

**Whatcom County Fire District #21  
Whatcom County Fire District #4  
Station 61 – Blaine  
9408 Odell Street, Blaine, WA 98230  
Special Board of Fire Commissioners Meeting  
8:00 a.m.  
November 18, 2023  
Budget Work Session**

**CALL TO ORDER**

Chairman Ansell called the special Whatcom County Fire District #21 Board of Fire Commissioners meeting for November 18, 2023, to order at 8:08 a.m. at Station 61 – 9408 Odell Street, Blaine, WA 98230.

**ROLL CALL**

District #21: Chairman Bruce Ansell; Vice-Chairman John Crawford; Commissioners Scott Fischer, Kimberly McMurray, and Matthew Rigberg; Fire Chief Jason Van der Veen; Business Manager Benita Williams; Labor Representative Scott Brown.

District #4: Chairman Steve Cooley; Vice-Chairman Tim Johnson; Commissioner Mark Lann.

Vice-Chairman Johnson left the meeting at 10:30 a.m.

**2024 BUDGET WORK SESSION**

Chairman Ansell welcomed all participants to the 2024 budget study session.

Chief Van der Veen stated that this work session will provide a high-level look at revenue and planned expenditures and discuss the plan for capital projects in 2024.

Chief Van der Veen offered to meet with each commissioner to review the budget more in-depth before the December meetings.

The final budgets will be passed at the December meetings.

**DISTRICT 4 BUDGET REVIEW**

District 4 Revenue

Chief Van der Veen provided an overview of the total revenue collected in 2023 (\$2,411,270) and the expected revenue (\$3,919,172) to be collected in 2024. The vast difference is due to the approval of the levy lid lift (\$.99), which will be in effect in 2024. Chief Van der Veen noted that the levy one percent increase allowed was banked for 2024.

- Fire levy 2023 - \$1,598,607 vs. Fire levy 2024 - \$3,329,639
- EMS Levy - \$418,533
- Facility Rental - \$105,000
- EMS County - \$56,000
- Forest Excise - \$1,500
- Leasehold Excise - \$500

Chief Van der Veen noted that the board will have a choice to raise the levy up to three percent per year for the next five years due to an inflator included in the levy language. With the increase in assessed valuation and the three percent, Chief Van der Veen stated that taking on an additional fire commissioner indebted bond would not be necessary nor wise. The board will have

the funds to pay for the necessary capital project purchases, plus deposit a modest amount into reserves.

Chairman Ansell noted that many current and future levy lid lids include inflators, so the one percent limit does not limit the boards. The board can also choose whether to bank the one percent to use later when needed.

#### District 4 Expenditures

Chief Van der Veen provided an overview of the expected expenditures for 2024. Some numbers will need to be updated, including the commissioner's salaries, which the state will raise. The contract for services payment will be adjusted when the District 21 budget has been finalized. Chief Van der Veen recommended continuing to utilize Liz Loomis Public Affairs to help keep the public up to date with District 4 messaging, including social media, texts, website verbiage, and Facebook information. The firm would also help Chief Van der Veen with crafting specific emails to citizens.

The approximate 2024 overall expenditures are \$2,469,354.

Other highlights included:

- Professional services – 2023: \$50,000      2024: \$24,000
- Contract for services – 2023: \$2,287,379      2024: \$2,392,967 (*expected to increase*)

The 2024 anticipated surplus is \$1,449,818.

#### Capital Needs

- Purchase engine – over \$1M expected
- Britton Loop Station 12 facility upgrades
- Brush truck and tenders needed but not budgeted at this time

#### Future D4

The contract for services will be reviewed and extended one year at a time until the future of District 4 is decided. Chief Van der Veen has not heard back from District 4's attorney regarding the contract language. District 21's attorney will also review the contract, and both boards will have the opportunity to approve the contract during their December meetings. Currently, the contract is expected to be twenty-five percent (25%) of District 21's budget.

