

September 30, 2020

Fisher River Valley Fire/Rescue
Fire Service Area (FSA)
Public Hearing
6:00 PM

Present were Commissioner Peck, Commissioner Bennett, Robin Swimley, Michael A. Roediger, David Anderson, Barb Benson Neumann, Agnes M. Kemp, Irene Loveless, Jerry Auger, Michael A. Munro, Joe Kelly, Tom Hill, Ken Preston, Terry & Larry Pitcher, Louis Jenkins, Jon Moe, Donna Moe, Michael & Kristin Bilkos, Bert Oxford, Sue Vincent, Will Vincent, Bobbie Olsen, Karol Spas-Otte, Mike Otte, Deb & Ron Sassaman, Mike & Lisa Hanks, Ron Pearson, Paul & Karin Bache, Randy Bock, Jon Wagner, Danell Wagner, Rhonda Francis, Mabel Beito, Ken Witheee, Will Langhorne, Ray Stout, Mary Johnson, Bob & Jenn Taylor, Jack McManus, Martin Gilman, David Neumann, and Clerk & Recorder Robin Benson. Also present was Kirk Kraft via phone conference.

Chairman of the Fisher River Valley Fire/Rescue Board Robin Swimley made introductions of commissioners and the FSA board members in attendance.

Commissioner Peck thanked everybody for their attendance and talked about potential county growth, assessments conducted by the state and clarified that the county does not have a county assessor. Commissioner Peck said the commissioners want to hear from everyone so they can make an informed decision. Commissioner Peck said he reviewed the FSA annual budget revenues vs. requirements and there is a huge gap. Commissioner Peck expressed that without fire income, the FSA is bankrupt, and the FSA cannot depend on fire income. Commissioner Peck read from statutes explaining commissioner authority and responsibilities.

Robin gave out a form showing the current assessment fee structure and proposal and explained how some structures were not being assessed residential and/or nonresidential. Robin shared the fees for all the countywide fire service areas and talked about how fire service areas are structured in comparison to fire districts. It comes down to what do we want for services. Wildland fire monies although controversial, does help pay for our operating costs. Robin commended the amount of community donations and fundraiser monies that come in. Robin talked about ambulance expenditures and revenues and how ambulance service and costs affects the FSA budget. Robin explained the budget expenditures, repair/maintenance costs, whether new or older equipment, the costs are very expensive. Robin further explained how structures such as barns and new buildings should be accounted for in the fees. Robin commented the FSA received a \$175,000 grant to replace the older ambulance, but the FSA needs to come up with a 10% match or \$17,000. The point is we all take this very seriously, nobody wants to increase taxes or fees. It comes down to what the community wants.

Mike Otte commented the FSA cannot charge for bare land because an FSA cannot duplicate state fees. Mike expressed that it does not make sense that a fire truck that needing \$15,000 repairs but is only worth \$6,000. Mike commented about the over mileage a few years back and asked the commissioners why they don't fund the ambulance for the citizens. Mike thanked those on the fire department for their service, time, and effort.

Dave Anderson talked about people not paying fees that live in the FSA.

Ron Pearson asked what the definition is for a piece of property that has an improvement. Who can tell us what is the definition of an improvement?

Tom Powers talked about raw land vs. developed land; a road is built, when county approves a subdivision, and questioned why impact fees are not acknowledged and new structures at that time; it's no longer raw land. We have RV's living in the area, and we do not receive any fees from them.

Commissioner Peck talked about the difference between FSA fees on structures and undeveloped land, saying that it comes down to the statutes.

There was a brief discussion about the Montana Codes and how they are applied.

Dave Anderson asked about applying impact fees at the time subdivisions are approved.

Robin clarified the difference of fire district monies that come from mill levies, and fire service areas based on fees per class. We want the best equipment for our EMT's and fire crews, but we don't have firm numbers on how much we are subsidizing the ambulance.

Barb talked about how fees are received and about billing. Because Fisher River is a rural ambulance service along a major highway, we have a lot of calls that involve car accidents for which we don't always get paid; people don't have insurance or liability only and many people cannot pay for service. Barb talked about how the Medicare and Medicaid do not pay much nor are we allowed to bill if Alert picks up the patient from the scene. We do try to privately bill, but billing is a real problem.

Robin said the key is what type of service we want as a community; we need to make these decisions.

Mike Otte commented that they are getting double taxed for ambulance services.

