

Trego/Fortine/Stryker Fire Service Area
Open House / Public Hearing
April 14, 2022
6:30 PM

Present were Commissioner Letcher, Commissioner Teske, Clerk & Recorder Robin Benson, Mike McMahon, Dawain Burgess, Nicole Pomeroy, John & Sylvia Mee, Leah & Stoney Fugate, Tillie Butts, Isaiah R. Williams, Elizabeth Williams, Patti Sue Stachofsky, Sharon Vieyra, Ira Eash, Deb Taggart, Justin McNeil, Pom (Alan) Collins, Donald Rosanne and Roland Snedigar.

6:00 PM **Open House:** This was a time set aside for the public to arrive and read materials and information provided. There was no presentation.

The meeting was opened with the Pledge of Allegiance.

6:30 PM **Public Hearing:** *Mike McMahon read and submitted the following documents:*

Welcome and we appreciate you, TFS Members, coming to 1) hear about the local fire department and 2) voice your opinion related to the fee increase proposal for structure fire preparedness and suppression within the TFS Fire Service Area. You will find those proposed rate changes in your handout.

Members of the TFS FSA are homeowners, businesses, and owners of real property such as trailer homes AND are assessed a fee on their tax rolls. We want to limit this comment period to members.

I am ... and a quick introduction of the Fire Service Area board is ... and also introduce the fire chief ...Robin Benson Clerk and Recorder, Josh Letcher, and Brent Teske –Commissioners.

HOW THE PROCESS HAS GONE AND HEARING WILL GO

Last year we presented the County Commissioners with a letter and presentation on the purpose and need for a 100% rate increase. They in turn asked about public input and requested we go through a public hearing since it's been more than 30 years since there has been a public hearing related to fire services in our area. We have discussed the potential for rate increases at the annual members meetings held in November but they would like more. On March 15, 2022, at their regular 3rd Wed of the month meeting they discussed the Resolution of Intent for the Fire Service Areas proposed rate increases – *(as shown on this chart)* AND we discussed the process for this hearing.

I will give a 15 minute presentation, entertain and answer some questions that came up during the open house and then entertain comments from our Fire Service area members.

Following this presentation we will open the comment period.

Robin Benson, the County Clerk and Recorder, will be taking minutes, we will try to record to the best of our technical abilities. Verbal comments, written comments and emails will be compiled and presented to the Commissioners. We encourage folks to write out their comments on the cards provided but the handout has an email address where comments will be taken through Sunday April 17th.

The Commissioner's will take up the matter at one of their meetings, potentially as soon as April 20th.

We have 4 main goals for this hearing:

- Inform Members and Communities on our organization for structure protection,
- Inform Members on costs associated with fire protection,
- Provide an avenue for the County Commissioners to assess **public input** on the potential for a rate increase.
- And then of course an objective is to increase interest, appreciation, and participation in TFS FSA and VFD.

The FSA was created April 1990 after public hearings following Rules set up from the State Legislature. The fee for providing structure protection was \$20 annually.

The county commissioners appointed 5 Trustees to 'Govern and Manage the affairs of the service area'. This board is all volunteer and appointed for 3 year terms by the County Commissioners. Generally we try to have 2 board members from Trego, 2 from Fortine and one from anywhere in the service area – Stryker would be ideal.

The Service Area basically contracts TFS Volunteer Fire Department for STRUCTURE FIRE PREVENTION and SUPPRESSION. The TFS VFD is a nonprofit corporation and it has its own 5 member board. Much of their responsibility is the operations of the Department. Usually in November the TFS VFD holds an annual meeting to download developments, provide status updates and elect board members.

There have been 2 fee increases in over 30 years. We had a \$5 increase for residential ~2001 and another increase across all Classes in 2010 raising those fees to 100% at that time. (I hadn't double checked the info I gave the paper so this is an edit).

In the early 2000's we helped fund a new truck and picked up more 'hand-me-down engines, got a good start on the Fortine Fire Hall, and started engaging in professional training and acquiring adequate protective gear.

