

**ISLAND COUNTY FIRE DISTRICT #3**  
**SPECIAL MEETING – Levy Lift Discussion**  
**Clinton Community Hall**  
**6411 Central Avenue Clinton WA 98236**  
**May 30, 2012– 7:00 P.M.**

**MINUTES**

In Attendance:

Chairman Kenon Simmons  
Commissioner Mike Helland  
Commissioner Bob Elliot  
Chief Rusty Palmer

In Attendance: AC Busch, DC Beck, Captain Beck, Karl Beck, Dean Enell, Bob Wolters, Betty Freeman, Joan Nelson

- I. Call to Order – Chairman Simmons called the meeting to order at 7:00pm.
- II. Chairman Simmons defined the purpose of the special meeting to be a discussion of a potential levy. The Board introduced themselves to the audience.
- III. Chief Palmer submitted one piece of public correspondence into the record.
- IV. Chairman Simmons opened the floor for public comment and questions.

C. Bob Wolters – Thanked the Commissioners, Chief, Staff, and Volunteers for their service to the Community. He stated that he opposes a levy lift based on the needs of so many other government organizations funded by the same tax dollars. None of the other tax collecting organizations have asked for as much of an increase as SWFE is proposing now. The District should go back to the drawing board and look for a lower amount that would satisfy the needs over the next several years as the board is making the decision in a vacuum.

R. Chairman Simmons – What do you mean we are making a decision in a vacuum?

R. Bob Wolters – I believe you are acting without considering the needs of the other tax paying organizations in the community.

R. Chairman Simmons – We started at .28/1000 because of the needs of the District and have come down to .15/1000 since. The Fire District is in need of additional funds to keep the tax payer expectations for service at the current levels. We should allow the voters to decide if they want the same service at an additional cost or the taxes to stay the same and we will cut services to accommodate the revenue stream.

R. Chief Palmer – You raise good points about the other organizations in need but most of them have asked for additional tax dollars in the last 23 years, SWFE has not.

R. Commissioner Helland – The cost of fuel alone has created budget shortfalls. Our expenses have begun to outweigh the revenues. Island County is 5<sup>th</sup> in the nation for highest median age of men.

C. Bob Wolters – If you cannot track response time how can you say you have good service?

R. Chief Palmer – It is about the ability to respond based on location of facilities and staffing.

C. Bob Wolters – You can't go to the people and tell them your response times are good. Your revenues have gone up significantly until the last three years. Now you say you are starving.

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R. Chief Palmer – We didn't say we are starving, we said we haven't gone to the people for 23 years to ask for additional funding.

C. Bob Wolters – The Iman initiative affected all of the taxing districts in the last several years, not just SWFE.

C. Commissioner Elliot – Why is the response time so important in the revenue discussion? The call volumes are more important.

Q. Commissioner Helland – Based on your knowledge of other taxing districts, where do you believe we fit in for needs?

R. Bob Wolters – You have too much capital in fire when 80% of your calls are medical. I think the question is how do you scale back fire and focus more on the EMS division. You are discussing cutting EMS when it is the majority of your calls.

R. Chariman Simmons – Cuts in Fire mean we either lose Firefighter safety or have even lower response times.

R. Bob Wolters – The Langley station should be a one engine station. There is no need for a training facility, why not build bare bones stations? Why have so many stations?

R. Chairman Simmons – The City of Langley's requirements for the Langley station added about \$200k to the costs.

R. Chief Palmer – Closing a station hurts the citizens paying the taxes to support the Fire District.

R. Commissioner Helland – It is a challenge to distribute services equitably among the many needs of the community.

R. Commissioner Elliot – Other Districts send a Fire Engine for EMS calls, we send a MERV to control expenses.

R. Chief Palmer – The Bayview facility is off the table for now. The wave of the future is combined services, EMS, Fire, Law enforcement all in one facility.

C. Dean Enell – There has been no levy increase in 23 years but no decrease in levy amount, just increased spending. You spent too much on facilities over the last 20 years and now you want to increase taxes to cover operational expenses. SWFE should forego the levy and scale back.

R. Chairman Simmons – If you don't want a levy increase, is it ok with you to wait longer for response or have less response? What is the value of the increase in taxes; \$45/year for a \$300k house.

R. Dean Enell – I don't believe I am voting on response times. Why not use the current capital fund for operations instead of saving it for more facilities?

R. Chairman Simmons – The capital fund is for facilities and equipment. The 2012 budget includes money for the current Bayview station to keep it functional until funding for a new facility is available.

R. Dean Enell – Did you buy the land with the increased revenue without thinking of what the future would hold?

R. Chief Palmer – The stations are built in specific locations for response times and functionality. When property is available you purchase it.