Robin talked about the fire truck that needs replaced and building maintenance costs. As equipment is replaced it's based on need, not where the equipment is placed.

Sue commented that she is confused regarding undeveloped land and how those fees and taxes are applied.

Commissioner Peck commented there is a balance to having some wildland fire capability; that makes sense. We are in full agreement the ambulance issue is completely wrong and we have to fix that. Commissioner Bennett has been working on that. Commissioner Peck talked about the ambulance board and the problem with local government efficiencies. Commissioner Peck explained that the membership on the ambulance board has no citizen member, these are things we are in the process of working on, we hear you on the ambulance stuff, it's not right and we are going to fix it. We hear you and don't disagree with any of it. Commissioner Peck commented that the purpose of fire departments in Montana have been brought on to wildland fires, so local agencies can get people trained and exposed to fire to better serve and defend their own district. You want your local fire fighters to know how to deal with wildland fire efficiently. Will Vincent talked about an audit to determine what all the fees go to so everybody can know where the fees go.

Commissioner Peck commented there is a real balance. If we have a bad fire year, and we get some starts, we want local guys to be able to deal with it, but that doesn't mean we become a full-blown wildland fire district.

Ron Pearson asked if the fee increase includes ambulance cost. Some of the money in the increase will go towards the ambulance. Ron questioned about fees from a car accident, and how those insurance companies work.

Mike Powers questioned the non-taxation, how are we going to get on top of that?

Robin said the DOR will send a list to the FSA and that is how its currently being done.

Commissioner Bennett commented that the state closed 22 of its DOR offices across the state, basically gutted that department.

Commissioner Bennett talked about conducting a countywide assessment of ambulance services. Partnering with the hospital, it will cost approximately \$20,000 to conduct that assessment. The county is going to move forward with that. The ambulance is a separate district and controls its own money since it began in the 1980's. Fisher River will be in the discussion, but we need to get that assessment done first.

Commissioner Bennett gave a brief history of the Fisher River FSA and talked about how he was given a 15-minute notice to evacuate during the Houghton Creek Fire. That is why we looked at this building and Ranchers, all mostly done by donations. We looked at both wildland and structural fires. Commissioner Bennett commended everyone, saying you have all done a great job, but it does boil down to what the community wants. This resolution is an intent to see what the budget is and what the requirements are. We are not going to make a decision tonight.

Robin explained how equipment goes through certifications and is tested. If it does not pass it has to be fixed.

Mike Monroe talked about numerous calls he has been called out on. There have been numerous wildland fires and hot spots close to homes and structures. Mike said he stays here purposely to protect our neighborhood. Mike talked about the many medical calls, ambulance and fire calls and expressed that we do need ambulance service out here in this area. Volunteer hours is free labor and many times it is free merchandise, the department does need more volunteers and community support to help make our department a little stronger.

Joe Kelly commented that he has been here since 1978 and has never seen an audit. If the commissioners are going to make a decision, an audit should be required.

Mabel Beito talked about why a fire truck goes out with the ambulance; we can't work in the back and drive the bus. A lot of the medics need help with manpower; we work as a team. The fire truck is there to help us out, especially heavy lifting. We keep going because we care. We have to work hand in hand because we are a skeleton crew, we don't have a lot of help. We go out for initial attack because we can respond quicker, and then other folks come in and help. Try spending a little time in our shoes...volunteer.

Marty Gildman talked about how we all benefit from the fire insurance rating. Look at your insurance from having the fire service. We may lose more by not supporting the increase.

Robin expressed the joint efforts with Ranchers equipment and explained how the equipment is too tall for the building.

And adamantly opposed the idea that equipment is being taken from Ranchers, etc...we all need to work together.

Commissioner Peck talked about EMS funding and how it is something he is going to push for to help offset some of the costs. Commissioner Peck expressed that he thinks it has been unfair, and it is a county thing, across the board.

Dave Anderson told his story of having a heart attack at home, going into full cardiac arrest. Dave said he had about 10 people beating his door down and supports everybody paying their fair share. Dave said he cannot say enough to people on these emergency services.

Commissioner Peck stated that folks want a fire department and EMS. That is the foundation. The EMS side needs to be fixed, and yes, there will be an audit.

8:00 PM Meeting Adjourned

LINCOLN COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

Mark Peck, Chairman

ATTEST: _____
Robin A. Benson, Clerk of the Board