

KITTITAS COUNTY FIRE DISTRICT #2
Ellensburg, Washington

Minutes of: Commissioners' Board Meeting, Special Session
Meeting date: March 30, 2017
Meeting time: 1900 hours
Meeting place: 10700 Thorp Highway North, Thorp

Commissioners in Attendance: Pat Clerf, Neil O'Neill, Neal Houser, and Glenn Huffman. John Smith had an excused absence.

Others in Attendance: Chief John Sinclair, Deputy Chief Elliott, FSM Simon and several members in the audience. District Secretary Hill had an excused absence.

1. Call to Order: Commissioner Charlie Iler from Kittitas County Fire District #1 called the entire meeting to Order at 1900 hours and led the Pledge of Allegiance. Chairman Clerf from District #2 and Chairman Verbeck from District #7 opened their Districts' respective meetings at 7:02pm.

2. Discussion of Merger/Consolidation Issues

Commissioner Iler welcomed everyone and introduced the purpose of the meeting.

All representatives of each District introduced themselves. Commissioner Iler introduced Chief Sinclair and turned the meeting over to him. Chief Sinclair asked the audience to introduce themselves. Most of the audience was with the fire districts or related associations. There was also a handful of citizens present.

Chief Sinclair gave a presentation. In his presentation, he

- Outlined current operations with mutual aid and cooperation among the three fire districts.
- Stated that a fire district merger would not change the current hospital districts.
- Discussed the increasing demands on the fire and EMS systems with increasing population growth.

Chief Sinclair asked Chief Elliott to discuss the beginnings of the merger between the City of Ellensburg and District 2. Chief Elliott discussed the City Fire Department, the process of the merger, and the benefits and challenges of the merger.

Chief Sinclair introduced Commissioner Glenn Huffman and asked him to explain the process that Eastside Fire and Rescue went through to combine all of the agencies into the current agency. Commissioner Huffman introduced which agencies were involved and how they all came together to provide service to the citizens. He emphasized that no employees lost their jobs and that the administration adjusted staff positions to make sure that everyone had a position. Commissioner Huffman also discussed the different options to consolidate (contracts, mergers, RFA's, etc.). In closing, Commissioner Huffman stated how important he feels this merger is.

Chief Sinclair called on Commissioner Houser to share his experiences with mergers and changes in his department. Commissioner Houser discussed which departments merged over the years and also

discussed how there is now central training with many of the departments in the Puget Sound area. He also shared how his department watched another merger near them go sour and how they took lessons learned from that when they went into their merger.

Chief Sinclair introduced District 7 Deputy Chief Bryan Pearson who explained the Central Pierce Fire & Rescue mergers. He discussed the removal of response lines between jurisdictions, combined training abilities, job security during the merger for the existing employees, development of resident program and consolidation of services. Chief Pearson and Chief Sinclair both discussed some examples of proposed mergers that did not work.

Commissioner Clerf asked Chief Elliott to explain how KVFR's training officer position was developed during the City of Ellensburg/Kittitas 2 merger. Chief Elliott explained the evolution of the training program into what it currently is. He also discussed opportunities to improve shared training in the future.

Chief Elliott responded to a request to explain the issues that the Saltwater Ridge consolidation experienced. He felt part of the issue was that the plan was overly ambitious. Chief Elliott additionally discussed the occasional lack of resources in Kittitas County. He stated that demands on resources would continue to increase with population growth.

Chief Sinclair continued to discuss examples of mergers that did not work. He introduced a slide that showed the common themes of those failed mergers. These include:

- Lack of leadership
- Lack of lead agency
- Communication and transparency

Chief Wiseman from District 7 is also the Chief of Snoqualmie Pass. Snoqualmie Pass and District 8 are now working on a merger into Snoqualmie Pass Fire & Rescue. They will then approach District 3 about merging with the new organization.

Commissioner Verbeck commented on the number of organizations providing emergency services in Kittitas County. The number of agencies is a concern to him. There was an idea of merging upper county entities, but the idea did not take off so they looked east to consolidate.

Chief Sinclair explained that the City of Kittitas has expressed interest in merging with KVFR. District 2 currently has mutual aid with Kittitas, but it is like-kind exchange. Since their resources are limited, KVFR's ability to help them free of charge is limited and usually has to charge them for responses.

