

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL WORK SESSION OF THE CITY COUNCIL AND THE VERDE VALLEY FIRE DISTRICT BOARD HELD FEBRUARY 5, 2009, AT 6:00 P.M. AT THE PUBLIC SAFETY BUILDING, 191 SOUTH SIXTH STREET, COTTONWOOD, ARIZONA.

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CALL TO ORDER & ROLL CALL

Mayor Joens called the meeting to order at 6:04 p.m. Roll call was taken as follows:

Council Members Present

Diane Joens, Mayor  
Karen Pfeifer, Vice Mayor  
Duane Kirby, Council Member  
Terence Pratt, Council Member

Staff Members Present

Doug Bartosh, City Manager  
Jody Fanning, Police Chief  
Mike Casson, Fire Chief  
Kyla Allen, Executive Assistant  
Richard Smith, Deputy Clerk

Council Members Absent

James Chapman, Council Member  
Tim Elinski, Council Member  
Linda Norman, Council Member

Verde Valley Fire District Board Present

Matt Robertson, Chairman  
Jerry Doerksen, Chief  
Dick Dobbin, Clerk  
Ken Bishop, Board Member  
Robert Eddingfield, Board Member  
Gerald Shanks, Board Member

DISCUSSION AND POSSIBLE DIRECTION TO STAFF REGARDING FUTURE COORDINATION AND POSSIBLE CONSOLIDATION OF FIRE SERVICES (COTTONWOOD FIRE DEPARTMENT & VERDE VALLEY FIRE DISTRICT)

Mr. Doerksen gave a PowerPoint presentation relating the history of fire fighting in the area and the current status of departments, districts, equipment, and services offered, including the importance of mutual aid. Part of the Verde Valley Fire District (VVFD) service area was in the city limits of Cottonwood. Services were enhanced because minimum standards were the same between the City and VVFD, apparatus (equipment) was standardized and joint training was conducted. Larger events often required both departments to work together. Efficiencies could be realized by eliminating areas of duplication. Differences which would have to be overcome included the lack of standardization on sprinkler ordinances, burn regulations and building regulations. Duties of the Council included the fire department among others, while the Board was solely dedicated to fire matters. Revenue sources were different for both departments since the Board obtained money from property taxes while the city funded its department from sales taxes. Annexations and mergers were cause for anxiety and uncertainty between departments and there was the possibility of competing for tax payer funds. Benefits of consolidation would include less administrative duplication and staffing and the avoidance of laying people off as boundaries changed due to annexations. There would also be less duplication of incident reporting. There would also be a united body when addressing regional and statewide issues, especially water issues.

Mr. Robertson, Mr. Eddingfield, and Mr. Bishop all stated they favored a merger.

Council Member Kirby stated the Council had considered this issue before. There may be some way we could work out a better working arrangement but merger should not even be considered. His constituency had fire protection from one revenue source and he was not prepared to ask them to support a property tax for the fire department.

Mr. Shanks said that was the right response now, but the future was uncertain.

Council Member Kirby stated he had no objection to the chiefs of the two departments cooperating in whatever way they could but he did not see them being under the same political leadership. Neither organization would be willing to compromise in the way they needed to make it work.

Council Member Elinski stated he was in favor of conducting a study to determine the benefits of combining services. Reports he had seen had shown that the City provided tax payers with the most efficient service for their money.

Mr. Shanks stated VVFD was largely a residential service. It did not have and did not need the equipment and large standby requirements of the City, whereas the city relied on the water tanker service of the VVFD. Instead of a merger, an independent organization could be formed with a formula devised for both entities to contribute to it. Service could be provided by the closest unit, regardless of jurisdictions.

Council Member Elinski stated each local community had its own character which they considered important. A regional department would not be as responsive to the needs and desires of local citizens.

Vice Mayor Pfeifer stated any study should be delayed. The City had other matters that required attention at this time and the money for it was not available at the present time. Creating a larger district would dilute current resources. Varying needs of the city and county areas could actually require more administration.

