) Capital Projects Apparatus: \$782,042.00

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

FIRE COMMISSIONER MONTHLY REPORTS

Chairman Ansell reiterated that concerned community member Margo Savell has offered to review the new district website layout and messaging. Chief Ward stated that the website is currently in the development phase and would welcome her review once the project is further along. Chief Van der Veen noted that Ms. Savell was part of the initial website layout review process.

Chairman Ansell noted that he met with a concerned resident from the Semiahmoo community regarding unstaffed Station 62. The resident offered his assistance with coming up with a solution.

LEGAL ISSUES

Chief Van der Veen noted that the district had spent a lot of money on developing a concurrency mitigation fee program for all new development occurring within their jurisdiction. Chief Van der Veen recently sent an inquiry to the district attorney and his partners regarding potential repercussions if the district declines to sign the "will serve" letters required for developers to receive building permits.

Chairman Ansell understood that the district could suggest that developments not be approved based on the thier inability to provide service.

Following the attorney's initial response to possible lawsuits, further information is expected from their subject matter expert.

IAFF LOCAL 106 MONTHLY REPORT

Local 106NW Representative Scott Brown noted that the district continues to respond to high call volumes. Local 106NW representatives attended the joint workshop on Saturday, June 4, 2022. The captains continue to preschedule overtime. One hundred five open shift spots in June were mostly pre-filled. Four members recently left for opportunities elsewhere.

Chairman Ansell thanked the members for their patience as the district continues to work through the upcoming hiring process. Chief Van der Veen noted that the entry-level and lateral firefighter posting will close on Friday, June 17, 2022. The hope is to have conditional offers by July 31, 2022. Four spots have been reserved for recruits to attend the North Bend Academy in August. Unfortunately, the recruits will not be ready to pull shifts until sometime in December or January. Lateral applicants will complete an accelerated hiring process.

Commissioner Fischer arrived at 10:14 a.m.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

District 4 Annexation Update: Chief Van der Veen and District 4 Chairman Lann met with the City of Bellingham Mayor Fleetwood, the finance team, and Bellingham Fire Chief Hewitt on Wednesday, June 8, 2022, to discuss Bellingham's annexations and potential annexation financial impacts and challenges for District 4.

Chief Van der Veen noted that Mayor Fleetwood was very cooperative and is invested in forming some type of partnership with District 4, although it was unclear how that may look. The Mayor authorized Chief Hewitt to work with Chief Van der Veen and the finance team to investigate and review possible options.

Chief Van der Veen noted that he presented the Mayor with a timeline to keep the project moving forward judiciously. Chief Van der Veen will keep the Board updated.

EMS Levy/BLS Funding: Chief Van der Veen stated that although fully approved by the county, it is unclear how districts will receive the reimbursement for basic life support (BLS). The total funds the district will receive is \$750,000, which includes District 4's portion of \$150,000.

Chief Van der Veen announced that a "final" 2023 County Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Levy draft had been completed. He requested that the Board add this topic to the next

meeting and approve a resolution formally endorsing the levy. Chief Van der Veen will include the BLS highlights from the document in the July board packet.

Chairman Ansell agreed that the Board's support is crucial, and as long as there is a process to receive the reimbursement funding, it is a show of good faith to support the levy.

Chief Van der Veen pointed out that the 2023 EMS levy clearly states that Whatcom County EMS will continue the BLS funding support throughout the entirety of the levy.

Chief Van der Veen recognized Chairman Ansell for attending the multiple council meeting EMS levy discussions.

NEW BUSINESS

Resolution 2022-06 District Financial and Investment Officer Alternate: Chief Van der Veen stated that in his absence and during an emergency, Chief Ward would have authorization to move funds between the cash and investment accounts for the day-to-day operations. The Board will continue to approve all vouchers before funds are transferred.

MOTION: Vice-Chairman Crawford moved to approve Resolution 2022-06 Appointing Division Chief of Special Services Shaun Ward, District Financial and Investment Officer Alternate as presented. The motion was seconded by Commissioner McMurray and approved 5-0.

Consulting Agreement: Chairman Ansell noted that with contract negotiations fast approaching, retired South Whatcom Fire Authority (SWFA) Fire Chief Dave Ralston has agreed to enter into a contractual agreement to participate in negotiations and other consulting matters.

MOTION: Commissioner McMurray moved to authorize Chief Van der Veen to sign the consulting agreement with Dave Ralston as presented. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Bosman and approved 5-0.

