

**City of Bellingham – Fire District 8
Regional Fire Authority Planning Committee
Meeting 14**

Date: **Monday, March 19, 2018**

Time: 3:00 P.M. – 5:00 P.M.

Location: Bellingham City Hall - Mayor's Boardroom

Proposed Agenda

1. Approval of Minutes from February 16th, 2018 (5 minutes)
2. Future of the Planning Committee
3. Closing Comments/Adjourn

The Regional Fire Authority Planning Committee meeting was called to order by Bellingham City Councilmember Terry Bornemann at 3:02 P.M. The meeting was held in the Mayor's Boardroom at Bellingham City Hall, 210 Lottie Street, Bellingham.

Present: Kelli Linville, COB Mayor
Bill Hewett, Assistant Fire Chief
Bill Newbold, Fire Chief
Rob Neher, Fire District 8 Commissioner
Terry Borneman, Bellingham City Council
Roger Buswell, Fire District 8 Commissioner
Brian Henshaw, COB Finance Director
Brian Heinrich, COB Deputy Administrator
Rick Sepler, COB Planning and Community Development Director
Peter Ruffatto, COB Attorney
Marty Mulholland, IT Director
Forrest Longman, COB Finance Officer
David Lehman, Fire District 8 Commissioner
Andy Asbjornsen, COB Finance Manager
Todd Lagastee, Citizen
Monea Kerr, COB Mayor's Office
Michael Lilliquist, Bellingham City Council
Jay Comfort, Fire Captain
Dave Pethick, Fire Captain, IAFF L106 VP

1. Approval of Minutes February 16th, 2018

The February 16th, 2018 minutes were unanimously approved.

2. Future of the Planning Committee

Councilmember Bornemann said I understand we got some decisions to make but it's not me who should bring those things up.

Assistant Chief Hewett said since our last meeting, the City has met a couple times independently to look at where the City is at and how things are looking. The planning committee members talk about where they think we are at. Unfortunately, Councilmember Bornemann is the most in the dark because we haven't had the chance to meet with him recently. We are looking at considering slowing down the RFA process. Putting the plan to ballot this August is not a realistic goal. There are a lot of things this could or couldn't mean.

Councilmember Bornemann said I understand that a couple people on the committee decided this is not the time to go forward with it, but no official decision has been made and the committee needs to get this on the record. I didn't meet with the fire folks but I did meet with the two Brians so I know what their opinions are. I also know what Councilmember Lilliquist and the mayor's opinions are.

Mayor Kelli said I wanted to make sure that if we put an RFA on the ballot it would be successful. We have put a jail measure on the ballot two times and failed, and I don't want this to turn out like that. I support a countywide RFA, but it's all about the timing. Honoring the merits of an RFA are different than using the RFA to fill holes in the City budget. The City budget is different than two years ago when exploring an RFA was put on the list of things to do. It is important for me that the City maintain the relationship with Fire District 8 and that our commitment to the level of service that is expected of us is maintained. As the mayor of the City, I don't want that relationship to change. If we decide to wait, we need to prepare for when the timing is right. We need to think about how we would like to go about that – do we meet periodically? Do we keep the planning committee together? I am very supportive of an RFA further down the line and want to maintain our partnership with Fire District 8. I am interested to know what your opinion is about moving forward.

Fire District 8 Commissioner Roger Buswell said we are two years into a four year contract, so any changes within those two years won't affect us. Right now, we can continue the way we are.

Mayor Kelli said two years down the road we may be ready to go out for something.

Councilmember Michael Lilliquist said I am a lot less skeptical than I once was. It seems doable, but is it advisable? We had strong pressures on our budget, and those aren't gone but they are eased. The large list of service improvements and capitals includes near term and far term items. It might be possible to make progress on that list, but we can't buy the whole list without new funding or a new financial outlook. If we can start working towards the first part of that list without taking a toll on our funding too much. We can dance for two more years.

Councilmember Bornemann said I think the RFA is the wave of the future and I think it is the best idea for the Fire Department, but I am fine with delaying it so that we can get the support for it to be feasible on the ballot. Right now we do not have enough support to be able to do it at this time. This process was important because it has shown what we need to maintain the level of service we have promised. I am glad to hear we can fill the holes that need to be filled with our current budget. We are in better shape financially to be able to do these things.

Fire District 8 Commissioner Rob Neher said when it comes time to renegotiate, we can revisit. At this point, if we were to do that, I don't think there is a whole lot left to pull the trigger. We were on the last step and the finance part is the one that needs to be finished. Level of service, who needs to provide what, etc. was already ironed out. If we do come back in two years to revisit an RFA, I don't see it taking another year to push through the process.

Fire District 8 Commissioner David Lehman said I agree with that, but looking into the future, budget crises always happen. If you can time it just right and have everything ready to go and know when the right time is, we can play it by ear.

