

Whatcom County Fire District #21
via Zoom Meeting
1:00 pm
April 27, 2021
Special Board of Fire Commissioners Meeting

CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Ansell called the special Whatcom County Fire District #21 Board of Fire Commissioners meeting for April 27, 2021, to order at 1:00 p.m. via Zoom Meeting.

ROLL CALL

Attendees: Chairman Bruce Ansell; Vice-Chairman Rich Bosman; Commissioners John Crawford, and Scott Fischer; Fire Chief Jason Van der Veen; Division Chief Shaun Ward; Attorney Richard Davis.

Commissioner Kimberly McMurray was excused from this meeting.

Other Attendees: Financial Analyst Bill Cushman; Consultants Karen Reed, Kris Faucett, and Heather Logan; Local 106 Representative Scott Brown.

NEW BUSINESS

Levy Lid Lift

Chairman Ansell acknowledged that a response letter has been drafted and will be sent to the District 4 Board regarding the Regional Fire Authority (RFA) Planning Committee. The District 4 Board had sent a written request for the District to reconsider their intent to withdraw from the RFA Planning Committee. This letter reaffirms the Board's decision to withdraw.

Chairman Ansell notified the Board that the Library District plans to ask for a \$.13 levy lid lift in November 2021 for the Birch Bay Library. Chairman Ansell is not sure of which area(s) will vote on the levy. In addition, the Whatcom County EMS renewal levy is scheduled to be included on the August 2022 ballot. The District hopes to include their levy lid lift request on the August 2021 ballot.

Chairman Ansell recognized Financial Analyst Bill Cushman for the time and effort he has dedicated to formulating a financial plan specifically for District 21.

Chairman Ansell identified the \$1.45 levy lid lift justification agreed to by the entire Board:

- A thorough financial plan created by Bill Cushman
- No levy increases for the past ten years
- Withdrawal of participation in RFA discussions

Chairman Ansell pointed out that there are two types of levy lid lifts including a single year or a multi-year. The single-year levy would begin at \$1.45 reducing yearly to \$1.32 by the year 2027. The multi-year levy lid lift would have a pre-determined yearly increase.

Chairman Ansell does not believe it would be prudent to have a multiplier added to the levy and then ask voters to approve an additional capital bond in a few years.

Chairman Ansell pointed out that the levy lid lift does not address capital needs such as remodeling or rebuilding Stations 63 or 69, which will be addressed with a bond in the future. The plan does include an architectural design study budgeted in 2022.

The levy lid lift resolution (May 14), pro, con and explanatory statements submittal deadline is May 19, 2021. The rebuttal statements are due May 24, 2021.

Consultant Heather Logan noted that the District must have three means of communicating their pro and con committee request. The District will seek community members to be part of the pro and con committees via the website, during this meeting, personally contacting individuals, and via a press release. There is a limit of three people per committee, although others may have input. The pro and con committees will be appointed during an upcoming special meeting. A member of the labor group can also be part of the committee. Local 106NW representative Scott Brown volunteered to be part of the pro committee.

As long as the District carries out their due diligence in publicizing their con committee request, there are no additional requirements other than notifying the auditor. Attorney Richard Davis recommended that all committee members live within the district. In addition, Consultant Kris Faucett noted that the District should also be mindful of geographical diversity when appointing the committees.

Chairman Ansell and Commissioner Fischer will reach out to specific community members via email for a meeting to discuss the committees.

Chairman Ansell requested that any community members watching this meeting via Zoom who are interested in being on either committee, are urged to contact Chief Van der Veen.

Attorney Richard Davis will draft the levy lid lift explanatory statement and provide it to the auditor.

Financial Analyst Bill Cushman presented his revised District 21 only financial plan.

- The current levy rate is \$1.15.
- The proposed levy rate is \$1.45 beginning January 1, 2022, eroding to \$1.32 at the end of seven years.
- The District will not receive income from the EMS levy.
- The District has no debt.
- Removed seismic upgrades for Stations 69 and 63 (will utilize a separate bond).
- 12 lieutenants, 16 journeyman firefighters, 10 firefighters, 4 battalion chiefs
- Funds allocated for replacement apparatus and equipment, station maintenance, and plans for additional studies regarding stations.
- Fully funded retirement reserve.
- No negative balance in reserve accounts through 2027.

The current plan will not sustain hiring the four proposed additional firefighters without some further modifications. The group discussed alternative ideas including staggering the hiring over several years, delaying the hiring process, or asking for another levy lid lift prior to 2027.

Chairman Ansell noted that other options include asking for a levy lid lift every few years or considering a multi-year levy lid lift. Regardless, it will be vital to provide voters with sufficient information for them to understand the reasoning behind any future levy lid lift requests.

Bill Cushman noted that the percentages shown in the reserve funds provided in his financial plan are based on the needs of the District. A comprehensive staggered apparatus and equipment replacement schedule has been included in the plan so the District will not need to ask for additional monies for those elements. Chairman Ansell agreed that the District has a fiscally responsible working plan which will be a good selling point moving forward.

