

BFFRPD (Cont. from 18)

Forest community, he said, and he has asked the district staff to be smart during the pandemic.

- The Rosenbauer Type 1 Engine and SVI 2019 Type 1 are currently out of service.
- The district has received multiple requests regarding cisterns and other development issues.
- BFFRPD worked on a project with Classic Homes that was productive.

- Planning has been focused on wildland defense with a consistent concern about the persistent lack of moisture.
- The district has three staff openings.

Bear Creek Fire assistance

Langmaid said the district had received a letter of heartfelt thanks from the chief of the Colorado Springs Fire Department thanking BFFRPD for the much-needed mutual aid response during the Bear Creek Fire on Nov. 19. The letter stated that “without assistance from BFFRPD, the impact of the fire could have been far greater to the neighborhood

and community of Colorado Springs.”

The meeting adjourned at 9:15 p.m.

Meetings are usually held at 7 p.m. on the third Wednesday of each month at BFFRPD Station 1, 11445 Teachout Road, Colorado Springs. The next regular board meeting is scheduled for Jan. 20 at 7 p.m. Due to COVID-19, meetings will be held via Zoom until further notice. For joining instructions, updates, and minutes, visit www.bffire.org.

Natalie Barszcz can be reached at nataliebarszcz@ocn.me.

Donald Wescott Fire Protection District meeting, Dec. 1**2021 budget approved as focus is on reserves**

By Allison Robenstein

The Donald Wescott Fire Protection District (DWF-PD) met Dec. 1 for its annual budget public hearing and approved the 2021 budget. The board’s main concern was maintaining reserve balances. Discussion between board members and Chief Vinny Burns regarding salaries ended positively.

Highlights of the 2021 budget

District counsel Michelle Ferguson confirmed the budget meeting notice had been published in a newspaper and the budget was made available before the meeting for public review on www.wescott.org.

Chairman Mark Gunderman said he reached out individually to other board members, who agreed philosophically on the direction regarding the budget. Maintaining the reserve fund was important to all of them. “We wanted to shore this up as best we can” to consider any uncertainty 2021 may hold.

Many of these budget highlights were discussed during the meeting, including:

- Health insurance increases from \$290,000 to \$335,000. Executive Administrator Stacey Popovich said part of the increase was because of the addition of new employees. Annual fitness tests were included in the line item this year but not in previous years. The tests cost \$20,000. Burns said the National Fire Protection Association guidelines for health and fitness requires these tests for diseases specific to the fire safety career, including cancer, respiratory, and cardiac testing.
- Burns asked the board to approve \$350,000 in the Building and Equipment line item, however the request was decreased by the board to \$20,600. This covers bunker gear, Station 2 updates including lockers, concrete and stucco repairs, crack and sealing for parking lot, and Station 1 decontamination before the new exhaust system is installed. Gunderman suggested additional item requests may be approved through supplemental budget requests further into the year.
- Director Larry Schwarz asked for clarification on the request for 10 new radios at \$70,000.

Burns said the current Motorola radios will become obsolete once the county updates programming. Battalion Chief Shannon Balvanz said, “Anytime we buy a radio it comes with a charger and a microphone,” so those are included in the purchase price. The district will have to purchase an extra battery for each radio plus a new battery reconditioning unit. “They [Motorola] have the market cornered,” said Burns.

- The board approved \$76,000 for a new Genesis Rescue Systems extrication system. The board was notified at the October meeting that the current system went offline. See Vol. 20 No. 11 - November 7, 2020 (ocn.me). Replacement parts are scarce for the 15-year-old kit, but if it can be fixed it will be used for training.
- Burns asked the board to approve funding for electronic billboards for Stations 1 and 2. Each cost \$30,000 and would be used to promote events, provide weather alerts and red flag warnings. “We looked at this as a very good way to get our information out,” said Burns. The board agreed to put the money into reserves to perhaps buy these later in the year.
- The Classes, Tuition and Workshops line item increased from \$2,600 in 2020 to \$25,000 in 2021. Lt. Roger Lance asked the board to confirm continuing education is for all district employees. Burns said the money is for anyone who would like to further their education “to prepare you guys for being better officers and moving up the chain and being a well-rounded individual.” He said many fire departments expect incoming firefighters to have at least an associate degree. Education courses must be aligned with the work done in the district such as emergency services, fire service management, or disaster preparedness.