Mayor Kelli said internally there were many more questions that went beyond just splitting up the work. Some other alternatives to continue to maintain our level of service are things that don't have to go out to the voters. If they have to go out to the voters, it's still an election and you don't know the mood of the public at any given time and there is a tiny bit of tax increase fatigue right now. A fire safety benefit charge is reasonable. I like the idea of it not evaporating completely.

Councilmember Lilliquist said the one time or occasion to go to the voters is when it's by necessity. If we go as far as we can with the existing structure and funding, it's not entirely necessary yet. It can become so in the future.

Mayor Kelli said Councilmember Bornemann mentioned that Fire has identified the enhancements they would like to do to bring us to a level of service that is adequate. Since we are all using the same services, a discussion of prioritizing the list of items they found needs to happen. Looking at where we want to be and incrementally adding to that until we get there would be best. What's the most critical and how do we add that to the next biennial budget, understanding we can't do it all in two years?

Chief Newbold said to that point, I am going to look to put together a bunch of proposals for the next 4 years. The items that were identified, RFA or no RFA, were important and need to be handled and planned for. I will put together a phase-in plan.

Mayor Kelli said similarly, we did a phase-in plan for the Police Department when they wanted to change their policing model.

Assistant Chief Hewett said I guess once we get all of our ideas out, the next thing would be to talk about our next steps as a planning committee. I just wanted to talk about what would need to be done to have a plan go to the voters. There are three things we need to accomplish: complete the ILA, finish the finance section of the plan, and go through a public process. Whether its hearings at commissioner or council meetings or open houses, we would need these to get a

finished plan out. Option 1 as a planning committee is to stay together and change the frequency of when we meet. Option 2 is to officially disband the planning committee and then wait for a period of time down the road when it is the right time for us to come together again. The benefit of keeping the planning committee together is it shows we are still headed in the same direction, but there are other ways to show that same progression. The purpose of the planning committee is to work on the plan until we finish it or come to a point in which we realize we don't need a plan. If we disband, it does not prohibit us from continuing to meet. Some of our first meetings at the airport were before we had an official planning committee, so nothing prevents us from meeting without being an official planning committee. Those are our options, and I wanted to put those out there and see what the planning committee thinks.

Councilmember Bornemann said it would be nice to keep the planning committee together to hear about the phasing plan from Chief Newbold. Until we make a decision that we are going to go forward with an RFA in the future, it doesn't make sense to continue meeting until we make that decision.

Commissioner Neher said I kind of lean towards what Councilmember Bornemann was saying. I like the idea of keeping the planning committee together because I would hate to have to start all over with brand new people a year down the road. An update every 4 or 6 months to keep our toes in the water would be appropriate. There is the possibility of forgetting where we're at in the process, what's changed and the priorities. We are waiting for the chief's proposals and ideas, and I don't want to wait a year or a year and a half down the road to hear them. I would still like to have some sort of communication other than emails and minutes.

Commissioner Buswell said I am in favor of keeping the committee together. Remember the learning curve it took to get everyone else up to the speed of the fire mode we have been living in for the past umpteenth years.

Councilmember Lilliquist said it would be better to keep the body going at a slower pace. It would be preferred to keep it going because of the foundation we have created. We have some unfinished business. Part of that is finding a way to address our level of service needs, which Chief Newbold will be handling. We need to focus on our most needed services first and then the next most needed services will follow. We need to be able to gauge the urgency of where we need to go. The plan itself is a half written document. How much work would it take to button up the Inter Local Agreement? Would it be too much time and energy to finish it?

Assistant Chief Hewett said the ILA is maybe 10-20% done, and it was 10% done when we exchanged "Renton" for "Bellingham." One of the things that scares me about putting it on hold is that it could vanish out of everyone's mind. It would be nice to see if we could continue to work on that document. The biggest thing holding us back is finishing the ILA and figuring out costs of services and transferring those services. August is really close, so it scared everyone that the measure would be going on the ballot so soon with an October 1 RFA start date. For us to continue to work on that document and bring things back to the planning committee, it will be

nice to slow down the pace and relieve some of the pressure of trying to figure it out between now and May when we would have to turn in the ballot measure.

Mayor Kelli said I am happy that people don't want to just dissolve the group. I thought at the last meeting there was sentiment to discontinue the planning committee. If we started over, we would lose a lot of ground. I think it is very much worth having a joint discussion on the budgeting. The City is going to be writing our budget for the next two years. I think there would be subject matter for the planning committee to be able to meet with some regularity. I always assumed that staff would still be working together at a slower pace to iron out some of the details in the ILA and then bring this forward to the group to discuss. IT Director Marty Mulholland and Finance Director Brian Henshaw were the main internal people working on this at a very high level and slowing down could give them some relief. I think this is a partnership and everything we do, I would like to have the partners talk about it together.

