



# Central Whidbey Island Fire & Rescue

1164 Race Road  
Coupeville, WA 98239

Professionalism • Integrity • Compassion • Excellence

(360) 678-3602

[www.cwfire.org](http://www.cwfire.org)

## Board of Fire Commissioners Special Meeting Minutes

November 15, 2014

### Call to Order

This special meeting of the Central Whidbey Island Fire & Rescue (CWIFR) Board of Fire Commissioners was called to order by Chair Cheryl Engle at 16:00 hours.

### Commissioners and Staff Present

Chair Cheryl Engle, Commissioner Paul Messner, Commissioner Steve Hutchinson and Chief Ed Hartin, Office Manager Kim Harpe, LT Derik Vrable, Acting Captain Jerry Helm, Firefighters Kyle Jacobsen, Chris Lytle and James Meek

### Members of the Public Present

None.

### Consensus Approval of the Agenda

The Chair received consensus approval of the agenda.

### New Business

Discuss the Direction of the District in 2015.

Chair Cheryl Engle opened the meeting by stating “She felt Commissioner Paul Messner’s frustration and concerns regarding recruitment and retention of volunteer members and people’s perception of the district outside the organization and called for this meeting to be able to address those concerns in a proper forum and opened the floor to Commissioner Paul Messner.

Commissioner Messner stated, “He felt the district was headed in the wrong direction and that the number one priority should be to attract, train and maintain volunteers. He shared, he had received comments from people at North Whidbey Fire & Rescue as well as community members stating, “It was horrendous to forget to recognize our members in the recent Whidbey Times article that recognized all the fire departments on the island”, “Central Whidbey was finally getting smart enough to make the right decision to let Chief Hartin go” (this was assumed by the recent executive sessions held to discuss the performance of a public employee), and that “Central Whidbey Fire & Rescue was a laughing stock”. Commissioner Messner also stated, “The volunteers had not been the priority for past 15-25 years and he felt the district was in real trouble and near the cliff’s edge if the issue of recruitment and retention was not addressed and put as the number one priority because the district would never be able to afford an all fulltime or part-time staff.

Chief Hartin agreed with Commissioner Messner, that the volunteer leg of the stool is critical to the district and is one of, if not the most important leg and it is a problem, but not a new problem. We have had people come and go and this is the first year we will see an increase big enough to offset the deficit. Seven people are scheduled to attend the 2015 recruit academy an increase for the first time in ten years and an additional seven are in various stages of becoming members. There are two parts to the picture: 1) Getting people in the door and 2) keeping them. Chief Hartin stated, that with the exception of one member, the reasons people have left have been directly work related.

Commissioner Paul Messner stated, that people have shared with him, "that the district is setting up people to become fulltime firefighters and people aren't willing to commit that kind of time when they only want to be a volunteer.

Chief Hartin commented "He had recently come across a "Probationary Firefighter Task Book" from 2007 and quite a bit of the requirements are the same now as they were then. The requirement's for volunteers is far lower now than what it was prior to his arrival. Volunteer Gordon Cambell left the department because of the old requirements which is one of the reasons we looked at and changed the requirements". Chief Hartin stated, "He was puzzled about where these people were getting their information from and how do we communicate to these people what the true story is?

Commissioner Paul Messner stated, "He felt the "Apparatus Operator Course" was too long and that he was concerned that if the district writes its own rules for this course it would leave the district open to being sued. He asked Chief Hartin if the course had been reviewed by the district's attorney and insurance provider so we don't leave the district open to law suits".

Chief Hartin stated, "You can get sued anytime for anything. The course is not only about driving - it's also about having a fundamental knowledge of being a pump operator, having the ability to find your way around the district and knowing the equipment on the apparatus. This is the other stuff that is in there so we are assured that when they are turned lose there is an increased probability that they will be okay and if we ever did have to go to court we would be able to show that they were trained". He also said, "If the Board would like the course to be reviewed by the District's attorney and insurance agent he would make that happen".

Commissioner Paul Messner stated, "Three of the district's longest serving volunteers have told him that they will be leaving the district within the next year due to being eligible for the Board for Volunteer Firefighter Retirement Pension. If it takes the people who are currently scheduled for the recruit academy a year and a half to get qualified - What are we going to do?

Chief Hartin stated, "It is a year and half from the time we get their application, not from the time they graduate from the recruit academy".

Commissioner Messner asked Chief Hartin, "If he was working on the budget or was he working on the award that was given for the budget? and were we trying to get awards over getting volunteers?"

Commissioner Steve Hutchinson stated, "He felt the district had really come a long way in the past five years and that any perceived negativity from EMS about CWIFR that he had previously heard had stopped".

Chief Hartin stated, "Looking at where we are today, he thought the question was "Are we seeing things start to shift?" "He couldn't say for sure, but he thought the numbers we were seeing this year were encouraging. The question will be, will we see the same numbers next year?" Chief Hartin shared, "Ideally, he would like to see ten volunteers at each station in addition to two or three water tender operators. Those are the marching orders Acting Captain Helm has been given and he spends a concerted effort addressing this as a priority but it's not going to happen overnight. If there are areas where we can streamline time we are looking into that also.