Recruitment and Retention: Chief Van der Veen acknowledged that recruitment and retention have become a looming topic for the district over the past sixty days. Four firefighters have left to go to other agencies in King and Snohomish County, and another has just received a conditional offer.

The current job posting for entry-level and lateral firefighters has been placed on the National Testing Network (NTN) website. Although there are one hundred eleven applicants on NTN, there are many agencies (75%) currently testing in Washington state. Many of these applicants have applied for positions at multiple agencies who offer a higher wage.

Chief Van der Veen stated that the current line employees are working numerous overtime shifts, which is beginning to take a toll. In addition, the cost of living continues to increase beyond what the district could compensate.

Chief Van der Veen spoke to each Board member separately to discuss his proposal. The proposal consists of a six percent (6%) wage increase for all members of the bargaining unit

and administrative staff, beginning July 1, 2022. The hope is that this increase will help to retain current members.

Chief Van der Veen pointed out that when compared with the proposed 2022 budgeted wages, those who have left the district, and including the filled vacancies, the six percent increase is a lesser amount.

Chief Van der Veen stressed that the district owes it to its employees to give them a fair wage. Both Chairman Ansell and Chief Van der Veen feel comfortable with the wage increase at this time, as they feel it is sustainable in the long term with the current revenue.

Commissioner Bosman stated that the increase is well deserved.

Commissioner Fischer agreed that the members need to be compensated.

Vice-Chairman Crawford doesn't want to see any other members leave.

Commissioner McMurray agreed, stating that the district needs to compensate members for their hard work and efforts.

Chairman Ansell conveyed that they had been in discussions with the labor group regarding covid and managing its impact. Although no agreement was attained, an agreement is expected to be reached during the upcoming contract negotiations. In addition, Chairman Ansell is committed to the workgroup and appreciates their role in the district.

From his perspective, resulting from discussions with citizens around the county, Chairman Ansell stated that most citizens do appreciate the district's efforts. However, they do not understand that those services have a cost. Most citizens believe that the fire district receives all the revenue from the increased property taxes when in fact, the district only receives a small portion, a fact he conveyed during a recent development meeting. He also shared issues during the meeting regarding the significant increases in concurrent calls and woefully underpaid personnel, with which he received some positive feedback. The community will need better education regarding the cost of running a fire department in the future.

Chairman Ansell stated that this is the first time he is aware that a fire department has offered a mid-contract wage increase. Chairman Ansell believes the increase both fair and reasonable and hopes it demonstrates the Board's commitment and appreciation. He does not want to see members leave and believes that eventually North Whatcom Fire and Rescue will prove to be the best place to work.

Commissioner Bosman noted that the district is at a disadvantage as it is curtailed by the budget while surrounded by other agencies who can offer a higher wage.

Chief Van der Veen noted that the district has exceptional people who have become family and would hate to see anyone else leave.

Although Chairman Ansell believes the increase can be sustained, the district will need to utilize revenues other than property tax, which are subject to change in the future.

MOTION: Commissioner McMurray moved to approve a six percent wage increase for all employees effective July 1, 2022. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Bosman and approved 5-0.

Chairman Ansell requested a roll call vote:

- Commissioner Fisher - yes
- Commissioner Bosman - yes
- Vice-Chairman Crawford - yes
- Commissioner McMurray - yes
- Chairman Ansell - yes

The vote was unanimous.

Tender Group Volunteer Stipend: Chief Van der Veen pointed out that the dedicated group of tender volunteers also deal with rising fuel costs and communication system failures. Many have purchased smartphones to download more reliable forms of communication for a quick response when needed.

Chief Van der Veen pointed out that he would like to utilize funds (\$40,000) that are explicitly earmarked for volunteers. He requested a one-time disbursement of \$500 per active member to offset the cost of fuel and upgraded phones. The cost would be approximately \$10,000. It was noted that the district's attorney had no objections to the disbursement.

Chairman Ansell agreed that volunteers are also doing a good job of providing support and he appreciates their efforts.

MOTION: Commissioner Bosman moved to approve Chief Van der Veen's request for a \$500 one-time stipend to all active volunteer support members to help compensate them for the additional fuel and incurring phone expenses. The motion was seconded by Vice-Chairman Crawford and approved 5-0.

Future Planning and Development: The deputy fire marshal's role is to review the future building plans to ensure developers follow the current fire code. Deputy Fire Marshal Nielsen provided information regarding ongoing residential and significant upcoming developments as of June 16, 2022. It was noted that many projects began before the 2008 stock market crash and are now moving forward with projected completion dates from 2023 to 2030.