Chief Van der Veen noted that with the continual annexation potential and with the newly elected officials in the City of Bellingham, the future is unknown. It is expected that once the new officials take office, the Chairs of both boards and Chief Van der Veen will have some frank discussions regarding annexations and District 4's future.

As of October 31, 2023, the tax collection balance is \$765,553.00. The reserve fund balance is \$520,078.04.

BREAK

### **DISTRICT 21 BUDGET REVIEW**

#### District 21 Revenues

Chief Van der Veen provided an overview of the property taxes projected to be collected in 2023 (\$6,659,367) and the projected overall property taxes anticipated to be collected in 2024 (\$6,969,121). The increase includes the one percent increase allowed as well as new construction.

Chief Van der Veen explained how new construction (residential and commercial) is allocated. For new construction to be included in the revenue, the project must be fifty percent complete before July 1 of the previous year. It is calculated at \$.85 per \$1,000. The assessed valuation of the new construction is \$150M.

Chief Van der Veen provided information regarding changes to how Ground Emergency Medical Transports (GEMT) Health Care Authority funds will be calculated and dispersed in the future. As recommended by the district's third-party billing system and the Public Consulting Group (PCG), the district plans to collect less money upfront and any residual funds in the spring of 2025. With more states participating in the funding and possible rule changes in the future, the less stable the funds could become.

Chief Van der Veen stated that the expected overall revenue collected in 2023 is \$11,899,169, and \$11,344,325 is projected to be collected in 2024. The District 4 contract for services fee is expected to rise once the 2024 budget is finalized.

At this time, Chief Van der Veen has budgeted \$11M. The remaining \$279,375 is expected to be consumed once the budget is finalized.

This budget does not address the Birch Bay Station 63 project or the improvements to Semiahmoo Station 62.

Chief Van der Veen pointed out that there does not seem to be a way to afford any commissioner indebtedness bond payments, which puts more pressure on the district to pass a levy lid lift in 2024. It is expected that a special meeting will be scheduled for the first of the year with Financial Consultant Jim Nelson and will focus on future funding options.

Chief Van der Veen reported that the district currently has \$398,344.20 in mitigation funds.

#### District 21 Expenditures

Benita Williams noted that the 2023 budget is currently at 80%. Chief Van der Veen pointed out the division highlights and draft District 4 costs.

#### Administrative

- Administrative salaries: \$465,812
- Legislative costs paid separately by each district
- Election costs paid separately by each district
- Fire Commissioner compensation is revised every five years per the WAC (increase from \$128 to \$157 in 2024)
- Professional services: \$150,000
- Printing services: \$7,000
- Election costs: \$20,000

Total \$1,180,620

#### Operations

- Eliminated the Assistant Chief of Operations (anticipated *new BC position to be created mid-year*)

- Projected Overtime: \$400,000 (*over every year – will continue to utilize unfilled positions compensation*)
- Plan to hire up to five firefighters
- Ground Emergency Medical Transportation (GEMT) Audit Service: \$30,000
- Whatcom County Fire Agency Radio Systems (FARS) Assessment: \$35,000 (*20% increase on radio maintenance and towers*)
- Firefighter/officer salaries: \$5,977,716
- Firefighter/officer benefits: \$2,012,980
- Operational supplies: \$301,500 (*tools firefighters need to do their jobs, not including apparatus*)

Chief Van der Veen explained how incentives are calculated per the collective bargaining agreement. Any firefighter/officer who has earned a degree in higher education is allotted an increase in their overall base salary.

- Associate (AA) degree – 1.5%
- Bachelor (BA) degree – 3%

Total: \$8,292,196

Chief Van der Veen reviewed the temporary, almost full-time Battalion 76 (B76) position the union and captains brought forth to the administration. With the continual difficulty of filling the assistant chief position, this position was created collaboratively with the union via a memorandum of understanding (MOU). The position began on Saturday, November 18, and the MOU will sunset at the end of May 2024 (*6 months*).