The next decade:

- we managed to finish the Fortine Fire Hall and seemed to be facing higher costs.
- We managed to get some grants requiring some matching funds,
- We realized higher utilities with the Fortine Hall
- Gas & oil prices fluctuate upwards
- Insurance rates started to consume 25% of the budget; especially when started getting workman's comp on our firefighters,
- More volunteers means more PPE and training costs
- Gear replacement, specifically turnouts and SCBA's costs about \$5000 each and have a limited service life,
- We started planning for the type of fleet the firefighters need but it's often cut short by the limited matching funds available in our budget for grants,
- Our boards and volunteers are frugal and put a lot of sweat equity into the Department but, in short, that can cause a lot of burnout.

General Budget items of late: Go to BUDGET CHART

The FSA receives approx. \$45,000 per year from fees assessed.

We have been contracting the VFD for approximately this same budget income for their services.

- we have approx. \$27,000 slated for capital improvement – primarily a tanker to haul ~2500 gallons which the VFD board is working to have constructed.
- \$6000 for Board operations, website, electronic filing system and Board Training
- ~\$18,000 for Emergency Reserves in cases where a transmission goes out or tires need replacement.

All the Trustees of the FSA Board have been on the VFD board and most have served actively as fire fighters. We see that the VFD has been incurring increased costs in PPE, insurance, maintenance of vehicles and buildings, and training –

One of the more recent things is that certain equipment must be cycled thru as it has inspections and lifespans. It becomes especially necessary to meet the NFPA standards and ISO ratings.

PLANS: Maintain our equipment and provide higher levels of structure firefighting capabilities thereby potentially lowering fire insurance on homes and businesses. To achieve this we need more water-holding capacity, budget plan for cycling gear and equipment, and a group of dedicated volunteers.

1. We're looking to budget PPE cycling to assure all responders have the right equipment to engage safely and return home or to work.
 - a. Turnouts have a 5-year lifespan and run ~\$6000 each
 - b. SCBA's have a 10 lifespan and must be checked annually
 - c. Hose must be pressure tested and recorded annually and replaced
2. Plan and target capital improvement projects (maintenance, office space, increase water-holding capacity,...) and strategize our large purchases (the right type of new trucks, ..).
3. Set up training to meet with the ISO rating and engage their regulators

Our Team:

I need to delve into the appreciation and recognition of our volunteers

- Show **training hours** – 30 hours minimum training requirement; plus there are many hours of maintenance, research, networking, fundraising ...
- **Safety concerns** – we rely on their training, physical conditioning and their awareness of the situation and risks.
 - Out in all sorts of weather,
 - Strenuous work conditions, lifting
 - Driving these backroads and Highway 93

These firefighters are there for support, willing to participate in most emergency situations, want to gain the experience and help the victims/families

- Occasionally we see our fellow firefighters needing their own support following some catastrophic event.

Finally I'd like to mention what you as members can help reduce the efforts our fire fighters must tend to.

- Wildland fire – defensible space, what to expect if/when a large fire happens, building wrap, foam, escape routes, ...
- Keep your roads plowed with nice turnarounds,
- Post bridges and cattleguards if they have weight restrictions
- Place address markers near your place

Now we will answer questions in the question box:

- We'll try to answer with short, concise answers but if you may also email for more information on the concern we will get back to you.

Now we will open the floor up to comments:

- (one of our team – maybe Justin McNeil) will acknowledge participants that would like to make a comment
- Please hold your comments to 5 minutes or less;
- Please minimize side conversations while someone is speaking
- IF you don't want to get up and speak please:

- o Leave a written comment on a card in the comment box
- o Write an email to tfsmt59918@gmail.com by end of Sunday April 17th.

