

**City of Bellingham – Fire District 8**

**Regional Fire Authority Planning Committee**

**Meeting 2**

Date: Monday, July 17, 2017  
Time: 2:00 P.M. – 4:00 P.M.  
Location: Bellingham City Hall – Mayor’s Boardroom

## Minutes

1. Review of draft proposed charter and operating rules for Committee – Chief Hewett (15 min.)
  2. Electing Committee Chair, Vice-Chair, appointing secretary – Planning Committee members (10 min.)
  3. Committee Meeting date(s) (10 min.)
  4. Review of existing conditions in the Fire Department & Fire District 8 – Chief Hewett (1 hr.)
  5. Next Agenda/Date (10 min.)
  6. Closing Comments/Adjourn

The Regional Fire Authority Planning Committee meeting was called to order by Assistant Fire Chief Bill Hewett at 2:06 P.M. The meeting was held in the Mayor's Boardroom at Bellingham City Hall, 210 Lottie Street, Bellingham.

- ## 1. Welcome and introductions (5 min.)

**Present:** Bill Hewett, Assistant Fire Chief  
Kelli Linville, Mayor  
April Barker, Bellingham City Council  
Rob Neher, Fire District 8 Commissioner  
Monea Kerr, Mayor's Office  
David Lehmann, Fire District 8 Commissioner  
Tim Kays, Fire Captain  
Brian Heinrich, COB Deputy Administrator  
Terry Bornemann, Bellingham City Council  
Michael Lillquist, Bellingham City Council  
Roger Buswell, Fire District 8 Commissioner  
Dave Pethick, Fire Captain, IAFF L106 VP  
Kristi Clift, FD Admin Services Manager  
Andy Asbjornsen, COB Accounting Manager

Rob Kinitzele, Assistant Fire Chief  
Todd Lagestee, Citizen

Assistant Chief Bill Hewett explained the goals of this meeting:

- Look at the purposed charter as the operating rules for this committee
- Elect a chairperson, vice chair and appoint a secretary
- Review current conditions of both fire departments

2. Review of draft proposed charter and operating rules for Committee – Chief Hewett (15 min.)

Bill Hewett, City of Bellingham Assistant Fire Chief, introduced the draft charter, which has been adopted from another agency and modified to fit the needs of the City of Bellingham Fire Department and District 8. He gave a brief review of the proposed draft RFA charter (attached):

- The mission of the RFA planning committee is to either develop a plan for a regional fire authority or determine that it is not a right fit for the area and to dissolve the planning committee. The planning committee's task is to work through the process to develop a plan, but if it isn't deemed logical, then the committee will be dissolved. If the planning committee does develop a plan, it then goes to the respective legislative bodies of each agency and would then go through public process before government bodies advance it to voters.
- Bellingham City Council Member Michael Lillquist brought to the committee members' attention that there needs to be criteria to evaluate the RFA and planning should be based on such criteria. He suggested having a formal discussion about the process goals rather than focusing on outcome goals.
- Chief Hewett stated that the charter allows for the 6 planning committee members to determine the functions of the group.
- Mayor Kelli Linville stated that she has always been supportive of RFA but has never seen a set of criteria for evaluation. She proposed setting up a criteria to work on an agreement that meets a certain set of guidelines from the beginning.
- Bellingham City Council Member Terry Bornemann agreed that there needs to be criteria, but the level of service currently provided needs to be maintained. In this process, Terry stated that protecting the rights of the individual firefighters is important.
- Commissioner Rob Neher believes the level of service and the financial viability for both entities is important.
- Michael Lillquist brought forth that there are both operational and capital issues. In terms of funding, he said, the planning committee needs to look at operational concerns such as new fire stations, equipment, fleet replacement, etc. With urban boundaries expanding, service areas expand as well. The RFA expands differently, and service choices come along with the urban and development choices that are made within our urban boundaries.
- Commissioner Roger Buswell stated that the RFA needs a stable funding source.
- Chief Hewett explained the purpose of the charter document – so that the planning committee members can agree on what it is they are working on, why they are meeting and talk broadly

about how they are going to communicate and how they are going to agree on certain issues. More finite details will be studied as the RFA goes through different parts of the process.

