

Minutes of the Custer County Commission Special Proposed Fire District Meeting, Friday, July 19, 2024

Members present:

Commissioners Jim Lintz, Mark Hartman, Mike Linde, Michael Busskohl, Craig Hindle and Commission Legal Counsel Aaron Davis. City of Custer Officials and Matt and Selena Spring were in attendance. City Liaison, Todd Pechota was not in attendance.

A. Commission Meeting was called to order at 2:30 PM, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance.

B. Adopting of the agenda

1. Chairman Lintz stated that Executive Session would be determined by State's Attorney, Tracy Kelley, or meeting advisor; he will not call for Executive Session and noted this needs to remain an open meeting.
2. Motion to approve made by Linde; seconded by Hartman; vote taken, all aye; motion carried.

C. Custer Fire District Meeting

1. Matt and Selena Spring appeared before the Commission; Dave Lindblom, Battle Creek Fire District, appeared as well. Informational packets were emailed to all Commissioners prior to today's meeting. Many questions arose, some of the first questions pertained to transfer of equipment and assets from the CVFD to the District, if formed. It was noted the transition plan is not complicated; an association would be formed from the current department; the association can then purchase equipment, etc. If a district is formed, another election will need to be held to elect district board members. The need for transparency regarding cash assets, as well as equipment was stressed, as the taxpayers want to know before voting on the issue.

Commissioner Hartman asked the purpose of the proposed district; he is hearing from the public that a new firehall is the main goal. Hartman stated the main need is to have full-time staff, firefighters and response time, not the building. He stated the need to change-up the message or time is being wasted at this point. Matt Spring stated the need for on-site staff and the building is part of that; without the building, they cannot get staff. Selena Spring noted that the building design is completed and has been presented to the City of Custer, and they are on board with the plans. Matt Spring stated the station building is the foundation of the District; funds are not available to build without formation of the District. Hartman stated he is not against the building, but the fire department needs to push the idea of paid firefighters to staff and have a better response time for emergencies. The current Power Point Presentation was discussed and the public is urged to review and become informed.

Discussion was also held regarding options to have the issue placed on the ballot for the General Election to be held in November. One is by Resolution; another is by Petition. It was noted there is not enough time or manpower to obtain signatures, so Resolution is preferred. Chairman Lintz noted that the issue of Fire District formation has been ongoing for the past ten years. State's Attorney, Tracy Kelley, stated this issue stays in place whether or not it passes. The building comes with the District, but it remains secondary. Hartman stated the need to have firefighting staff, even if it means renting or purchasing a house in Custer for them. Selena Spring said there is no money to buy or rent housing at this time. Kelley stated perhaps the community can work together to find housing for staff. Spring stated the building is being made a target. Busskohl stated the need for the County and City to work together. Springs' asked how soon monies could be available to CVFD if the proposed district doesn't pass; would money be set aside at this budget time? Matt stated he has been told by the Commission there is no money available from them. Discussion was then held regarding prior ARPA and annual monies provided by Custer County to the CVFD. Custer City Mayor, Bob Brown, stated the City supports the district. Commissioner Busskohl asked who would pay for what expenses when working together. He has received a request for funding, but not a breakdown; Selena Springs stated the Commissioners did receive this information. Hartman noted that the purpose of today's meeting is to discuss the passage of the Resolution; Custer County has a legal liability to provide fire protection. Selena Spring stated Commissioner Hindle is the only one that is willing to vote to pass the Resolution at this time. She stated the purpose of having a District is to provide a consistent revenue source; hiring staff is primary and the building is secondary. The Power Point lays out exactly what is what is needed. Discussion regarding Petition vs. Resolution was held, noting that the County and City are proactive and applauded them for drafting the Resolution.

Moritz Espy, Fairburn VFD was present and stated that obtaining signatures via Petition is a great point of contact with the public. Espy also inquired how support for smaller departments will continue if this district passes—will Custer County still be able to help with funding. Commissioner Busskohl noted the need to start looking at ways to cover the financial need for smaller departments. EMS Director, Steve Esser, stated the proposed District is destined to fail if passage does not occur this election. Hindle stated that by passing the Resolution, a message is sent to taxpayers that Custer County supports the District.

Dave Lindblom, Battle Creek Fire District, shared information regarding the necessary steps for formation of a new District, transfer of assets, MOU, equipment disposition, etc. He also discussed the importance of separation of taxpayer monies vs. donation and fundraising monies. Further discussion was held regarding disclosure of funds and assets to the taxpayers being asked to vote on the issue. Moritz Espy, Fairburn VFD, stated the balance of 20-years' fundraising is fully disclosed for that

department. Selena Spring stated that the funds that are donated and raised do not necessarily have to be disclosed as those monies are different than tax dollars.

Additional audience discussion was held regarding owning and operating equipment vs. contracting those services. Commissioner Hartman said that a District should own equipment and the building and provide staff to operate rather than contracting to mitigate the possibility of having contracts ending and leaving residents with no service or coverage.

State's Attorney, Tracy Kelley, reiterated the need to educate the public and provide transparency regarding the balance of funds and how those funds are being spent in order to garner support for the District. Todd Fish stated there is a need for the District and to better gain public support, focus needs to be on why a District should be formed; he stated it is better for the District board to discuss the building portion.

The audience was encouraged to attend future informational meetings; the next meeting to be held Monday, July 29, 2024 @ 6:30 PM at the Custer Fire Hall. Chairman Lintz stated that if we don't get behind the formation of the District, then we may not have service at all.

D. Executive Session--None

E. Adjourn

Motion by Linde and seconded by Busskohl to adjourn the meeting at 3:57 PM; vote taken, all aye; motion carried. The next meeting will be at 8:00 AM, July 24, 2024 in the Commissioner's Room in the Custer County Courthouse.

Jim Lintz, Chairman

Attest: _____

Barbara Cox, Custer County Deputy Auditor

Published once at the total approximate cost of _____.