**Trego Fortine Stryker (TFS)
Fire Service Area (FSA)
Public Hearing
April 14, 2022
Fortine School Gym**

Public Comment Options:

- You may speak at the hearing
- Write Comments on cards and deposit in Comment Box
- Write an email to tfsmt59918@gmail.com by end of Sunday April 17, 2022

TFS Fire Service Area Details

- Fire Service Area Size: ~ 80,000 acres
- Number of residential and commercial properties: ~870
- Number of fire stations: Two – Fortine and Trego
- Number of operational fire trucks: 7
- Roster: ~18 Volunteer Firefighters and Assist Volunteers; 4 Probationary volunteers
- ISO Rating: 9

Annual Operating Budget

TFS FSA FY2022: ~\$97,000

Budget allocation:

- \$45,000 - Operations TFS Volunteer Fire Department (VFD)
- \$ 6,000 - Operations TFS FSA
- \$28,000 - Capital Improvements
- \$18,000 - Equipment & Maintenance - Emergency Reserve

Proposal: Increase TFS Fire Service Area fees by 100%

Class 1 – Single Family Residences:	from \$50/yr to \$100/yr
Class 2 – Multi-occupied dwellings, bars, restaurants, churches, small motels (5 units or less) and similar business:	from \$76/yr to \$152/yr
Class 3 – Service Stations, small lumber mills (5 employees or less) and similar businesses:	from \$112/yr to \$224/yr

Current total revenue generated at existing rates: ~\$45,000

Total estimated revenue generated from fee increase: ~\$90,000

Rationale

- Last rate increase was in 2010
- Increase in insurance rates and other operational expenses (e.g. training, equipment, fuel, etc.)
- Increase in number of volunteer firefighters
- Increase due to expendable equipment needs and costs (e.g. *Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), Self-contained Breathing Apparatus (SCBA), tires, and hose are expendable, etc.*)
- Increase and earmark monies for capital improvements projects and equipment
- Address increases in maintenance needs and costs

Benefits to Service Area Members

- Reduction in home owner insurance rates with improved ISO rating.
- Lower risk of catastrophic structural fire losses.
- Increase in mutual fire suppression aid capacity.
- Maintenance of National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standards.
- Achievement of higher safety standards for volunteer fire fighters.

TFS History

Date	Management	Volunteer numbers	Income	Equipment Sources	Facility details	Suppression support
<u>1970s</u>	Beginning of TFS Volunteer Fire Department and Board All volunteer	Phone tree Any able body responder	Dues \$20 per resident participant	Some Donations Bulk from Out-of-pocket	Underground garages	USFS limited
<u>1990</u>	Legislative formation of TFS Fire Service Area and oversight of TFS VFD Board All volunteer	Phone tree Any able body responder	County-levied fees \$6,000 per year	Donations Out-of-pocket	Trego hall; Fortine school bus barn	USFS and DNRC limited

<u>2002</u>	TFS Service Area TFS VFD Board All volunteer	14 with 6 Trained Class 1 Firefighters	County-levied fees \$13,300 per year	Mix of: Donations Purchases Out-of-pocket	Trego -2-bay hall; Fortine school bus barn	Increased aid from other agencies - Water, suppression, wildland urban interface
<u>2021</u>	TFS Service Area TFS VFD Board All volunteer	13-18 Trained Class 1 Firefighters 4 Probationary	County-levied fees \$45,000 per year	Majority by direct purchase Donations Grant writing Out-of-pocket	Fortine-TFS facility Trego-expanded partnership	Mutual aid between responding agencies

Fire Chief Isaiah Williams explained and described duties and responsibilities of firefighters, commenting they provide service with no benefit to themselves, but to provide safety for our communities.

Isaiah explained gear cost and the legal lifespan requirements as well as tires and truck maintenance for firefighter safety.

- Coat & pants only: \$3,000
- Air Pack: \$7,000
- Air Tank: \$1,000

Isaiah said a huge cost is work comp insurance, firefighting is dangerous work and they are deserving this cost.

Public Comments:

Pom Collins asked about the ISO rating and assessment.

Isaiah Williams said he is requesting an assessment and hoping to have that complete this summer. The water tank project has lot to do with the ISO rating and that project needs to be completed first.

John Mee asked for clarity on ISO rating, and questioned benefits to residents.

Isaiah Williams discussed and gave clarity on how insurance works in relationship to FSA radius to properties. Insurance that cooperates will see greater benefits.

Donald Rosanne questioned the fire danger area and property radius to the FSA. The FSA does not apply to insurance.