- The critical issues discussed in last meeting were revisited:
  1. Fairness of funding
  2. Funding able to be sustainable for current and future services
  3. Maintain and enhance services
  4. Keep costs reasonable
  5. Governance – relationships of City & District: how do we integrate & define services?
- Critical issue #4 was focused on in a discussion:
  - Chief Hewett stated that first, you must look at what services are desired to be provided.
  - Terry Bornemann asked if the cost of running a combined fire district be comparable to existing costs of running the two separate entities.
    - Can they be run at a similar cost to what we are currently doing without taxpayer dollars?
    - Rob Kintzele stated that there is a challenge because there are improvements they want to make, not just maintain.
    - Mayor Kelli wants to maintain services Bellingham is providing now. What is the millage rate with the services we already provide? Fire is one of the biggest pieces of the general fund budget in the City.
    - Chief Hewett stated that the City of Bellingham has overall issues with City general fund and from a fire staff perspective, we are not maintaining our desired level of service. It has been continually decreasing due to many different factors. For the district, it is running out of assessed value which hurts their ability to raise funds.
    - Mayor Kelli stated that RFA is an extension of full response agreements, fire chief's retirement, and sharing administrative costs.
      - Maintaining direct service to public.

This discussion item was tabled for discussion at a later date due to time constraints.

### 3. Review of existing conditions in the Fire Department & Fire District 8 – Chief Hewett (1 hr.)

The existing conditions of the City of Bellingham Fire Department and of Fire District 8 (attached) were reviewed:

- There are 9 facilities, 8 fire stations and 1 medic station.
- 3 different levels of service base on response times
  - The City's adopted level of service:
    - 4 minute travel time for 90% of calls
  - Fire District 8 (Whatcom County) adopted levels of service:
    - Urban (Bellingham's UGA) – 8.5 minute travel time for 80% of calls

- Rural – 10.5 minute travel time for 80% of calls
  - Remote – Same day service (meaning there will be a response in the same day as the call)
- Adopted level of service standards are consistent with National Fire Protection Association (RCW 35 for the City and RCW 36 for the County)
  - Dictates the arrival of the first unit
- Nationally, adopted level of service numbers are different but the concept of having NFPA 1710 covers cities like Bellingham
- NFPA 1720 covers combination staff like District 8, which breaks the adopted response times into urban, rural and remote.
- There isn't a sustainable way to provide an urban level of service in a rural area.
- An example of this is how Fire District 8 has 2 fire stations in the same geographic area as Bellingham but the call volume is low so the service area cannot be served in the same way. It would not be economically feasible to provide 6 staffed fire stations in the fire district for the call volume that occurs there.
- In Bellingham, there are 7 areas where we are making our goal and have adopted the level of service we strive for. The core of our city is not reaching the standard 90% of time.
- District 8 is roughly meeting their standards but their bar is lower so it makes it easier to meet their goal.
- Michael Lillquist shared that physical proximity alone is not enough to guarantee service.
- Chief Hewett brought forth two significant fires that occurred.
  - One was a double fatality
  - The other was an apartment complex arson
  - Both fire stations were taking a non-priority call (BLS) and when the priority call for the fire came in, they were unable to respond which on one of the fires led to an 8 minute response time for the first in engine.
  - Engine 3 receives a high call volume, oftentimes at the same time so it makes it so station 1 and 4 are taking those calls
- Michael Lillquist asked “For low priority calls, what are the expenses to maintain these levels of service?”
- Chief Hewett explained that it involves starting to look at unit utilization. How many calls are we running?
  - In each fire station, there is one three-person crew at any given time. They go everywhere together as a crew and those three people operate one vehicle. Once that vehicle (i.e. a fire engine) is taken, the other vehicles (i.e. an aid car) cannot be taken. This eliminates fire protection in certain areas when an aid car is taken.
- There are triggers to getting a new unit:
  - Station 3 – 2,900 calls a year
  - Station 4 – 2,500 calls a year
  - Station 1 – 2,500 calls a year

- Stations 1 and 3 are the smallest response areas geographically, so it should be easy to hit the 4 minute call time, but they are gone so much of the time that the station then relies on other units to service that area.
- Station 6 has 3 people staffing an engine, a ladder truck and an aid car – which when adding up the calls for each equals 2,300 calls per year at that station.
- The number of responses per apparatus gives a picture of why we are not maintaining desired level of service
- During weekdays, there are routine out of service times to maintain training goals, administrative/mechanical times, etc. that all take firefighters away from their stations.
- Six or seven years ago, the fire companies stopped doing fire inspections at businesses to allow for call volume and training.
- The community paramedic program helps with reduction in repeat customers (high use customers) – percentage accounts for a small percentage of calls. It helps, but not very much. Helps with top 200 high use customers while the fire department is dealing with other things.
- Chief Hewett talked about urban infill and that while it is cheaper on capital facilities we still need to address the additional call loads with additional staffing.
- Mayor Kelli Linville stated that as the population gets bigger, there is a need for more police and fire enforcement to serve them. She stresses response and service.

