

Donald Wescott Fire Protection District, Dec. 7

## 2023 budget hearing; staff member departure

By Natalie Barszcz

On Dec. 7, the Donald Wescott Fire Protection District (DWFPD) board held a “special meeting” for the 2023 budget public hearing to establish a notice posting location for future board meetings and to approve the 2023 meeting dates, times, and locations. The board also heard about a departing member of the staff.

Directors Charles Fleece and Mike Forsythe were excused.

The board approved the “special meeting” agenda as presented, 3-0.

Administrative Assistant Stacey Popovich thanked the board for arranging a “special meeting” on short notice. The need for the meeting was brought to her attention two days after the November meeting and after realizing the state had accidentally filed the DWFPD 2023 budget and the Monument Fire District (MFD) budget as one district. The need for an additional meeting was then realized to conduct the public hearing and re-submit the DWFPD budget to the state in time to meet the mandatory filing deadline, said Popovich.

**Note:** The districts, although operating as one fire district, will continue to submit separate budgets to the state until the merger is completed. See [www.ocrn.me/v22n12.htm#dwfpd](http://www.ocrn.me/v22n12.htm#dwfpd).

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### 2023 budget hearing

President Mark Gunderman opened the second public hearing for the 2023 budget. See [www.ocrn.me/v22n12.htm#dwfpd](http://www.ocrn.me/v22n12.htm#dwfpd).

The district’s attorney, Emily Powell of Ireland Stapleton Pryor Pascoe PC law firm, confirmed the public hearing for the 2023 budget had been published and no comments had been received, and no members of the public were in attendance.

Gunderman closed the public hearing and made a motion to approve the 2023 budget.

The board approved the 2023 budget as previously presented, 3-0.

The board also approved 3-0, the meeting schedule for 2023, establishing a notice posting location for the district, and the meeting dates, times, and locations.

### Staff departure

Fire Chief Andy Kovacs thanked Popovich on behalf of the district for being instrumental during the consolidation process between DWFPD and MFD and announced that Popovich leaves the district after eight years to take an administrative assistant position with the Security Fire Depart-

ment. The district appreciates all her work for both departments over the years, he said, and he wished her well for the future.

Gunderman said that when he joined the board, it did not take him long to realize that Popovich was the glue holding everything together at DWFPD. There have been so many moving parts over the past several years, and he wished her the best of luck on behalf of the board.

Treasurer Duane Garrett and Secretary Larry Schwarz also wished Popovich success for the future.

The meeting adjourned at 4:11p.m.

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Future meetings will be held on the fourth Wednesday of the month at Station 1, 18650 Highway 105. The next regular board meeting is scheduled for Jan. 25 at 4:30 p.m. Meeting attendance is open to the public in person or via Zoom. For joining instructions, agendas, minutes, and updates, visit [www.wescottfire.org](http://www.wescottfire.org) or [www.tlmfire.org](http://www.tlmfire.org) or contact Director of Administration Jennifer Martin at 719-484-9011.

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El Paso Board of County Commissioners, Nov. 29, Dec. 6 and 20

## Approval for RV storage special use at Highway 83 property

By Helen Walklett

At the Dec. 6 El Paso Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) land use meeting, the commissioners heard a special use application to legalize the operation of an existing RV storage business at a Highway 83 property. The commissioners also approved the 2023 budget during December.

### Highway 83 RV storage special use approved

At the Dec. 6 BOCC land use meeting, the commissioners voted to approve a special use application by Steve Rael Jr. to legalize the operation of the existing RV storage business at his Highway 83 property. The 40-acre property, zoned RR-5 (residential rural), is located on the west side of Highway 83, one-third of a mile south of its junction with Walker Road. The application, originally scheduled to be heard at the Nov. 1 meeting, was rescheduled at Rael’s request to allow him more time to prepare. It came to the BOCC from the Oct. 20 Planning Commission meeting with a recommendation for approval. See [https://www.ocrn.me/v22n11.htm?zoom\\_highlight=rael](https://www.ocrn.me/v22n11.htm?zoom_highlight=rael).