Chief Van der Veen explained that the current captains would become B76 officers at the same pay rate, utilizing the assistant chief's wage line item in the budget. Lieutenants will fill the open captain position, however, they will not be able to complete all the necessary tasks of that position. The remaining duties will be completed when a captain is on duty.

B76 will be run out of Birch Bay Station 63. Tasks will include assisting with operations, facilities and maintenance, training, personnel, mentorship, and administrative functions. These functions are in addition to relieving Chief Van der Veen of B76 duties every three weeks so he can focus on higher-level oversight. The hope is to have the B76 position open the lines of communication between the stations and the overall district.

During the six-month timeline, the administration will focus on crafting a plan to add four battalion chiefs along with their corresponding job description and wages. Chief Van der Veen noted that this position is long overdue and very much needed in the district.

Commissioner Rigberg questioned whether the members filling this temporary B76 position would receive some incentive pay since they would be assuming greater liability and more responsibility. District 4 Commissioner Lann concurred, noting that the position should be compensated accordingly. Chairman Ansell further noted that it would behoove the district to have the attorney review the temporary position before the permanent position is finalized. Chief Van der Veen noted that their pay currently remains at their regular wage; however, they receive overtime pay, and the incentive to assist with creating four new positions. In addition, the collaboration brings additional goodwill to the union. Although Chief Van der Veen believes his pay decision is defensible, he agreed to discuss the concern with the attorney. In addition, the MOU will be added to the District 21 December board agenda for approval.

Information was provided regarding an unforeseen chief officer illness and another returning to his former captain position, causing the need for the temporary B76 position.

#### BREAK

#### Fire Prevention and Public Education

Chief Van der Veen reviewed the fire prevention and public education budget, which had only slight increases in education, public education, and community risk reduction activities.

Total: \$212,235

#### Training

Chief Van der Veen noted that although the training captain position remains in the budget, no decision has been made regarding the future and its relevancy to the organization. This position is a negotiated item that will be discussed more formally with the union at the appropriate time.

Total: \$286,497

#### Facilities

Chief Van der Veen pointed out some changes in the station utility costs.

Total: \$561,365

#### Vehicle Maintenance

Chief Van der Veen reviewed the increases to the vehicle maintenance division. Chief Van der Veen has yet to go through each line item with the newly hired mechanic, Ryan Mack, and determine his needs going forward.

Chief Van der Veen shared his immediate apparatus concerns, which include underpowered vehicles that are wearing out sooner than was anticipated. As a result, the district is updating how new apparatus is purchased and practicing predictive maintenance.

Total: \$532,037

#### District 4 Costs and Payments

Chief Van der Veen reviewed how the District 4 costs are broken out of the overall budget. Anticipated BLS transport fees are also deducted.

Current Total (*expected to change in December*): \$2,392,967

#### Personnel

Chief Van der Veen reviewed the total compensation cost for each district employee's position. Although the district has four vacant positions, their maximum total compensation costs have been included in the budget.

Chief Van der Veen reviewed the increases associated with personnel benefits:

- Overall wage: 5%
- Dental /Vision: 2 %
- Medical: 3%
- L&I: slight increase

### Capital Needs

Chief Van der Veen provided information regarding capital projects he is considering and those he regards as critical.

- Ballistic vests and helmets: \$100,000
- Replace five mobile data computers (MDC): \$9,000

Commissioner Rigberg suggested that the district may be able to apply for a Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) grant for the ballistic vests and helmets. Commissioner Rigberg will investigate a grant for twenty sets.