Mr. Doerksen stated that would be the reason for a feasibility study.

Mayor Joens stated VVFD was not providing services to the State Trust Lands that Cottonwood was considering annexing and questioned why was it considered a loss of revenue to them.

Mr. Doerksen stated the VVFD was looking at the income that would be derived from future development.

Council Member Kirby stated there was no revenue gained from annexation because growth added responsibilities. The City's annexation bid was not for revenue but to control the type of growth that would occur.

Mayor Joens stated the city supplied a lot of service to those outside the city. When she was elected she had been open to becoming a district. The matter was brought before the Council at a public meeting and the Council determined it would not be in the best interests of the citizens of Cottonwood. The City had recently been awarded a grant to form a second engine company. Staff time could probably not be spared to do a study. The matter should be postponed for six months.

Mr. Dobbin stated a study could be easily done in-house, cheaply, based on previous district studies.

Mr. Bartosh stated this matter should be looked at as a business case to see if it was beneficial financially and operationally.

Mayor Joens opened the floor to discussion from the public. There was no response. She was concerned about the lack of staff for a study. She asked how long it would be before we could get together again and do this study?

Chief Casson stated it would be at least several months to a year.

Mayor Joens suggested Mr. Bartosh and Mr. Doerksen continue their dialogue to explore business plan ideas and search for ideas to bring to the Council and the Board.

Mr. Bartosh stated this discussion was likely to involve a lot of emotion. An in-house study might not have the credibility and lack of emotion that was really needed to make it work. It would be worth the investment for both parties to bring in a third party expert on such matters to create a business case to determine if it made sense for both parties.

Mayor Joens asked Chief Casson what his recommendation was.

Chief Casson stated he agreed with Mr. Bartosh. An in-house study required a lot of staff time. The issue was an emotional one for all parties. A business case study was the proper approach to determine whether consolidation would be in the best interest of the community. Our commitment was to continue to work together regardless of the political situation. If the intent was to create one community, then there should be one governing entity in all areas such as police, water, sewer, utilities, streets, public education, and parks and recreation; not just in fire protection. That was not the case because of political differences. Without an outside expert who could evaluate things from a business perspective, a financial perspective, and a performance perspective, we would not be able to do a study without involving the emotional impact.

Mr. Shanks stated if the Council really did not want to do this, then it should not be pursued.

Mayor Joens stated she was keeping an open mind. Things were always changing. It was important to have good working relations with the Board. We may not agree on things but we should continue to dialogue. Just a couple of weeks ago we learned we were going to be eligible for a grant. This change occurred since Mr. Bartosh and Mr. Doerksen last spoke together.

Council Member Kirby stated change could not be divorced from emotion with this issue.

Mr. Robertson agreed.

Mr. Bartosh again recommended bringing in someone that did not have emotional attachments. We needed to get through the budget season before we even considered this further. He could continue to dialogue with Chief Casson and Mr. Doerksen to determine alternatives that both the Board and Council could consider. Six months would be a realistic timeline on this.

Vice Mayor Pfeifer asked if the current arrangement with dispatch was working well.

Chief Casson stated that in some ways we benefited and in some ways we did not. We were working though things there on a monthly, if not weekly basis.

Mayor Joens asked if the Council would be agreeable to dialogue. The Chiefs and City Manager would continue discussions of possible models but would not plan for the two groups to meet again for six months or so.

Mr. Bartosh stated we would have to be flexible to see how long it would be before things worked out, but we would try for a six month time period.

Mr. Dobbin asked if the city was prepared to fund the S.A.F.E.R. grant to the extent that was needed over its term.

Mayor Joens replied, yes. We were not closing any doors and were keeping dialogue open.

#### ADJOURNMENT

Mayor Joens moved to adjourn. Vice Mayor Pfeifer seconded the motion, which passed unanimously.

The special work session adjourned at 7:45 p.m.

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Diane Joens, Mayor

ATTEST:

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Richard Smith, Deputy Clerk