



Citizen's Committee Report

2011

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2011 Citizens Committee Report for Cowlitz 2 Fire & Rescue

Committee Members:

Bill Bangs*	Mike Momberg
Dan Buel*	Matt McCoy
Rob Hall*	Mike Sanders*
Susan Kamp	Glenn Tsuda
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*Citizen's Academy Participants

Labor Representative:

Travis McWain

Fire Commission Representative:

Keith Merritt

Facilitator:

Don Bivens

Staff Support:

Chief Dave LaFave

EMS Administrator Becky Ribelin

Assistant Chief Alan Headley

Cowlitz 2 Fire & Rescue Overview

Cowlitz 2 Fire & Rescue is a combination career and volunteer department that serves approximately 35,000 people over 170 square miles in central Cowlitz County, which includes the City of Kelso, unincorporated west Longview, Columbia Heights, Lexington, Ostrander, Rose Valley, and the Carrols area with fire, hazardous materials and advanced life support ambulance transport services. The response force is divided between 5 fire stations with the headquarters station located in the City of Kelso and the other stations at Bakers Corner, Columbia Heights, Lexington and Rose Valley. The Fire District currently employs 30 career responders, approximately 70 volunteer responders and 6 support staff members. In 2010 the Fire District responded to approximately 3700 calls for service. Typically about 80% of those calls are for emergency medical services.

Background

Cowlitz 2 Fire & Rescue, like most governmental agencies, has been significantly impacted by the economic downturn of the past 2-3 years. As a result of that downturn the District was forced to layoff 12 part time employees, 1 full time support position and leave 3 additional part time positions vacant. Last year the employees of Cowlitz 2 Fire & Rescue collectively made the decision to reduce their wages by 5% to 8%. Reducing health benefit options by the union additionally saved the District over \$65,000 which offsets the District's recent 20 percent cutback in contract fees with the City of Kelso. These sacrifices allowed the District to maintain response capability and the ability to serve their public. The Professional Firefighters Union Local 3828 along with the administrative staff opted to reduce both wages and medical benefit options to prevent further layoffs in the department.

As the District evaluated how to continue to provide services with restricted funding and reduced staffing it was determined that, in order to properly gauge what levels of service the citizens expect and what they perceive as critically important, there needed to be input from a representative group of District citizens.

Citizen's Committee Selection

The Fire Commission authorized the formation of a citizens' advisory committee with the direction to have the committee evaluate the current level of service, the available funding sources and give feedback about what the committee felt the most important services are that should be maintained.

The citizen group was solicited through a variety of methods including; a newspaper article and advertisements, radio public service announcements, and simple word of mouth. As a result 10 individuals stepped forward that were willing to participate.

The Citizen's Committee was made up of people representing a cross section of the District's taxpayers. IAFF Local 3828 provided a labor representative to participate with the committee and the Fire Commission appointed a commissioner as their representative. Fire District senior staff provided support for the committee and a facilitator was provided by the District through the consulting group ESCI.

Committee Briefing

Starting on January 18, 2011, committee members came together 8 times over a 3 month period of time and received information regarding the current configuration and service levels of the Fire District. The group was also made aware of how the District is funded and what the major areas of expenditure are. Staff explained that the District wasn't looking for the committee to simply validate some form of ballot issue for additional funding but to evaluate current District services and evaluate and prioritize the current goals and objectives. The committee was also asked to evaluate issues with surrounding fire departments as they pertain to Cowlitz 2.

The group quickly focused on how the District is not educating taxpayers about the service level that is being provided and how efficiently the District utilizes their tax dollars. As a group the committee is impressed with the fact that only 57% of the Fire District's budget comes from tax dollars with the rest coming from a variety of contracts and fees for service. There is concern that this information is not being conveyed to the general public.

The Committee reviewed the service levels currently provided by the District. There were many questions about the way the District responds to calls, EMS in particular. Staff explained how the typical EMS call is handled as well as the need to have more personnel on scene than is typically available on an ambulance. Often, due to the increasing weight of many of the patients that the response crews are having to deal with and or the way that a patient must be moved, it takes at least 4 and at times 6 to 8 crew members just to safely lift patients onto the gurney, move them out of their residence and then lift them into the ambulance. It is also necessary on many occasions to need additional people to help administer the appropriate care for a patient. The committee learned that the District often does not have a clear picture of what the emergency call may entail due to 911 callers giving inaccurate information to dispatchers. It was noted that, when possible, the District uses smaller vehicles to assist the transport medic crew instead of always sending the fire engine to help. In general the District is providing the correct level and types of service and should not reduce that level of service.