Rael filed the special use application in 2019 after he was notified of a code violation the previous year. Jonathan Moore with CTR Engineering LLC, representing Rael, stated that the business was started in 2006 when neighbors asked if they could store their RVs on the property. Moore said that, like many ranchers at the time, Rael did not know he needed a permit from county to do that. He added that the process of getting permission can be a confusing one and that that explained why it had taken time to get to this point.

A July 2022 application from Rael to the Board of Adjustment requesting that the required 50-foot boundary setback be reduced to 30 feet was denied. The business has 42 storage spots but these are being cut to 25, the latter being the number

that was presented at the Planning Commission hearing. Moore reported that work was also underway to move the RVs but was difficult due to some owners being snowbirds and therefore out of state for six months. He asked that Rael be given three months rather than the usual 30 days to get everything built if the storage area were approved. Rael will need to build a 6-foot screening fence as part of the requirements.

Moore said he and Rael had met with the neighbors on site after the Planning Commission hearing to look at different locations for the storage. Most had favored the south side but not all did. Siting the RVs out by Highway 83 was not feasible financially due to issues with drainage and gradient.

Twelve adjoining property owners were notified of the application, with six responding in favor and six in opposition. Four neighbors spoke in support at the hearing. Matt Dunston, co-developer of The Preserve at Walden, north and east of Rael’s property, said he did not see the storage business as a problem. One neighbor said he had no objection to the 25 RV proposal but had spoken against the application at the Planning Commission because he did not find it in harmony with the character of the area. He also feared it would set a precedent for the area, stating that two properties to the south already had RVs parked on them.

Three neighbors spoke in opposition. Jill Fowler, a neighbor who raised the long-running code violation with the BOCC in June and spoke against the application at the Planning Commission meeting, said that none of the reasons given by neighbors in support of the application had anything to do with whether or not the special use met the criteria and the intent established in the county code. She said that the storage in its proposed location did not meet the special use criteria because it was not in harmony with the neighborhood’s character. Fowler said that her property had been devalued by the presence of the storage business and this had been verified by an independent expert. She commented, “He’s been allowed to drag his feet with no financial penalties assessed and he’s been flaunting his violations in my face as well as in the face of the county.”

Fowler concluded, “Bottom line is this RV business does not meet the special use criteria because it’s not in harmony with the character of the neighborhood and it does not meet the intent of the rural home occupation’s special use because it does not protect neighborhood areas from unreasonable impact. It’s all about location that we’re opposing”

Commissioner Longinos Gonzalez Jr. joined the application hearing part way through and, as a result, was advised by County Attorney Kenneth Hodges that he could not vote unless the vote was split but could make comments. He said he felt the business was not in harmony with the neighborhood. He also said he had concerns with property owners who do things in violation and ask for forgiveness afterward.

Commissioner Holly Williams commented, “At the end of the day I’m looking at the code and I’m having a hard time finding that it is in harmony with the neighborhood.” She moved to deny but the motion did not find a second and failed. She then moved to approve, and this was seconded by Commissioner Carrie Geitner. The vote to approve was 3-1 with Williams voting no.

### 2023 budget

At their Dec. 6 meeting, the commissioners voted unanimously to adopt and appropriate the 2023 budget. Ahead of the vote, Bret Waters, county administrator, said the \$471.2 million budget places an emphasis on roads and infrastructure as well as park maintenance and resources for emerging issues like homeless camp cleanups. He commented that the budget also makes a provision for adequate employee pay adjustments based on significant inflationary costs. He ended by saying, “Lastly, this budget has a consideration for an economic slowdown in future years by placing more funds in reserve.” Gonzalez commented, “Again, another great effort to continue our prioritization of our roads infrastructure, our public safety, and taking care of our personnel.”

The budget documents can be seen on the county website at <https://admin.elpasoco.com/financial-services/budget-finance/county-budget/>

### Other decisions

- Nov. 29—the commissioners approved the final release of bonds for Filings 5 and 7 in the Forest Lakes subdivision following the completion and satisfactory inspection of all required improvements in both filings.
- Dec. 20—approved a memorandum of agreement, special warranty deeds, a non-exclusive permanent easement, and a temporary construction easement agreement for the Highway 105A project. This concerns property owned by James A. Maguire as trustee of the James A. Maguire Living Trust for which the county will pay \$1.03 million.

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