Chief Hartin commented, "He did not want to give up the quality of people just to get more bodies". Commissioner Paul Messner agreed.

Chief Hartin also shared, "When a member goes from volunteer to part-time status they do not get moved from their assigned station and that part-time members are generally more apt to respond on calls".

Commissioner Paul Messner stated, "He has said for the past 15 years - volunteers should be the number one priority, and he doesn't feel like anyone has made it their priority. Jerry Helm does a good job, but it's everybody's job in the district to make it their priority. He stated he was very concerned about what will happen if this is not addressed". We should look at other districts our size and see what they are doing to achieve success in getting and retaining volunteers. Chair Cheryl Engle agreed.

Commissioner Paul Messner stated, "He had heard that Chief Hartin had put in over 300 hours in the submission of the GFOA Budget award. He felt if we spent that time on figuring out how to get and retain volunteers it would be more beneficial".

Chief Hartin stated, "That it is not so much about the award, it's taking the national or international criteria and it's about the work that you ought to be doing anyways. If you took the budget prior to my arrival and showed the public they would have no idea what they were looking at".

He shared, "He was 100% certain the district would not ever be in the same state as Island Transit based on the procedures and standards that were now in place. The financial policies were finished this year and there is a lot of value in that and not at the exclusion of identifying best practices, and policies for attracting volunteers".

Commissioner Paul Messner stated, "When the district went for the Washington Fire Commissioners Management Excellence Award it took a lot of time, they were going to go after it every year but if you do it every year it doesn't really show how well you are doing. Awards are really nice, but we need to have a functioning district".

Chief Hartin stated, "Question 1 in the midterm should be: How do we staff? and Question 2 in the short term should be: How do we deal with things in the mean time?. The target we shoot for now in

the event of a fire is six people quickly and 12, 14, 15, 16 in a little bit more time. The intermediate challenge to address is the "Apparatus Operator Course". We need to ensure they can do their work regardless whether it takes 3 weeks or 5 weeks.

The light apparatus might be able to happen in the fire academy. It's not too challenging, we may be able to squeeze that time down, customize it for the person and continue to work with the individual to make it work and it could be more efficient. We have acknowledged that each leg of the stool brings an important element to the table and it cannot be done without the volunteers".

Commissioner Paul Messner stated, "If getting and retaining volunteers moves to the top of the priority list, he will feel being a called a "rogue commissioner" will have all been worth it. He felt that everyone was saying the same thing, it just hadn't been made the priority".

Chief Hartin stated, "The only difference now is in that we write it down and document that people are qualified. If a person's goals and aspirations will one day take them away from the district - doesn't change the obligation to train them just like anyone else."

Chair Cheryl Engle stated, "She would like to see an insert in our upcoming newsletter recognizing the districts members".

Chief Hartin stated "That an article was already being worked on that he would like to get everyone of the districts members in a picture for the article. Chief Hartin stated that the newsletter would be mailed out in time to commemorate the district's 86<sup>th</sup> anniversary on December 10<sup>th</sup>.

Lieutenant Derik Vrable asked if he could make a statement. Chair Cheryl Engle confirmed that comments and statements are always welcome.

Lieutenant Derik Vrable stated, "Since Chief Hartin's arrival five years ago, rigs are getting out the door quicker more now than ever before and the rigs actually work". He also commented, "That he is more proud to work with the people he works with and doesn't want recognition, and doesn't know of anyone who does, they all just want to be able to their job".

Commissioner Paul Messner stated, "He hadn't heard any negative things from anyone from inside the district, the comments he received have all been from outside people". He wants to get more people and continue getting competent people and feels the district is on the right track". Commissioner Steve Hutchinson and Chair Cheryl Engle concurred. Commissioner Steve Hutchinson stated, "Once the similar districts that are having success with recruitment have been identified, he would be happy to travel to those districts and see what we might be able to incorporate here".

Chief Hartin stated, "He shared Commissioner Paul Messner and the Boards concerns and he thought having this meeting was helpful to keep us focused on this and that he is always asking himself "If what the district is doing is helpful to the community?". With all the things we have moved forward on, like the strategic plan which took a pile of time, the Standard of Cover being currently worked on will answer the questions of how quick? And how many?

Chief Hartin stated, "The reasons for the contention between Central Whidbey Fire and North Whidbey Fire and Oak Harbor Fire were due to a training incident at North Bend which involved all three districts. He stated, "He did not apologize for this because if the situation had been handled then, Chad Michael would not currently be dealing with the very same issues at Renton Fire.

Prior to Chair Cheryl Engle closing the meeting, she stated, "We should all be our own advocates, and thought the district was doing a lot of good things and doing the very best that we can". She said, "She appreciated the deep labor of love that Commissioner Paul Messner has for this department and is happy that they were able to put everything out on the table and address difficult topics and knows we strive for excellence every day".

### **Good of the Order/Announcements**

None.

### **Next Regular Meeting**

December 11, 2014

Time: 17:00

Location: Station 53

There being no further business, Chair Cheryl Engle adjourned the meeting at 18:10

Submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kim Harpe".

Kim Harpe, Secretary