The committee also learned how volunteers respond to calls as the initial responders with the career staff backing them up in the outlying areas of the District and as backup to career staffing in the core area of Kelso. Response information shows that volunteers are not always

available and it is not unusual for the career responders to be first on scene even in the outlying areas. Committee members liked that the District is looking for more ways to provide increased staffing on a scheduled basis both through the recently received SAFER grant that is reinstating 9 of the part time positions and by volunteers scheduling specific times to be available.

Initially there were questions about why there are so many different fire jurisdictions. It was explained that Cowlitz 2 has been an advocate in the past for consolidation and attempted to do so with the City of Longview. The City decided to end the partial merger instead of completing a full merger. Staff explained the cultural and philosophical differences between the members of the Longview Fire Department and Cowlitz 2 Fire & Rescue using the recent LFD patient abandonment, station fire event and the intolerance of volunteers as examples of why it would be very difficult to successfully combine these two organizations. The committee also learned about the District's efforts to include other surrounding jurisdictions in other joint ventures such as training.

The committee evaluated and prioritized the District's current goals and objectives as adopted by the Fire Commission. The general consensus is that the overall goals and objectives meet the needs of the District. The committee feels though that the financial goal and the public information goal need to be closely tied together and that they should both have the highest priority. Staff needs to spend more time developing programs that address these issues.

The idea of a citizen's academy was discussed with the goal to educate people about the District and to give a better understanding of the services available. The committee feels that this is a good starting point for public education and volunteered to be the test group for a pilot academy. Six of the committee members were available to continue on with this project.

Citizen's Academy

A 24 hour long citizen's academy was developed at the suggestion of this committee using a model from the Vancouver Fire Department. Members of the committee volunteered to be the test subjects for the first academy with 6 members participating as that test group.

The pilot academy, which was held on April 15th and again on the 16th, consisted of a variety of hands on demonstrations and exercises designed to give the participants some idea of what the job entails. Academy members were also assigned to apparatus and responded to emergency calls with the on-duty crew. The start of the "shift" had participants lined up with the on-coming crew to hear what had transpired the shift before. They were then paired up with a crew member that guided them through the academy events.

All participants feel that this is a valuable program that gives first hand understanding of the scope and quality of service provided by Cowlitz 2 Fire & Rescue. As one participant stated in

the written evaluation, "...the training provided along with the instruction provided a real sense of what happens on a typical shift. This combined with the opportunity to go on ride-a-longs added realism and seeing firsthand what a firefighter/paramedic goes through during a shift."

An unexpected outcome was the observation of the sense of family and team spirit of the crews. The conversation and interest shown between crew members during meal times shows that these individuals really care about what they do and about each other. The comradery and light hearted banter between crew members while in the station immediately turned to seasoned caring professionalism when an emergency call was received.

The academy participants highly recommend that Cowlitz 2 regularly schedules citizen academies. This is the only forum that truly shows who and what Cowlitz 2 Fire & Rescue is all about.

Observations and Recommendations

As a result of the series of meetings and this experience the committee is making the following observations and recommendations:

- Cowlitz 2 is doing an exceptional job of managing existing tax dollars and developing alternate funding sources to maintain current levels of service to the community.
- Most of the public served by the District have no idea about how the District operates and the level of service provided.
- The District has not done enough to educate the public about how the taxpayers are getting the best possible service for their tax dollars.
- The District has goals and objectives that meet the needs of the citizen's they serve.
- The services currently provided by the District are essential and should be maintained.
- District responders are well trained, professional and compassionate.
- The fire district is efficient in utilization of the taxpayers' facilities and of professional time.
- The District under reports/values the volunteer hours put into training, responding, promoting, and administration every month. Not only by the volunteers, but in the extra time put in by all career staffing.
- Cowlitz 2 needs to continue their efforts to maintain it's boundaries by bringing attention to the "boundary disputes" which look more like "land grabs" for dollars.

- It's apparent, in light of current economic conditions in our county, that a high percentage of resources are typically utilized by a low percentage of our population base.
- More emphasis needs to be placed on developing additional District funding along with educating the voters about the needs of the District. In short, don't be afraid to ask taxpayers for additional funding.
- The District needs to review and update the amount charged other jurisdictions for services performed, i.e. mechanical work by the District's maintenance shop.
- An ongoing public information and education program needs to have high priority along with the funding needed to make it effective.
- Continue to network/research how other districts conduct public outreach programs. Develop and keep a book on what works and what doesn't work.
- Continue to develop and offer a citizen's academy on a regular basis.