

## MINUTES

Whitefish Fire Service Area  
Trustees Meeting 4/19/22  
Fire Station #22

Call to Order: 6:00 pm

- Present: Mark Carlson, Dennis Oliver, George Losleben, Ed McGrew, Molly Miller
- Guests: Alison Young, Thomas Moran, Joe Perry

Public Comment (2-minute limit per speaker): None

### Current Business

- Administration
  - Approval of 3/15/22 minutes
  - Bills paid:
    - #2942 FEC, \$119.00
    - #2943 NWE, \$270.45
    - #2944 Big Drift, \$500.00
  - Current fund balances:
    - Working Fund: \$409802.13 (recent late deposit)
    - Capital Improvement Fund: \$856675.85
  - Website/SEO: Joe Perry reported we reached #1 on Google searches for Whitefish Fire Service Area and Fire Service Area
- Steering Committee Recommendations - Appended to these minutes in **Exhibit 1**.
  - Tom Moran of the Steering Committee presented its recommendations, not listed in priority order at this time:
    - Work toward Fire Authority model and educate public on what it entails prior to seeking voter approval:
      - Regional, cooperative system
      - Mill levy funding equity
      - Board elected by voters
      - Backup plan is Fire District model
    - Establish Resident Volunteer Program, managed by WFD
      - Scholarship system mentioned as alternative
    - Build suitable housing at Station 22 (dorm addition or new building)
      - Building new residential station at Twin Bridges Rd is lower priority
    - Be willing to compensate WFD extra funds
      - Last 5-year contract signed December 2020, effective July 2021
    - Establish Financial transparency, including cashflow information
      - Flathead County Commissioners controls majority of finances
      - Build breakout budgets on project basis?
    - Develop 5-year plan and approach county commissioners for a rate increase while pursuing Fire Authority/District

- Last increase 2015
  - Hire professional communications when required
    - Joseph Perry can assist in certain things
  - Water at Station 22?
    - Currently served by working 10,000 gal cistern
  - Participate in Strategic Planning with the City
  - Disband steering committee
    - Tom Moran and Becky Briber to continue to help as required; subcommittee approved
    - Will work with Carnegie Mellon to develop funding analysis tool
- Discussion
- Other New Business
  - Meeting guidelines: Dennis spoke with County Attorney Dave Randall about notification and other requirements for WFSA Trustees
    - 48-hour notification of changes to meeting times, which must be approved by trustee votes
    - Meetings of more than 2 trustees separately from official meetings are discouraged
  - Internet Access for Station #22
    - Not supported by majority of trustees
  - Mark Carlson has hired outdoor maintenance for the station for the summer
  - Mark's last meeting is in May
    - Add transition/handoff duties to May agenda

Adjournment: 7:22pm

## **Exhibit 1**

### **WFSA Steering Committee Recommendations to WFSA Board Finalized by the Steering Committee on 3/22/22**

**Present at the steering committee meeting:**

**Ed McGrew, Ed Leiser, Tom Moran, Becky Briber, Whitefish Fire Chief Joe Page.**

**Many of these recommendations were derived and distilled from the AP Triton Whitefish Fire Department Master Plan dated November, 2021. The board could consider rearranging these in order of importance/priority.**

- 1) Recommend that WFSA work toward the Fire Authority model and start educating the public and talking to lawmakers regarding the need for this regional, cooperative fire services format. WFSA will also need to formulate a back-up/interim plan (likely a Fire District) in case that this effort is unsuccessful in the 2023 MT legislative session and/or takes longer than we want to implement. Create a WFSA 1-, 5-, and 10-year (or other suitable increments) plan.
- 2) Recommend that WFSA pursue establishment of a resident volunteer program with Chief Page's guidance and assistance. These resident volunteers would be trained and managed by the WFD. Chief Page reports that he has a couple of firefighters willing to conduct training and oversight of the resident volunteers and that this would be sufficient staffing to oversee the program. Contact the firefighter union early in the process to get their feedback on this option (this step is already being pursued by Ed M.). Missoula is apparently already utilizing this model, and Bigfork has just started - so we should reach out to them to see how this is going periodically.
- 3) Recommend that WFSA prioritize in this order: (1) build suitable housing at Hodgson Rd. Station #22 and staff with resident volunteers, then (2) build a station in the vicinity of Rt. 93/Twin Bridges Rd. and staff with resident volunteers, then (3) possibly build and staff a station in the vicinity of the East Side of Whitefish Lake, depending on how annexation of WMR pans out.
  - a) Hodgson Rd. Station #22 housing for resident volunteer staff was chosen first for the following reasons. WFSA is contracting with the WFD to provide fire protection in the WFSA. If the WFD has insufficient staffing and equipment, so too does the WFSA. This is especially true during simultaneous incidents. Because the most critical and immediate need at the WFD is more firefighters, creating housing and establishing a resident volunteer program is the fastest and most cost-effective way the WFSA can provide these resources to enhance fire protection in the WFSA. Regardless of whether a Fire Authority is formed, or WFSA forms a Fire District, or continues as a Fire Service Area, this investment will not lose its utility and will continue to fill a critical need. In the longer-term, beyond the current MOU, if WFSA continues contracting fire services out to the

WFD, population growth in the WFSA and City of Whitefish will eventually require more firefighters than WFD can house at its station, which justifies this investment in the long term. If the WFSA instead creates a Fire District, it would need these resources - and then some - anyway. If we form a Fire Authority, there will be a need for satellite stations throughout the area, and this would be one such station. The point is that there is no way this investment becomes unnecessary in the future, and this is the fastest and most cost-effective means to achieving a higher level of fire protection in the WFSA than we currently have.

