

Whatcom County Fire District #21
9408 Odell Street, Blaine, WA 98230
11:00 a.m.
October 20, 2022
Regular Board of Fire Commissioners Meeting

CALL TO ORDER, PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE, ROLL CALL

Chairman Ansell called the regular Whatcom County Fire District #21 Board of Fire Commissioners meeting for October 20, 2022, to order at 11:02 a.m. at Station 61 – 9408 Odell Street, Blaine, WA 98230.

ROLL CALL

Attendees: Chairman Bruce Ansell (*via Zoom*); Vice-Chairman Crawford; Commissioners Scott Fischer, Kimberly McMurray, and Matthew Rigberg; Fire Chief Jason Van der Veen; Division Chief Shaun Ward.

FIRE COMMISSIONER WELCOME

Chairman Ansell welcomed newly appointed Fire Commissioner Matthew Rigberg to the Board.

Commissioner Rigberg provided the Board with some background information. He has a twenty-year background in law enforcement, fourteen of which were as a supervisor in Scottsdale, AZ. He was also a small business owner.

Commissioner Rigberg relocated to Whatcom County in July 2022 and is committed to immersing himself in the community and offering support in various aspects.

APPROVAL OF CONSENT AGENDA

1. Meeting Minutes
 - a) September 7, 2022 – work session
 - b) September 15, 2022 – regular
2. Staff Reports – Chiefs / Operations / Training / Technical Support
3. Financial Report
 - a) Total Revenue – September \$899,050.96
 - b) Total Expenditures – October \$949,985.63
4. Voucher / Payroll / Benefits
 - a) NWFR Employees Direct Deposit Payroll: \$414,189.83
 - b) Payroll Taxes Voucher: \$99,079.99
 - c) Benefits Voucher: \$301,000.23
 - d) Monthly Expenditure Voucher: \$118,035.57
 - e) Capital Projects Apparatus: \$5,212.71
 - f) Capital Projects Voucher: \$12,467.30

MOTION: Commissioner McMurray moved to approve the Consent Agenda as presented. The motion was seconded by Vice-Chairman Crawford and approved 5-0.

FIRE COMMISSIONER MONTHLY REPORTS

Chairman Ansell, Commissioner McMurray, and Chief Van der Veen attended the joint All County Fire Chiefs and Commissioner meeting on Wednesday, September 21, 2022.

Most of the discussion centered on whether both associations would support the upcoming Whatcom County EMS Levy renewal. The two associations worked together to craft a joint statement supporting the levy. Chairman Ansell thanked Chief Van der Veen for his involvement in drafting the letter.

In addition, a recent all County Mayors meeting resulted in crafting an EMS levy support statement.

Chairman Ansell noted that the district continues to move forward with contract negotiations. The next meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, October 25, 2022.

Commissioner McMurray attended two Blaine City Council meetings since the last Board meeting.

Commissioner Rigberg is expected to attend an upcoming Semiahmoo Planning meeting.

IAFF LOCAL 106 MONTHLY REPORT

Although 106NW Representative Scott Brown could not attend the meeting, Chief Van der Veen relayed that the Local is excited about the new recruits joining shifts after their graduation on November 4, 2022, and that contract negotiations continue to move forward.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

District 4 Update: Chairman Ansell reiterated that a letter had been sent on behalf of the Board to District 4 Chairman Lann regarding the contract for services interlocal agreement expiration date. The letter requested that District 4 respond by November 1, 2022.

Chief Van der Veen noted that the letter was discussed during the recent District 4 Board meeting. They are aware of the deadline to provide a plan and the gravity of the situation.

Chief Van der Veen and District 4 Commissioner Cooley recently met to work on the summary outreach message for the District 4 community. Chief Van der Veen noted that the process is moving slower than expected.

Chief Van der Veen, City of Bellingham Fire Chief Hewitt, and one District 4 commissioner will deliver the message to the community. Chief Van der Veen will convey District 21's current position with regard to District 4. The message will include that District 4's current income is insufficient to pay what it costs to staff their station under District 21's current bargaining agreement and maintenance program.

Chief Hewitt is expected to provide similar information on what the City of Bellingham can afford with regard to District 4.

Chief Van der Veen noted that there is approximately one half-million dollars difference between what District 21 and the City of Bellingham can afford.

The hope is to paint an accurate picture for the citizens in District 4, so they can choose whether they want to reduce their level of service to what they can afford or increase their levy rate. It was noted that the citizens have twice failed to approve raising the levy rate.

