



ELSIE-VINEMAPLE Rural Fire Protection District

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March 19, 2024 - Q & A with our Community

We know many of you have questions about what is happening with our Fire District. We also know that some people are trying to use fear and uncertainty to scare our community into believing you are not being protected. This is just not true. We have not missed one call for assistance, and we have continued to conduct weekly trainings at the firehouse for both experienced and new volunteers.

In February, we hired an experienced Interim Chief to take over operations. We have been working as a team with our new Chief, our volunteers, and community members to clean up our firehouses, equipment, medications and supplies, and begin recruiting new volunteers. As you can imagine, this is a big job after so many years of neglect. We want to assure you that the work of protecting our community has never stopped.

We have compiled some of the questions we've received from you so far, and have answers for you tonight. We're going to read through them, and we will also post them on our website. We encourage you to continue sending us your questions, either by email or by voicemail at Station 1, and we will continue to do our best to answer them all. And, following the meeting tonight, we invite you to stay for a few minutes to meet and talk with our new Interim Chief!

So now, here are the questions and answers we have for you:

1. **How many volunteer responders do we currently have, and how many calls are we responding to?**
 - a. Answered by Chief Davis in his report.

2. **Was Mike Wammack paid monthly for serving as Fire Chief? Was Hans Mulder paid monthly for serving as Assistant Fire Chief? Was George Jette given compensation for serving as Captain?**
 - a. Mike Wammack and Hans Mulder each received \$300/month. We were told by Mike (April 22, 2022 Meeting Minutes) that these payments were contracts awarded to them by a former Board, many years ago, for fleet

maintenance and building maintenance (respectively). A careful review of all available minutes, conducted over the last few months, has found no written documentation of a Board vote for these contracts.

- b. George Jette received no compensation for serving as Captain. In April 2022, Director Ed Van Dyke reported having been approached by some of the volunteers who reported that George did most of the fleet and building maintenance work, as well as keeping the grounds maintained at all 3 stations. These volunteers requested the Board award a contract to George to pay him a little something for his work. The Board discussed the volunteers' request over several months of meetings, and in December 2022 the Board voted to approve a \$100/month contract for groundskeeping at all 3 stations. In January 2023, the Board voted to award the groundskeeping stipend to George Jette.
 - c. Many volunteers, including Chief Wammack, Assistant Chief Mulder, and Captain Jette, pulled shifts during the summer under the Summer Staffing grant that we received from the Oregon State Fire Marshall. Through this grant, these volunteers were paid the state rate for the hours they served.
- 3. Is it true that when the Board dismissed the Fire Chief, the Assistant Fire Chief refused to cooperate with the Fire Board by not returning the Department credit card, and not giving the Board the password to the computer containing the financial records? Is this still the case?**
- a. At the January 26 Board meeting, Assistant Chief Mulder announced his intention to take a 6 month leave of absence. In that same meeting, he verbally stated that he would not return his Department credit cards, and that he had forgotten all the passwords to the computer he used containing all the Department financial records. Those statements are recorded in the written minutes of that meeting, as well as the audio recording of that meeting.
 - b. To date, Mulder has not returned his Department credit cards, nor provided passwords to the computer and programs containing financial records.
- 4. Is it true that when the vehicle that was used by the Assistant Fire Chief was picked up from his property (with his permission) for the use of the Interim Fire Chief, the battery cable had been cut, which stranded the Interim Fire Chief on his way to a meeting? Fortunately, it did not happen when he was on his way to an emergency.**
- This is true. As a result of the severed battery cable, the vehicle started and initially ran, but then suffered a complete electrical failure on the freeway. This was observed by Banks FD, who helped when the vehicle failed, and can be confirmed by the shop the vehicle was towed to
- 5. Is it true that equipment, such as chain saws, as well as turnouts and other gear, have gone missing?**

- a. There are turnouts and equipment purchased by the District that remain unaccounted for.

6. During the volunteer construction inside Station 2, under the direction of the Assistant Fire Chief by the authority of the Fire Chief, were any building permits obtained? Whose responsibility was it to obtain building permits? Did the Assistant Chief move forward on that construction knowing the necessary building permits were lacking? How did the Board handle this issue?