- b) Options for adding on housing at Hodgson Station #22 include a separate dormitory structure, addition to the current station or double-wide stand-alone housing units which would allow for housing of families/couples (but could be more complicated in terms of septic and utilities). The option chosen should allow off-duty resident volunteers to have their own space separate from where on-duty firefighters will be staged and doing training and other on-duty tasks. WFSA will need to pay for architect renderings, formulate a budget for equipping and operating the station, then share this information with WFSA homeowners and get homeowner input.
- 4) Recommend that WFSA be willing to provide financial support to WFD in a manner and proportion that is consistent with the WFSA's utilization of WFD's fire services. Current WFSA utilization of WFD fire services is 40%, both in terms of percentage of calls and percentage of property value protected.
- a) The Steering Committee supports the Chief's proposed increase in Whitefish FD staffing to 6 firefighters on duty 24/7/365 for FY23 and the addition of an Assistant Chief position, because both of these will enhance fire protection in the WFSA.
  - b) The Steering Committee recommends that the WFSA Board be open to providing additional financial support to the WFD, even beyond its current obligation under the MOU, if this financial support is necessary for staffing increases or equipment needs. Homeowners in the WFSA will directly benefit from sufficient firefighter staffing at WFD, especially in the case of simultaneous incidents. The WFSA will also benefit from having an Assistant Chief who can oversee firefighter training (and eventually WFSA satellite station resident volunteer training). The Assistant Chief can also serve as the Carnegie Mellon University (CMU)-recommended wildland fire coordinator, and can oversee the CMU-recommended WUI prevention programs. Both wildland-oriented efforts will primarily benefit the WFSA and not the City of Whitefish.
  - c) Recommend that WFSA continues to support equipment needs at WFD.
- 5) Recommend immediate increased financial transparency and planning. The entire WFSA board should review financials each month and financial statements should be attached to the minutes so the public has access to this information. The WFSA should

conduct a budgeting process with full board oversight (via vote) ahead of each calendar year. It would be very simple to manually input inflows and outflows of cash into a cloud-based accounting platform, which would allow us to generate the financial statements we need (profit and loss, balance sheet, budget vs. actuals, and year-over-year comparisons).

- 6) Recommend that WFSA approach the Flathead County Commissioners with a proposal for a WFSA rate increase that would make up for the lack of rate increases over such a long period (none since 2015) and help us start saving for anticipated future investments. It may be easiest to justify this rate increase by setting forth projects that fall outside the current MOU with the City of Whitefish as justification for the rate increase.
- 7) Recommend that WFSA Board hire a professional who has conducted successful communications campaigns to start communicating with the public on a more regular basis via such means as regularly scheduled email newsletters, social media posts and newspaper articles. The goal of this communications campaign should be (1) to educate the WFSA about how their fire services work, (2) keep the public in the loop regarding WFSA needs and planning, and (3) set the scene for buy-in for future investment in new stations and staffing. Ed M is going to talk to Lisa Jones who has led successful communications campaigns.
  - a) NPR article Tom found on lack of volunteers and increasing call volume nationwide - WFSA could use this in a PSA to raise awareness of the realities of our situation and why non-resident volunteer programs won't work in today's world:  
<https://www.npr.org/2022/02/03/1077383009/calls-volunteer-fire-departments-few-first-responders>
- 8) Recommend that the existing cistern at Hodgson Rd. #22 be brought back into service if it currently is not functional.
- 9) Recommend that WFSA continues participating in the Whitefish FD Strategic Planning Committee Meetings.
- 10) Recommend that the steering committee cease meeting. Committee members who are not currently sitting on the WFSA board have expressed availability to assist in the future if the board has a need.
- 11) Recommend that WFSA commission a second Carnegie Mellon University study for the WFSA under the below guidelines. This study would be free of charge to WFSA, with significant time commitment required from select board/committee members.

Objectives:

Develop a data-driven model that will allow the board to formulate several options for financing the short term WFSA improvements approved from WFSA Steering Committee recommendations. This model would be adoptable to WFSA's various options going forward, whether we remain a fire service area, form a district or join with Whitefish FD and possibly other entities to become a Fire Authority. The goal would be to build a funding model that would not only address our immediate needs, but also be adaptable and usable into the future, as the demographics of the fire service area change.

Proposed Study data including but not limited to:

- GIS demographics
- HOA coverage.
- Distance from station Revisit importance of 5 mile ISO rating factor.
- Possibility to cave out SID/RID areas.

How another CMU study will benefit the WFSA:

- This study will provide us with a tool that we can use to determine how the WFSA will pay for fire services in the future.
- Save WFSA from the expense of hiring outside consultation.
- WFSA would have control over the direction of the study group's work through weekly meetings, focusing the outcome on agreed to achievable goals.
- The report would serve as a help in keeping our stakeholders in the loop as to the projected pace and cost of expanding fire services and as an aid in working with the Flathead Commissioners to provide for financing of the Projects.