Sylvia Mee asked about 75 to 80 homeowners.

Mike McMahon commented those came on the tax rolls approximately 2 years ago and explained records/reports that he receives from the DOR. Mike said he has conducted a lot of research to ensure that DOR has all the property listings. There were some refuse being collected but not TFS.

Commissioner Letcher explained DOR has no way of being notified. The county does try to notify DOR through the septic system permitting.

John Mee commented that there must be a way to track who should pay TFS fees, been a problem forever.

Tillie Butts stated that she just wanted to say thank you and expressed very sincere appreciation to the volunteers of TFS members.

Tillie said she is more than happy to pay the increase in fees.

Sharon Vieyra asked about the how commissioners vote on this process.

Commissioner Letcher explained the commissioners did pass a Resolution of Intent and now will take and review public comment and will vote on another resolution on April 20. There will be another public comment time at the commissioner meeting as well.

John Mee questioned the commissioners approving an increase. When set up years ago, there was a stipulation commissioners could approve up to a certain amount. John expressed concern that the commissioners can just agree to raise fees and he has no say or protection as a taxpayer. John commented that people should have a right to vote on this big of an increase, it's double. Should be some language in new bylaws that stipulates to that affect.

Donald Rosanne agreed there was language to how a fee increase had to go through the stipulation and was limited.

Mike McMahon commented that Montana Code is pretty clear on process. Mike commented the by-laws are almost finished and he is still working on them.

Isaiah Williams said that he has served on school boards and an institution takes it in the shorts when you don't institute annual increases. The process is easier than waiting many years when you need funds and then have to double fees, and that is the situation we are in.

John Mee asked how many house fires there were last year.

Isaiah Williams 3

John Mee questioned the FSA cannot get equipment to cover 3 or 4 house fires.

Isaiah Williams explained the cost is more than just house fire expense.

Commissioner Teske clarified the request is to increase a fee, not a tax.

Dawain Burgess commented his opinion is being responsible for fire fighter safety. Dawain talked about emergencies and how every truck needs new tires.

Isaiah Williams explained how fire districts operate different, their fee comes from a mill levy tax. The next question is do we want to be a district and levy taxes. It is a lot more work and is cheaper to have a FSA.

Richard Maketa talked about the Crestin fire departments annual auction that raises a lot of money and is a big event. The FSA should do that every year.

Nicole asked for volunteers to help with that to plan and organize, FSA volunteers are too few. We would need volunteer help to organize fundraising events.

Isaiah Williams said the budget is not meeting maintenance nor equipment cost or maintaining infrastructure. The FSA is replacing ear/equipment as it wears out. The maintenance is for facilities we currently have. Isaiah said the FSA is currently involved in a grant for new equipment. The grant includes the sheriff's dept., hwy patrol, and other emergency agencies, but \$260,000 is TFS portion. The grant has a 5% match and TFS will have to come up with that money.

Written comments are amended to the minutes as follows:

We are responsible for equip out
TFS to respond in the best
possible.
So agreed to help in paying
the added tax payment required.
Thank You Earl

4/13/22 Meeting TFS
I want approval
of the increase
Sharon Venzio
Stryker, Montana

I would encourage the
Commission to pass the
resolution for the fee
increase
Dawan Burges

Dear TFS FSA Board. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the TFS FSA rate increase proposal. I want to first say how much we appreciate our volunteer firefighters and board members. Without your efforts, our wildlands and homes would be at greater risk of loss.

We support the rate increase for a number of reasons. First and foremost, we want the volunteer firefighters to be safe, secure and prepared without loss to themselves. We also hope it will enable our fire department to attain a better fire rating, or at a minimum, maintain its current rating. Either of these outcomes is essential in our minds. Finally, we hope to encourage more people to volunteer when they see how much the community is behind their efforts.

Thank you again for all you do.

Regards,

Catherine Schloeder Michael Jacobs

3010 Meadow Creek Rd, Fortine, MT 59918

8:00 PM Adjourned

LINCOLN COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

Jerry Bennett, Chairman

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