- a. Station 2 was approved by the voters in 2016. None of the current Board members were serving on the Board at that time, so we do not know how the process of managing that project, applying for permits, etc. was initially set up. A recent review of Board meeting minutes from that time does not provide that information.
- b. When current Board members began their terms, Assistant Chief Mulder was acting as Project Manager, and that practice continued until November of 2023 when the Board relieved him of that responsibility upon receipt of a County notice to cease construction due to unpermitted work and code violations.
- c. Oversight of construction of Station 2, including acquisition of necessary permits, falls under the purview of Operations, for which the Chief is responsible (ORS 478.260: "The fire chief shall be responsible for the equipment and properties of the district.")
- d. At our monthly meetings, it was standard practice for Assistant Chief Mulder to provide a progress report to the Board summarizing work on Station 2 since the previous meeting. The Board had no reason to believe that the Chief and Assistant Chief weren't following all applicable laws and codes regarding building permits and specifications.
- e. After a site visit by the Clatsop County Building Inspector in October 2023, the Board learned of code violations and unpermitted work. In November 2023, the Board took over management of the Station 2 project, and has been working with the County to determine what permits were obtained, what permits were not obtained, and take the recommended corrective action.
- f. At the request of the County, we have engaged a licensed designer to create "as-built" plans for Station 2, which the County will use to determine corrective action. We hope to submit those plans to the County within the next month.

7. What exactly is the Board's responsibility?

- The Board's primary responsibilities are to set policy and to ensure the financial health of the District. The Board is supposed to be made up of 5 members, each serving 4 year terms. The current policy manual is dated

2007, and based on the relative lack of minutes or other documentation we've found, it appears that the turnover of Board members after that time was very high – some Board members stayed only a few months – with vacancies fairly common up until just a couple of years ago. Then, in 2021, Directors McCann and Hecox were elected, joining Directors Carmichael and Ed and Sharon Van Dyke, and for the first time in many years, the District had a full Board of 5 that has remained committed to improving the District and served out our terms.

- With the full Board in place, then, we began to acquaint ourselves with the way the District functioned. It became apparent early on that budget and accounting processes being used by the District were non-traditional, which made it difficult for us to understand them. Assistant Chief Mulder was acting as Treasurer, controlling the accounting and finances, and our suggestion that a Board member take over the Treasurer's role was met with outright refusal. We increasingly noted instances where the numbers presented to us by Hans in his monthly reports didn't add up, and the Chief and the Assistant Chief were often at a loss to explain or be able to reconcile the discrepancies. Despite repeated requests, the Board was never granted access to original documentation of budget records, bookkeeping records, or other financial information necessary for us to do our job to ensure that the District was operating legally and ethically. This is all documented in meeting minutes posted on our website.
- Now that we are functioning properly under a new administration, we are moving forward with a complete review of the District financials, as we have discussed in other business tonight. Once we get the District stabilized, we will be able to focus more attention to continued review and update of the Policy Manual.

9. What is the role of the Special Districts in the current process?

- The SDAO provides training, resources, and support for special districts like ours. As we have worked through these issues we currently face, SDAO advisors have been instrumental in guiding our process every step of the way. They have provided consultation services, advice and information about the best ways to handle each of the issues we have encountered, so that we do everything legally, ethically, and properly. We remain in close communication with the senior consultant assigned to our case, and speak with him several times a week. These services are provided free of charge to us, as members of SDAO.

10. What is the source of funds to pay for the legal services?

- Legal services not covered by SDAO are paid out of the general fund. So far, legal services have cost \$4000.

11. Is it true that medical supplies and equipment were outdated and should have been replaced?

- This is true. A majority of the medical supplies were expired, some as far back as 2016. These medications were found in medical bags and inside vehicles that were currently being used by some of the volunteers who are now no longer responding. Photos were taken, and the expired meds in the bags and supply cabinet were observed and documented by numerous people. None were marked to be used for training purposes, nor stored in a manner consistent with that practice.
- There was \$5000 in the budget for medical supplies, most of which was unspent, so there was no reason for not re-stocking with current medications and supplies.
- We are in the process of re-stocking with current medications and supplies, and thus far have been able to get everything we need donated.

12. Can you talk about the long-term plans for the District?

- I see this in 3 phases. Number one is making sure that the district can continue to respond. When you call 911, you live here, you expect that somebody's going to show up. And so, making sure that our response capabilities remain intact and active is absolutely step number one for us moving into the future.
- The second part of that is going to be financial stability and making sure that we understand where we're at financially, and that we're being transparent with the community members and all of you understand, and are comfortable with what we're doing with your money. So as folks that live within the district pay their taxes, you deserve to know that we're spending your money appropriately, and you understand at any point you can ask the question of, "Okay, where are you spending your money? And what are you doing with it?"
- The third part is continuing to increase our recruitment retention. So, that means making sure that we continue to invite folks in that have the time and the drive and the desire to volunteer with the fire district, and then making sure that we're doing the right thing for those folks that want to give up their time so that they want to continue to serve their community when the calls come in.