Chief Van der Veen stated that during his research, he reviewed Consultant Bill Cushman's figures regarding degrading levy projections. Chief Van der Veen pointed out that due to the current economy, the levy reduction in both districts will happen much sooner (by six years) than Bill Cushman's predictions.

The current chatter on social media indicates that the constituents are confused about their taxes and the difference between the Whatcom County EMS levy renewal currently on the ballot and district levy lid lifts, specifically in rural areas.

Once the District 4 community meetings have been completed, the District 4 Board will need to decide how best to move forward and then provide a response letter to the District 21 Board.

It is anticipated that the chairman from both boards will have discussions during the upcoming Washington State Fire Commissioners meeting scheduled for the end of October.

Chairman Ansell reminded the Board that Chief Van der Veen had recommended that the contract be extended in no more than two six-month extensions. Chairman Ansell noted that the district is running out of time and viable options. He is unsure if a year is going to improve their situation. This topic is expected to be discussed during the upcoming budget study session. Chairman Ansell further stated that if the district cannot afford to provide services to District 4, then the Board will need to sever the contract. By law, the District 21 constituents cannot fund District 4's deficit.

Commissioner Rigberg requested additional information regarding what a reduction in services would look like, delayed maintenance, and whether it creates a liability for either district.

Chief Van der Veen does not believe liability will be created due to delaying protracted maintenance. Britton Loop Station 12 requires painting and possibly some residing, which is expected to cost approximately one-half million dollars. However, the infrastructure remains intact, and there are no health or safety issues for the firefighters.

Chief Van der Veen went on to state that a reduction in services would be a huge barrier to the current auto-aid agreement with the City of Bellingham and District 21. At this time, Britton Loop Station 12 responds into the City of Bellingham automatically if they are the closest in-service station. District 4 collects the revenue from any ambulance transports in those areas. The agreement is based on like-for-like services.

Chief Van der Veen reviewed a recent fire in Districts 4's area, where multiple agencies worked together based on the auto-aid agreements. The majority of the response came from

Bellingham. The joint effort resulted in less damage to the multi-million-dollar home. District 4 relies heavily on the auto-aid agreement.

If District 4 cannot respond with a three-person engine crew (career), they are no longer a party to the agreement and will not receive an increased fire response. District 4 will need to specifically request additional resources, which will lengthen the response time. In addition, they will no longer be able to respond into the City of Bellingham nor collect additional revenue for those ambulance transports.

Chief Van der Veen does not believe dropping District 4 staffing to a two-person engine crew is safe.

Chairman Ansell believes that the district (21) would get serious pushback from the labor group if the agreement remained intact and the Britton Loop Station was run as a two-person engine crew. As a former firefighter, Chairman Ansell would be disappointed if a two-person engine crew was suggested, citing safety issues and industry-standard. District 21 could instead terminate the agreement and then implement a reduction in staffing, which would put firefighters at risk. At the same time, backing out of the agreement would be detrimental to both districts and the City of Bellingham.

Chief Van der Veen believes the City of Bellingham wants the agreement to remain intact since the termination may trigger the need for them to open another fire station.

More discussion is expected during the budget study session.

Washington Surveying and Rating Bureau (WSRB): WSRB has requested some additional information. There are no other updates at this time.

BLS Reimbursement: Chief Van der Veen has no current updates on when the fire districts will receive those agreed-upon funds.

NEW BUSINESS

Resolution 2022-10 Surplus Computer and IT-Related Equipment: Chief Van der Veen provided information regarding the surplus equipment and the current standard process for marketing or disposal.

MOTION: Vice-Chairman Crawford moved to approve Resolution 2022-10 Surplus Computer and IT-Related Equipment as presented. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Fischer and approved 5-0.

Resolution 2022-11 Cancellation of Warrant: Chief Van der Veen noted that a check had been lost in the mail and will need to be reissued.

MOTION: Vice-Chairman Crawford moved to approve Resolution 2022-11 Cancellation of Warrant as presented. The motion was seconded by Commissioner McMurray and approved 5-0.

Chief Van der Veen continues to work with finance to move the district toward utilizing electronic fund transfers by the end of the year as directed by the Board last month.

Budget Study Session Dates: The Board discussed the potential dates for the upcoming 2023 budget study session. The agreed-upon date is Wednesday, November 9, to be held at Odell Station 61 at 9:30 a.m. District 4 commissioners, Labor representatives, and lead contract negotiator Dave Ralston will also be invited.