Bill Cushman reviewed the District's assessed values since 2009. The agreed projected realistic growth rate is based on four percent (4%) per year. Bill Cushman offered to enter alternative data into the plan for further discussions if requested.

After much scrutiny, Chief Van der Veen is comfortable with the proposed plan, noting that there may be additional modifications in the future. The plan demonstrates a mature style of budgeting and savings that includes long-term retirement and future planning, which is more stable for both the community and employees. Chief Van der Veen is aware that it is a big ask for the community however, after utilizing various consultants and developing a strategic plan, it is time to move forward and provide the best coverage to the community along with the much-needed infrastructure improvements.

Chairman Ansell agreed noting that there have been multiple strategic plans completed by various consultants in the past and he is excited to utilize their contents moving forward.

Commissioner Crawford requested information regarding the purchase year of a new ladder truck. It was noted that the ladder truck purchase can be delayed one or two years if needed. Commissioner Crawford concurred with Chairman Ansell regarding past plans and the need to move forward.

Vice-Chairman Bosman who has served on the Board the longest, agreed with both Chairman Ansell and Commissioner Crawford regarding moving forward. In addition, Vice-Chairman Bosman is in favor of the \$1.45 levy rate and possibly with enough history collected by 2026, to make a valid case for a multiplier. He noted that he is very impressed with the much-needed apparatus replacement plan.

Commissioner Fischer stated that he is on board to move forward.

Chairman Ansell believes that this plan is a good starting point. He hopes to be able to meet with the Board and consultants in person for a study session in the near future, following the Covid-19 restrictions, prior to the election. The study session will ensure that everyone is on the same page and providing similar information to the community.

Additional long-term planning can take place after the August election.

Chairman Ansell affirmed the Board's appreciation for Bill Cushman's efforts on this project.

Resolution 2021-03 Levy Lid Lift: Chairman Ansell stated that in all fairness to the community, his preference is to move forward with the single levy lid lift (\$1.45), which due to the intense planning and documentation, will be easy to justify and ensure that it will be successful. Once proven, a multi-year levy lid lift can be requested.

MOTION: Vice-Chairman Bosman moved to approve Resolution 2021-03 Levy Lid Lift. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Crawford and approved by a roll call vote of 4-0.

Attorney Richard Davis explained that the levy in 2021 will be collected in 2022.

Consultants Karen Reed, Heather Logan and Kris Faucett pointed out various elements that will need to be completed in the near future, and following a specific timeline:

- Final decision on financial plan and levy rate (what are the additional services?)
- Decision on when to restore the levy (5 or 6 years?)
- Develop strong message and agree on how to circulate (frontline staff possible handout to give to community members)
- Education (District can educate but not advocate)
- Schedule regular steering committee meetings (communication internal/external customers)
- Develop key talking points for a slide presentation (public meetings/Zoom)
- Need a group to tell the story to the voters (how we got here)
- Develop materials for the website (FAQs)
- Identify the District's common form of communication channels (need to be consistent)
- Identify groups (internal and community) to assist in sharing the District's information
- Newsletter articles/information
- Possible mailers to all residents (timing crucial)

The steering or communications committee will include Chairman Ansell, Vice-Chairman Bosman as his schedule allows, Chief Van der Veen, Consultants Karen Reed, Heather Logan, and Kris Faucett.

Local 106NW representative Scott Brown voiced his satisfaction that the levy lid lift is moving forward. He appreciated the financial spreadsheet presentation, specifically the apparatus replacement schedule. He is pleased to be a part of the pro committee.

An email will be sent to the labor group regarding the District's direction. A motion to support the levy lid lift is also expected during an upcoming executive meeting.

Scott Brown stated that the larger Local 106 will also be contacted and are expected to assist with political action as needed.

Chairman Ansell stated that the Board and Labor have remained in good communication and expressed his desire to continue the rapport moving forward.

Division Chief Ward agreed with moving forward with the levy lid lift process.

Next Steps:

- Chief Van der Veen will keep in close contact with Attorney Richard Davis regarding critical date deadlines and the explanatory ballot language.
- Chairman Ansell will reach out to certain community members who may be interested in participating in either the pro or con committees.
- Chief Van der Veen will send out an email to set up meetings regarding the pro and con committees.
- Schedule a Board special meeting to appoint pro and con committees and confirm the message. (week of May 10).

ADJOURNMENT

MOTION: There being no further business Vice-Chairman Bosman moved to adjourn the meeting at 2:15 p.m. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Fischer and approved 4-0.

Respectfully Submitted by:

Jennie Sand, Board Secretary

ATTEST:

Bruce Ansell, Chairman

Rich Bosman, Vice-Chairman

John Crawford, Commissioner

Scott Fischer, Commissioner

Kimberly McMurray, Commissioner

Jason Van der Veen, Fire Chief