Some of the larger projects include:

- Grandis Pond – 360 units
- East Maple Ridge – 452 units
- Martin Property – 350 units
- 8080 Harborview – 750 units
- Highlands Semiahmoo – 500 units
- Baywood Ponderosa – 127 units
- Whisper Lake – 145 units

If all the projects are completed, it will drastically raise the population in both Blaine and the Birch Bay urban growth area. There would be a total of 3,236 units (3.5 persons per household). Currently, the district issues "will serve" letters to the developers allowing them to receive the necessary planning permits to proceed with their projects. If these projects are completed, the district is concerned that they will no longer be able to respond at the current level of service.

There was discussion regarding at what point the district could withhold the "will serve" letters and communicate that they cannot provide and maintain the current level of service.

Deputy Fire Marshal Nielsen pointed out that the Maple Ridge development has water and sewer issues that will postpone a portion of the project. Although the City of Blaine plans to address the water and sewer issues, they are unsure how to fund the project.

Chief Ward inquired if there had been any discussion regarding infrastructure accessibility for the district to respond to these developments. Deputy Fire Marshal Nielsen noted that the East Blaine development is addressing accessibility. However, the additional traffic issues on H Street have not been addressed which could affect the district's response capabilities.

Chairman Ansell noted that the recent development meeting he attended had brought up multiple citizen concerns regarding upcoming developments regarding increased population and the lack of planning for improving roads, traffic, bridges, and services.

Chairman Ansell expressed his concern that the district currently runs forty percent (40%) of concurrent calls. With the developments in progress potentially adding 7,000-9,000 to the current population, and if traffic and bridge safety is not addressed, at what point can the district decline issuing "will serve" letters?

Chief Van der Veen pointed out that the district has had some experience with major response issues due to the recent train derailment, Birch Bay Lynden Road shut down, and inclement weather. Not only do some areas become islands, but it also becomes increasingly difficult to transport patients to the hospital and for members to get to work.

Deputy Fire Marshal Nielsen announced that the border is installing a new train x-ray machine that will be located closer to the border and should have less impact on the Bell Road train crossing, which has been prone to significant delays.

Deputy Fire Marshal Nielsen will continue to track all upcoming developments and keep the Board informed during the monthly meetings.

Chief Van der Veen will contact the district attorney regarding the impacts of the Board's possible future stance regarding "will serve" development letters before any potential options are considered. The information may take a few months to review, and given the changing economy, developments may be slower to progress.

The Board agreed that it would be both proactive and prudent to go on the record stating concerns regarding the district's ability to provide services in the future. The district cannot approve new development if the citizens do not support a levy lid lift. Chairman Ansell offered to assist Chief Van der Veen in crafting a letter that the Board will review during the

next meeting before it is sent to the County Council, County Executive, City of Blaine Council, and the City of Blaine Mayor.

CORRESPONDENCE

- Northern Light article re: Anderson Rd. structure fire
- Northern Light article re: Blaine development
- Email from Victor re: Thank you for your service
- Tender Group re: Thank you for your support
- Janet Hauge re: Northshore volunteer station closure impact
- The Responder: District newsletter, June issue

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- **July Board Meeting Attendance Query:** Due to multiple conflicts, the meeting will be rescheduled from July 21 to July 19. All Commissioners present except Commissioner Bosman expect to attend the meeting in person at Odell Station 61.
- On behalf of Local 106NW, Scott Brown thanked the Board for their positive relationship with the members. He also thanked Chief Van der Veen for his continual support.

AGENDA ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING

- Draft Development Letter
- Deputy Fire Marshal
- District 4 Annexations
- County EMS Levy Support Resolution
- Recruitment Update

EXECUTIVE SESSION

RCW 42.30.110(g) *"to evaluate the qualifications of an applicant for public employment or to review the performance of a public employee."*

at 11:17 a.m. for approximately fifteen minutes until 11:32 a.m. Chief Van der Veen remained for the executive session. Action is not expected to be taken.

MEETING RECONVENED

Chairman Ansell called the regular meeting back into open session at 11:35 p.m. Action will not be taken.

SIGNING OF DOCUMENTS

ADJOURNMENT

- MOTION:** There being no further business, Chairman Ansell moved to adjourn the meeting at 11:35 p.m. The motion was seconded by Vice-Chairman Crawford and approved 5-0.

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