Chief Sinclair explained the umbrella principles: building a system for citizens, being more effective and efficient, nobody loses a job, nobody loses pay, however, jobs may change. He also talked about keys to success, including checking egos at the door and constant communication. Chief Sinclair gave an example of how the boards would work: Districts would continue having individual board meetings and there would be combined meetings until the merger became official and money was combined. Commissioner George from Fire District 1 asked at what point in the process is the money merged. Chief Sinclair explained that an ILA (Interlocal Agreement) consolidation could be created before a merger formally occurs. There was also discussion of how the mergers occur and how the Districts are

legally combined. There was further discussion about the Commissioner structure of the organizations before a merger and how it would look after the merger. Commissioner Clerf shared how the board was created for the current KVFR organization after the merger with the City. He also emphasized that the voters will decide the structure of the board of the combined entity.

Chief Sinclair emphasized that the existing debt of each entity (i.e. KVFR's station bond) stays with the existing entity and would not be shared with the merged entity. In addition, a difficulty will be to convince the voters that the tax rate must all be the same (\$1.50). He then reviewed the financial breakdown of each district's revenues. There was also an analysis of what a combined entity's finances would look like.

Commissioner George for Fire District 1 asked Chief Sinclair to explain what he meant by being able to provide a better level of service. Chief Sinclair responded that this would include hiring additional people in the areas of greatest need (i.e. career staff added to District 1 and 7), expanding the resident programs, and enhancing the volunteer staff. He pointed out that District 1 is a volunteer district and struggles to keep everyone up to training standards. A combined agency will allow for combined resources and increased safety. Career response times are much faster than volunteer responses and taxpayers will see reduced ambulance fees as members of the district.

Commissioner Huffman explained that career staff offers a guaranteed response whereas volunteer responses are not guaranteed. Career staff can respond immediately while volunteers come in to backfill the stations. This helps to guarantee a response to all calls. The lead agency will be responsible for juggling resources to where the biggest need is to reduce response times. Commissioner Verbeck from District 7 discussed the shortage of medic units and that a merger will strengthen the ability to respond to EMS calls.

A citizen in the audience asked how the merger would increase the likelihood of being able to save his house on fire. It is in District 1 and the resources are currently limited so he expects to lose his house. Chief Sinclair responded that a merged agency would be able to respond with more resources, both volunteer and career. Chief Pearson added how an agency he was with put a guaranteed minimum apparatus on every structure fire. Commissioner Huffman emphasized that life safety comes first and property conservation comes second. A career staff ready to respond ensures a higher level of life safety.

Commissioner Huffman also pointed out that an increase from \$1.16 to \$1.50 on a \$250,000 house would be \$85.00 per year. There was continued conversation regarding this with Commissioner George and Commissioner Iler concerned about selling this to landowners with large properties and many buildings on their property. In these situations, the cost to taxpayers could be thousands of dollars a year. Commissioner Huffman emphasized that District 2 is here to support the other districts in explaining and selling the tax increase to their taxpayers. Chief Sinclair shared KVFR's experience of lifting the levy lid during the merger 12 years ago, stating that it is critical to openly communicate and educate the public on the impact before it goes to vote.

Chief Sinclair reviewed what the next steps would be moving forward, including:

- Three boards commit
- Bring in Attorney Brian Snure

- Create a 2017 ILA for a group which functions as one entity
- Name a leader who would be over operations as well as leading the merger effort
- Hold community meetings
- Decide timelines for ballot measures
- Form working committees
- Appoint a rumor control officer
- Crews work and train together
- Conversations with Kittitas Hospital District 2
- Hold educational meetings and figure out ballot timing

Chief Sinclair gave an overview of the staff KFD2 had and what staff the City had before the merger and compared it to the current staffing of KVFR, noting that there has been a 42% increase in career staffing.

Chief Sinclair opened the meeting up for audience questions and comments:

- Gary Bernt gave an overview of what he sees throughout the state and the desire to have partnerships in Washington that other states look to as an example.
- A citizen and former commissioner shared that he does not care what the name of the agency is. He just wants to have the personnel be qualified. He also wants to make sure that everyone gets home safe.

Commissioner Iler thanked everyone for their participation. Commissioner Verbeck clarified what needs to happen next with each individual board. He encouraged the boards to not wait too long to decide.

4. Adjournment

Commissioner O'Neill made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Commissioner Houser seconded the motion. There was no further discussion and the board voted unanimously to adjourn the meeting. The meeting adjourned at 2106 hours.



Board Chair



District Secretary