The budget was unanimously approved.

Salary discussions

The board had numerous questions for Burns regarding salaries. “We feel pretty strongly ... we would like to be able to give” a 3.5% raise for firefighters, said Gunderman. In the end a 4.5% step increase was approved.

Popovich said the intent was to provide raises for lieutenants and below. No chiefs are scheduled for a pay increase this year. Burns said that since the district changed the rank structure last year, paramedic pay and lieutenant pay are similar. To compensate for the issue, lieutenants will get a greater step increase than others this year. Schwarz said the lieutenant step increase from \$80,000 to \$84,000 for step two is comparable to regional partners. “At \$84,000 for lieutenants, you’ve exceeded Tri-Lakes [Fire Protection District] right there.”

Burns confirmed even those firefighters who don’t wish to seek promotion and are “happy sitting in the backseat,” receive a step raise if their obligations are met from year one up to year 20.

During the November board meeting, there was discussion to remove a chief position. Part-time Assistant Chief Jim McBride’s position was considered non-essential to the board. See OCN Vol. 20 No. 12 - December 5, 2020 (www.ocn.me/v20n12.htm#dwfpd). Gunderman said of McBride’s services, “I have a hard time supporting that and my recommendation would be we do not use taxpayer money to compensate him any further.” All the other board members agreed. Burns said, “I’ve already made arrangements for that.”

Public comments

Resident Mary Gunderman praised DWFPD for its prompt and professional responses. “We so appreciate you,” she said. This reporter noted the outstanding work done on the district’s new website.

The meeting adjourned at 5:41 p.m.

The next Donald Wescott fire district meeting is scheduled for Jan. 19 at 4 p.m. If the meeting is held in person it will be at Station 1, 15415 Gleneagle Dr. For a virtual meeting, the phone number is 669-900-9128, and the meeting code is 980 378 2073. Meetings are usually on the third Tuesday of each month at 7 p.m. For information, call Executive Administrator Stacey Popovich at 719-488-8680 or see www.wescottfire.org.

Allison Robenstein can be contacted at allisonrobenstein@ocn.me

El Paso Board of County Commissioners, Dec. 1, 8, 15, and 22**Approval for residential development on Benet Hill Monastery land; WMMI litigation update**

By Helen Walklett

During December, the El Paso Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) approved rezoning and preliminary plan requests for The Sanctuary of Peace residential development on Benet Hill Monastery land in Black Forest. The commissioners also heard an update on the Western Museum of Mining and Industry’s (WMMI) variance of use application.

Sanctuary of Peace Residential Community

At their Dec. 8 meeting, the commissioners heard requests by Benet Hill Monastery for the rezoning from RR-5 (rural residential) and A-5 (agricultural) to PUD (planned unit development) to allow the development of 26 attached residential lots and a lot to be used as a private business event center on land adjacent to the monastery. The 49.9-acre

parcel of land is north of Stagecoach Road, south of Benet Lane, east of Roller Coaster Road, and west of Highway 83.

The El Paso County Planning Commission recommended the application for approval by a vote of 7-1 at its Nov. 19 meeting. Commissioner Becky Fuller voted against it amid concerns about the monastery owning the open space. She felt its ownership should lie with the Homeowners’ Association (HOA) to provide adequate protection for future property owners. See https://www.ocn.me/v20n12.htm?zoom_highlight=%22sanctuary+of+peace%22

Kari Parsons, planner III, Planning and Community Development Department, told the BOCC that, since the Planning Commission hearing, the applicant had met with county staff and had agreed

to make modifications to address the concerns over the open space’s ownership. The majority will now be owned by the HOA.

Dave Gorman of M.V.E. Inc., on behalf of the applicant, described the proposed development as a clustered residential community in Black Forest that would aim to cause minimal disturbance to the existing natural features. The development would preserve most of the property, along with its natural features, in perpetuity with almost 90% remaining as open space. Access would be via Benet Lane off Highway 83. A new road would connect to Benet Lane in two places.

Gorman said that emergency access would be via easements across neighboring land and that this access would also work in reverse, providing emergency access to Highway 83 should the need