C. Dean Enell – Why not sell Thompson road?

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R. Chairman Simmons – It was purchased because of a community outcry for better locations of the stations. It wasn't built and was taken off the table as a buildable site due to neighborhood response. It was taken off the real estate market due to decreasing value; it would have to be sold at a loss.

C. Dean Enell – You also spent money to change your name and for a marketing person for the levy lift. This seems like excess spending when you are starving for more funds.

R. Chief Palmer – We are not starving, this is financial planning for the next 6 years because expenses for the current service level are higher than expected revenues.

R. Commissioner Elliot – Thompson road would have to be sold for a loss. If we cut back on spending we would likely lose Volunteers. If we lose Volunteers we will become a paid department which costs much more.

R. Commissioner Helland – We cannot site a facility on Thompson Road, but we cannot sell without a loss at this time.

C. DC Beck – The current Bayview station is not well located for response. It is located behind other businesses and is difficult to get out for a call even in a smaller vehicle.

C. Dean Enell – If the market comes back up in a few years you will be flush again.

C. Chief Palmer – The Bayview property is a good location for a facility, which is difficult to find, and will be kept for a future build.

Q. Dean Enell – How many acres is the Bayview property?

R. Chief Palmer – 10 acres for an Administrative office, Fire station and Training facility.

C. Bob Wolters – Why not hold off on the levy until you have response times available? You like to pay cash for capital purchases but the interest on obligation bonds is currently low. The bond debt would raise the amount of the levy to cover it each year.

Q. Chairman Simmons – Do you prefer we save our revenue and pay cash for capital purchases or take out obligation bonds to cover them?

R. Bob Wolters – Low interest bonds rather than cash, you should take on debt for the capital purchases.

C. Commissioner Helland – We have discussed obligation bonds with a professional in the past, we decided to save and pay cash over the years.

Q. Betty Freeman – What process did you go through to decide on proposing a levy lift? Why .15/1000?

R. Chief Palmer presented a PowerPoint slideshow of graphs and statistics for the District over the last twenty years. Included were comparison levy rates for all of the Island County Fire Districts showing South Whidbey as the lowest rate currently; call volume statistics that follow the population and expense trends over the last twenty years; revenue versus expense graphs showing the breakeven point of 2014 and the future expenses for current service levels above the anticipated revenues.

Q. Dean Enell – If there is an auto accident when do you get the call? It seems like there is a large amount of response for minor emergencies.

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R. Chairman Simmons - The 911 call dispatches us, we currently do not have criteria based dispatching. We send based on what we are told rather than assuming the call is minor.

R. Chief Palmer – We provide more than medical care on an accident scene depending on the circumstances. We don't know the extent of the call until we arrive, it is better to send people away than to call in more help and wait.

Q. Betty Freeman – Do you see an increase in calls during the summer?

C. Chief Palmer – We have an effective population of about 25,000 daily, 15,000 are residents.

Q. Betty Freeman – Would it help to educate the population about what they should call 911 for? That a cat in the tree is not an emergency?

R. Chairman Simmons – Possibly, but if we don't go to the cat in the tree call then we are going to the call for the kid who fell out of the tree trying to get the cat.

C. Karl Beck – The current housing projections show that prices will remain flat over the next several years, yet inflation has risen 103% in the last year. Based on this the tax dollars will remain the same or decrease but expenses will continue to rise. How can you find more money in your budget if revenues are down and expenses will continue to rise?

R. Chief Palmer – We can't, that is the reason we are proposing a lid lift, to raise additional revenue to cover the increasing expenses.

R. Chairman Simmons – The revenues will not follow the current expense trends over the next several years.

C. Dean Enell – Your revenues go up about 10% per year over the last 20 years.

C. Bob Wolters – Island county has had the largest percent decrease, 10.1%, in assessed values in the state from 2010-2011.

Q. Betty Freeman – have you had a good balance of pros and cons at most of the meetings? When will you decide on the levy lift?

R. Chairman Simmons – Yes, for the most part it has been a good debate. At the next regular meeting June, 14<sup>th</sup> at 5:30pm. Chief Palmer will present a resolution for us to vote on.

Q. Dean Enell – Will the vote be in the primary or general election? Will it require 60% or majority.

R. Chief Palmer – In the primary in the fall, majority of the vote.

C. Joan Nelson – Thank you for your service, your department saved mine and my husband's life.

V. Chairman Simmons – Thank you for being here tonight to discuss the levy lift with us, we appreciate your input on the subject.

VI. Adjournment – 8:47pm

Cindy Rehberg  
District Secretary