Councilmember Lilliquist asked: When in the natural course of your job might you be able to bring something forward to this group to chew on? If we go at this slower pace, what new material would be ready and by when? Should we meet again in 4 months?

Chief Newbold said the phasing plan will be ready within the next month or two. I will defer to Captain Dave Pethick, Finance Director Henshaw and IT Director Mulholland about the work of the ILA.

Captain Pethick said I think your two department heads have a tremendous amount of work to do. There are things that need to be worked out to get this ILA language where it needs to be. I think it would take months.

IT Director Mullholland said if it were moving forward, it was going to be a burning priority for me over other work plans. Having months to get it finished would be ideal. It's very difficult to fill in numbers when you don't know certain ones.

Mayor Kelli said maybe since you have been working on the ILA, we can identify key factors and come up with options over time. There is a lot of background stuff that needs to be done to be able to put it together and it might feel like we are putting forward the time to do it right if we do it slowly.

Councilmember Lilliquist said so should our next meeting be in 3 months?

Chief Newbold said it is likely that Captain Pethick might go back on shift at the end of this month. What I would ask of him, Finance Director Henshaw and IT Director Mulholland is to set up an exit strategy for Captain Pethick going back on to the line. It would define the elements that are still outstanding and still need to be done. Once the framework is identified, I would rely on Finance Director Mulholland and her staff and Finance Director Henshaw and his staff to complete those outlined things.

Mayor Kelli said for me and others who aren't actually doing the work of the ILA, it seems it can go faster than it actually can.

Finance Director Henshaw said there are certain things we can do. Over the next 6 months, we will be working on the biennial budget and Fire Department priorities will be included in that. We were preemptively coming up with numbers and now the biennial budget will give us those numbers. We won't lose ground on what Captain Pethick has already done. Numbers will be formulated in the next couple of months and sometime in the fall all that useful information will be available and then we can prioritize. There are elements we can work on simultaneously and then have those come forward. We will be able to see Fire priorities and all other City priorities and bring those to the public. We have to do new program requests, internal costs, capital costs etc. and those numbers come in at the end of the year.

Councilmember Bornemann asked: what do we want to do about setting up a meeting?

Chief Newbold said 3 months is too far out to meet. I'd say meeting at end of April or beginning of May would work well.

Councilmember Lilliquist said April 30th or May 14th are non-council days.

Councilmember Bornemann asked: Does meeting on April 30th, same time same place, work for everyone?

Chief Newbold said I will be prepared to come forward with something and it will be a good opportunity to have that exit strategy and the knowledge from Finance, IT and Captain Pethick to understand what is needed.

Finance Director Henshaw said we are going to continue to work on the ILA. We are trying to put it into a legal format so all the departments are into one. Before we stopped working on it, that's where I remember we were. We can report back anything we've found at that point. Since Fire has been working on this, you are going to be far ahead of the budget process. We don't need to rush into the next meeting. As a context, we've got time.

Mayor Kelli asked: On April 30th would we be able to identify outstanding issues?

All said yes.

Councilmember Lilliquist asked: Is there any motion needed that we aren't going forward with this?

Chief Hewett said I don't think we necessarily need to make such a motion because the fact that we are not going to have a plan adopted by the May deadline will be reflected in our minutes and shows that we would have to go further out. I don't see a value in making a motion.

Councilmember Lilliquist said I see a value.

Councilmember Bornemann said the one value I see is that we work as part of the plan, saying that we will be changing our ballot measure date.

Planning and Community Development Director Rick Sepler said it seems appropriate to update the status to council for near term and long term.

Mayor Kelli said I recommend that we don't move forward now, but not dissolve all together.

Councilmember Lilliquist said it could be something like: I move that we revise the estimated time table so that it no longer shows anticipated ballot in August

Captain Pethick said if it's not august and we're keeping this thing going, is there a direction from the planning committee that we should be taking?

Chief Hewett said if we aren't pushing another process, can we just continue?

Councilmember Bornemann said what if we move to postpone the ballot date from August 2018 to a date to be determined? That way we are postponing that date rather than ending the planning committee altogether.

Councilmember Lilliquist said I would like to make a motion that we postpone the ballot date from August 2018 to a date to be determined.

David Lehmann seconds and the motion passes unanimously.

COB Deputy Administrator Brian Heinrich said when we discussed this early on we were talking about bringing an update of this item to City Council on March 26th. Should we still do that?

Councilmember Bornemann said yes, it will be brought to the Public Safety Committee.

3. Closing Comments/Adjourn

Mayor Kelli said I've really enjoyed doing this and have learned a lot. I agree with whoever said that it was a worthwhile process to figure out everything we need.

Councilmember Bornemann said it's been a pleasure working with everyone and I have learned a lot. It's been a huge learning curve and I've enjoyed working with everyone and look forward to working with you all in the future.

The RFA Planning Committee adjourned at 3:54 P.M.

Recorded by Monea Kerr.