

Donald Wescott Fire Protection District, Feb. 19

# Merger talks decline; firefighter promotions approved

*By Allison Robenstein*  
During the Feb. 19 meeting, the Donald Wescott Fire Protection District (DWFPD) board discussed amendments to the previously approved 2019 budget and approved firefighter promotions. It also discussed merger options, heard

a presentation about the annual audit, and discussed creating board bylaws. Budget amended without formal procedures; firefighter promotions approved  
Director Gary Rusnak used the recently reformatted monthly financial

report to point out changes made to the 2019 budget. Before this meeting, the board agreed to transfer \$34,000 from committed funds to expenses to pay county treasurer's fees. Because of additional changes to expenses, Rusnak said, "This is not the budget the board approved in December." Legal counsel Matt Court said he was comfortable with the change without a formal discussion or vote.

A unanimous vote to approve the January financials was substituted for a formal budget hearing for the amendment.

Chairman William "Bo" McAllister requested the board approve moving \$62,696 from committed funds for the following:

- \$60,000 to non-exempt employee salaries.
- \$1,000 to administrative staff salaries.
- \$1,696 to pay for legal fees incurred in January.

During budget negotiations, the directors decided to move \$61,000 from salary funds into committed funds because they were unsure how the chiefs intended to use the money. Tonight, Director Larry Schwarz asked the chiefs to clarify the benefits to the community.

Wescott Fire Chief Vinny Burns said that historically, the two stations were managed by officers working at Station 1. Firefighters not in-grade, meaning those who were not officers, were taking on leadership roles and making command decisions at Station 2 without the proper certifications or training. These promotional requests are to train, certify, and promote three people to lieutenant, some of whom will be working from Station 2.

Assistant Chief Scott Ridings and Burns said the promotional process will include training, assessment, and interviews. Schwarz said it was "gratifying to know that type of detail" and agreed to approve the promotions.

The motion to approve firefighter promotions passed 4-1 with Rusnak voting no, with no reason given.

## TLMFPD merger discussion

Schwarz said he received an email from Tri-Lakes Monument Protection District (TLMFPD) Fire Chief Chris Truty saying his board directed him to write a

contract with Wescott but gave no further details. Schwarz said he had been surprised by the email because he said it's "essentially a takeover" by TLMFPD to adopt Wescott into its organization.

McAllister said DWFPD isn't looking for a contract for services and was bewildered this had even been extended. Rusnak wondered aloud if TLMFPD had moved in that direction since Wescott had made little effort to communicate its intentions. He and TLMFPD Treasurer John Hildebrandt had been emailing budget questions back and forth. Rusnak said he answered Hildebrandt's questions, but had sent his response to his board for their approval rather than directly to Hildebrandt. No one had forwarded Rusnak's responses to Hildebrandt.

Secretary Mark Gunderman said although he doesn't want to close the door on negotiations, perhaps this isn't the right time for a merger and discussion should be put on the back burner. He is still concerned about cultural differences between the two districts, saying a merger would be more successful if the two were more culturally aligned.

Schwarz and Burns, along with Treasurer Joyce Hartung, agreed to set up a meeting with Truty to get his thoughts. All agreed it would be beneficial to continue to build respect and trust among the boards.

Station Capt. Sean Pearson said he often works with TLMFPD to hold joint training exercises.

## 2018 audit gets clean opinion

Tom Sistare of Hoelting and Company Inc. performed the 2018 budget audit, concluding with an unmodified clean opinion.

Burns had previously asked for extra budget money to pay for the audit in 2019, knowing the department had been randomly selected by Fire and Police Pension Association to perform an extended audit, which includes examination of census and payroll data. Sistare said the exam showed the department's numbers were "spot-on, perfect."

He found that firefighting expenses had increased 26.5 percent, due mostly to overtime. At the end of the year, the district had no outstanding debt.

The only note of consequence from Sistare was that there be more segregation of financial duties since Executive Administrator Stacey Popovich is the only accounting person.

## Bylaws and attorney time

McAllister suggested the board work on bylaws in the next year, saying the first one should be that no one contact Court. "None of us on this board have the right to call Matt," McAllister told them.

Rusnak and Schwarz pushed back on this. "If we have a question, I should be able to ask Matt," Rusnak said. Burns said that at one time he was appointed as the board contact, suggesting this would be beneficial since he can determine if a board member's question could be answered in-house or require legal review.

## Chief's report

Ridings reported there had been 90 calls for service in January. He said two fires were put out with no damage to property.

Burns reported the following:

- DWFPD will work toward a better Insurance Services Organization (ISO) rating with the intent of lowering homeowners' insurance rates. Wescott is currently rated a



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