- Laurel Station 69
  - Windows: \$30,000
  - Waterline: \$15,000
  - Security fence between station and business to the south: \$15,000
  - Padding in fit pit: \$15,000
- Odell Station 61
  - Interior and exterior paint: \$150,000

- Birch Bay Station 63

The group discussed the current state of the station. The district is currently waiting on the Phase I evaluation before a better idea of what will be needed can be determined, including:

- Housing alternatives for crews during the process or before if the station continues to deteriorate
  - Build for future growth
  - Shop relocation allowing for a bigger station footprint, which in turn lowers the shop price per square foot, and different regulations for the shop
  - Addition of apparatus bay
  - Community room
  - Ability to house multiple crews in the future
  - Identify any soil or archaeological issues
- Semiahmoo Station 62
    - Repairs: \$100,000 (*minimum*)
    - Mitigation funds available: \$398,000

The group discussed what repairs needed to be done immediately to the station if the decision was made to temporarily house the Birch Bay Station 63 crews.

Commissioner Rigberg noted that he would rather see the district invest in renovating the station for temporary housing opportunities rather than purchasing temporary housing (*commercial skid, mobile home, trailer*), which would be more difficult for the district to recoup. Chairman Ansell concurred, noting that it made more sense fiscally to complete the station renovation and provide some additional goodwill with the residents in the Semiahmoo area, especially in light of the upcoming levy lid lift request.

There is currently \$1.5M in facility reserves. Chairman Ansell noted that mitigation funds could be utilized for Station 62 if it is staffed due to increased growth and need.

Depending on the Phase I outcome, Station 62 could also be temporarily staffed by the Birch Bay Station 63 crews. Speaking on behalf of the union, Scott Brown stated that the crews would rather be relocated to another station vs. temporary housing at Birch Bay Station 63. Further discussion ensued regarding how to house additional apparatus better.

It was noted that the relocation will affect response times in certain areas.

Commissioner Rigberg voiced his concern regarding the upcoming Drayton Harbor and Bell Road bridge repair, which will further impact response times.

Chairman Ansell recommended lobbying for mitigation funds specific to aid and fire response from the County or State during their bridge project. Those funds would mitigate the crew relocation to Semiahmoo Station 62. Commissioner Rigberg agreed, reiterating the urgency of getting Semiahmoo Station 62 operational as soon as possible. Vice-Chairman Crawford concurred, stating that the district needs to move forward with the project immediately.

Chief Van der Veen further noted that if the levy lid lift request is approved in August 2024, the district plans to house an additional aid unit at Semiahmoo Station 62. Commissioner Rigberg suggested partnering with the Sheriff or Blaine Police Department to partially utilize the station.

Chief Van der Veen will look into the immediate repair costs of Semiahmoo Station 62.

#### GRANT OPPORTUNITIES

The group discussed potential grant opportunities:

- Extrication Tools for Ladder 63 (*in process*)
- Radios (*in process*)
- Lifepak 15 (*defibrillator*): \$40,000 each (4)
- CPR Lucas device (*automotive CPR*)
- Ballistic vests and helmets (20)

Chairman Ansell will contact Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Manager Mike Hilley regarding acquiring funds for the Lifepak 15s and CPR Lucas devices.

#### OTHER

Other concerns discussed included staffing due in part to upcoming retirements. Chief Van der Veen stated that although the district may need to hire up to four firefighters, it is unknown whether four qualified firefighters who are the right fit will apply. At this time, the firefighters have to fill a lot of overtime, which can be exhausting. If another response unit is added, the concern then becomes how to fill the overtime if the district continues to have open positions.

#### ADJOURNMENT

**MOTION:** There being no further business, Chairman Ansell moved to adjourn the meeting at 11:28 a.m. The motion was seconded by Vice-Chairman Rigberg and approved 5-0.

**MOTION:** There being no further business, Chairman Cooley moved to adjourn the meeting at 11:28 a.m. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Lann and approved 2-0.

Respectfully Submitted by:

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Jennie Sand, Board Secretary

**ATTEST:**

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Bruce Ansell, Chairman

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John Crawford, Vice-Chairman

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Scott Fischer, Commissioner

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Kimberly McMurray, Commissioner

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Matthew Rigberg, Commissioner

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Steve Cooley, Chairman

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Tim Johnson, Vice-Chairman

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Mark Lann, Commissioner

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Jason Van der Veen, Fire Chief