State Fire Marshal's Office Legislative Support Request: Chief Van der Veen provided information regarding a requested letter of support for redistributing funds in the State Fire Marshal's Office.

Chief Van der Veen noted that this increase does not directly affect community members' taxes but rather is a reorganization of current tax funds for administration and basic firefighter education, which directly benefits rural districts.

MOTION: Chairman Ansell moved to authorize the Fire Chief to provide a letter supporting the State Fire Marshal's Office to improve funding for training in their budget process. The motion was seconded by Vice-Chairman Crawford and approved 5-0.

CORRESPONDENCE

- From Washington State Fire Marshal re: Legislative changes and proposal
- Semiahmoo Nextdoor Discussion re: Fire and EMS Levy
- From Systems Design re: Transport increase
- From Linda and Dave Schuyler re: Thank you for service (donation)
- From Ronald Rayburn re: Commissioner interest
- Northern Light article re: First Responders
- Northern Light article re: Sweet Rd structure fire
- Northern Light article re: Poplar View Dr structure fire
- Lynden Tribune article re: Whatcom County EMS Levy
- The Responder: District newsletter, October issue

Vice-Chairman Crawford appreciated Lt Nelson's response on the Semiahmoo Nextdoor social media thread regarding levies. He stated the facts and referred community members to the fire chief for additional information. The district has yet to receive any phone calls. Chairman Ansell noted that the number of conversations was interesting; however, much of those conversations were based on misinformation.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- **November Board Meeting Attendance Query:** All Commissioners in attendance are expected to attend the November 17 meeting at Odell Station 61.
- **NWFR Newest Arrival:** Firefighter Hayley Urling-Ehinger recently delivered a healthy baby girl. Haley is the first career pregnant firefighter in the district. She spent the last month on light duty and has been instrumental in assisting in the administrative office.

Chairman Ansell noted that his former coworker, Jeanette Wools, who recently died of cancer, was the first career firefighter hired in Washington. Jeanette opened the doors for all career female firefighters in Washington.

AGENDA ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING

- Public Hearing – 1% Increase and Levy Certification
- District 4 Update
- Washington Survey and Rating Bureau (WSRB)
- BLS Reimbursement

EXECUTIVE SESSION

Chairman Ansell recessed the meeting for an Executive Session, per RCW 42.30.110(g), “to evaluate the qualifications of an applicant for public employment or to review the performance of a public employee.” And

RCW 42.30.140(4)(a) “Collective bargaining sessions with employee organizations, including contract negotiations, grievance meetings, and discussions relating to the interpretation or application of a labor agreement; or (b) that portion of a meeting during which the governing body is planning or adopting the strategy or position to be taken by the governing body during the course of any collective bargaining, professional negotiations, or grievance or mediation proceedings, or reviewing the proposals made in the negotiations or proceedings while in progress.”

At 11: 54 a.m. for approximately thirty minutes until 12:30 p.m. following a five-minute break. Chief Van der Veen remained for the executive session. Action is expected to be taken.

Chief Van der Veen left the executive session at 12:20 p.m.

Chairman Ansell extended the meeting at 12:32 p.m. for approximately twenty-five minutes until 1:00 p.m.

Chief Van der Veen was invited back to the executive session at 12:47 p.m.

MEETING RECONVENED

Chairman Ansell called the special meeting back into open session at 12:57 p.m.

Division Chief of Operations: Chief Van der Veen recommended approving the working agreement of Jon Ahrenholz as the Division Chief of Operations, effective November 1, 2022.

Chairman Ansell is confident that this position will provide some relief to Chief Van der Veen, although it will put further strain on the line personnel. Chairman Ansell was pleased that there was an internal candidate who was willing and capable of taking that next step to improve the district.

MOTION: Commissioner Fischer moved to approve the Division Chief of Operations Working Agreement as presented. The motion was seconded by Vice-Chairman Crawford and approved 5-0.

Congratulations, Division Chief Ahrenholz.

SIGNING OF DOCUMENTS

ADJOURNMENT

MOTION: There being no further business, Chairman Ansell moved to adjourn the meeting at 1:00 p.m. The motion was seconded by Commissioner McMurray and approved 5-0.

Respectfully Submitted by:

Jennie Sand, Board Secretary

ATTEST:

Bruce Ansell, Chairman

John Crawford, Vice-Chairman

Scott Fischer, Commissioner

Kimberly McMurray, Commissioner

Matthew Rigberg, Commissioner

Jason Van der Veen, Fire Chief