#### City of Bellingham Fire Department

- Station 1 – headquarters – built in 1990 (27 years old)
  - Host of capital needs
  - Needs energy upgrades
  - Leaks in new roof
  - Several deficiencies
  - Needs an overhaul – good bones but needs large scale overhaul
- Station 2 – built in 2001
  - Heating and air conditioning
  - Paintjob, carpets need replacement
  - Good location and size of facility
- Station 3 – built in 1983, remodel in 1999
  - Good bones, has some wear and tear
  - Good size and location
- Station 4 – built in 1989
  - Problems with heating and AC
  - Problems with roof
  - Herald ran article about worst facilities in city – number 1 or 2 on list
  - Good location, adequate size
- Station 5 – built in 1971 (oldest City Station)
  - Not adequately sized or located
  - Not built for modern apparatus

- Redundant coverage between station 1, 31 & 5
- Station 6 – built in 2002 (newest)
  - Adequate size & location
  - Carpets, paint, upgrades
- Station 10 – Medic unit house on Smith Rd. in the county to service Northeast corner of County Built in 1991, remodeled in 2002 (oversizing of the garage)
  - New floor last year
  - Hang on until see what future of medic program is
  - 3 bedroom house with oversize garage for ambulance

#### District 8

- Station 31 (oldest of all) built in 1967, add on in 1984, mobile homes that make training and admin buildings 1998, bunk house added in 2008
  - Without volunteer, covered with overtime shifts
  - Inadequate size – a lot of engines won’t fit here
  - Issues – doesn’t have an exhaust removal systems
  - Close to station 1 & station 5 – location not adequate
- Station 34 Built in 1970 with additions in 19?? And a remodel in 1997

#### Fleet

- Engines - City currently has 6 that are 8 years old and two that are 21 years old. District 8 has one that is 1 year old and two that are 12 years old. These have a life span of 15 years. Currently neither the City nor the District has enough funds set aside to replace on schedule.
- Ladder Trucks - City currently has one that is 9 years old and a second that is 19 years old. These also have a 15 year life span.
- Ambulances - In general our ambulance fleet is doing well. ALS Ambulances have a 6 year life span (running 3000+ calls per year county wide). BLS Ambulances have a 10 year life span (running fewer calls in a smaller service area).
- Engines cost approximately \$680,000 this year and have been inflating at 7% per year. Ladder cost estimate for this year is \$1.4 million per truck and has been inflating at 7% per year. Ambulances cost approximately \$180,000 per ambulance inflating at 3% per year.
- Reserve units spend as much time on front lines as the front line rigs do – ongoing maintenance for other rigs (normal routine maintenance, long maintenance, etc.)

#### Additional on Level of service

- Region EMS council is looking to add region wide paramedics to help readmission to hospital for wound care, etc.
- We shouldn’t focus on maintaining level we are at today, but instead maintaining a level that our customers expect today, which is a 4 minute response time 90% of the time

- We are judged by Washington Survey and Rating Bureau, which rates fire departments for the purposes of adjusting insurance rates
  - District 8 insurance level rating went from a 6 to a 5 because they made commitment to consistently staff station 34 – for a rural agency, 5 is a great number.
  - City of Bellingham insurance level rating has been class 3 for several decades. On the cusp of class 3 and 4, which is effected by facility locations, age of apparatus, prevention program, and training program. The biggest deficiency is that we are behind on commercial inspections.
  - We have been borrowing neighbor's training facilities.
  - Concerned with losing ground on these ratings and maintaining level of service that the public is expecting
- Chief Hewett will take feedback into consideration, look at the proposed charter and match the goals so they are more in line with what was discussed at this meeting.

#### 4. Electing Committee Chair, Vice-Chair, appointing secretary – Planning Committee members (10 min.)

The committee voted unanimously to elect Terry Bornemann as the chair, Rob Neher as the vice chair and appoint Monea Kerr as the secretary of the RFA Planning Committee.

The next meeting will be held on Wednesday, August 9 from 3:00PM-5:00PM. This meeting will focus on changing the draft charter to more talk about critical issues we've talked about in last meeting and today, answer questions, get financial questions answered, estimated costs, comparable mill rate, capital needs (\$ amounts)

Recorded by Monea Kerr