

Monument Fire District, Nov.15

2024 budget approved; homeowners petition for inclusion

By Natalie Barszcz

At the Monument Fire District (MFD) meeting on Nov. 15, the board approved the 2024 budget, the mill levy, the wage scale, a fee schedule, the board's meeting schedule, and the employee handbook. The board heard about a number of homes requesting inclusion into the district and received updates on the new combined Career Firefighter Academy and a wildland fire exchange program. The board also received an update on the Donald Wescott Fire Protection District (DWFPD) sub-district dissolution process and heard about a resignation.

Secretary Jason Buckingham attended via Zoom.

2024 budget approval

President Michael Smaldino opened the public hearing on the proposed 2024 budget and the corresponding appropriations, and closed the hearing after receiving no public comments. See www.ocn.me/v23n11.htm#mfd and www.monumentfire.org.

In a roll call vote, the board unanimously approved Resolution 2023-05 approving the 2024 budget, appropriating funds, and accepting the mill levy certification at 18.4 mills for 2024.

The board unanimously approved the following:

- A 3% cost of living adjustment to the 2024 Wage Scale.
- The 2024 Fee Schedule (includes an EMS fee for ambulance requests to the Town of Palmer Lake at \$588.25 per transport).
- The 2024 Board of Directors schedule, maintaining the fourth Wednesday every month at 6:30 p.m., except for the No-

ember (third Wednesday) and December (first Wednesday) meetings.

- The 2024 revised Employee Handbook.

Smaldino said he had no questions or concerns regarding the 68-page employee handbook, and he thanked the executive staff on behalf of the Board of Directors for a good 2024 budget, a competitive wage scale, and the 2% matching 457 retirement plan. The board is supporting not only the district but the firefighters too, he said.

Vice President John Hildebrandt said the 2024 budget decreases the mill levy back to the original 18.4 mills after setting the mill levy at 18.83 mills for 2023 to offset the loss of revenue anticipated from the drop in the Residential Assessment Rate. The board are good stewards of the revenue received, and although the property tax assessments are increasing for 2024, the majority of the property taxes for DWFPD are decreasing significantly, he said. There is still uncertainty about future revenue due to the scheduled emergency legislative session to discuss property tax relief, but I am proud of the product the district puts out for the citizens, he said.

Fire Chief Andy Kovacs thanked the board for its support and said he is proud of the staff for putting the budget together, and 2024 will be an exciting year for the district, the community, and the firefighters. The district will continue to develop the training center and stay ahead with fire apparatus and equipment. The district expects to receive an ambulance and a Type 3 "Wildland" engine in December, and another ambulance in early 2024. The

district chose not to increase the fee schedule again and is trying to be mindful to the community after the increase in property taxes. The district may still have to pivot on any state legislation that may decrease the district's property tax revenue, he said.

Local 4319 President and district Engineer Christian Schmidt thanked the board for approving the wage scale and said the firefighters are excited about the 2% per pay period matching 457 retirement plan. He thanked Kovacs for the negotiation process.

Note: The total revenue budget for 2024 is projected to be about \$22 million (includes revenue for the provision of emergency fire and EMS services to the DWFPD). The total expense budget for 2024 is projected to be about \$25.6 million. The district's capital expenses are projected to be about \$9.8 million in 2024 (about \$8.6 million for the purchase of land, the rebuild of Station 3 to include the district administrative offices, the remodel of Station 4, and fleet and equipment purchases). The budget includes a total fund transfer of \$3.7 million (includes \$1.5 million in Impact Fees collected only within the Town of Monument) as the district continues to set aside funds for capital purchases. See www.monumentfire.org.

Financial report

Treasurer Tom Kelly presented the October financial report and said the district had received over 100% of the projected revenue budget in all categories for a total of about \$16.2 million year to date. The annual revenue income was projected to be about \$16.5 million.

Overall expenses year to date are "tracking pretty well" at about \$11.8 million of the projected 2023 total expense budget set at about \$14 million, he said.

Hildebrandt questioned the cost of \$3,253 for air duct cleaning at Station 4.

Kovacs said several firefighters had complained of sinus and allergy related symptoms during shift, and cleaning the ducts resolved the issue.

Division Chief of Administration/Fire Chief Jamey Bumgarner said the ducts were dirty and multiple quotes were much higher, with one as high as \$6,000. It was the second station to undergo air duct cleaning, he said.

Director Tom Tharnish said the cost was considerably less than the bill of about \$12,000 for air duct cleaning at Monument Town Hall.

Kelly said the district total in checking/savings is about \$15 million (includes about \$6.2 million for the Operations/General Fund).

The board unanimously accepted the financial report as presented.

Petitions for inclusion

Kovacs said the El Paso County Sheriff's Office (EPCSO) had provided the district with an audit of several homes within the district not provided with fire and EMS service by it. The district drafted letters to the homeowners in the Red Rock Ranch area and the northeast of the county (within the district's service area), and so far five properties have petitioned for inclusion into the district; more homeowners are yet to respond. A public hearing to include the homes into the fire district is expected to be made at the January meeting after the district's legal counsel and Director of Administration Jennifer Martin have collected the data. A responding homeowner was surprised to learn they were not included within the district for services and was eager to be included. Somehow the properties were overlooked by the county assessor or missed after homes were built on empty lots. The properties should have been included within the district a long time ago,

he said.

Hildebrandt asked about the potential for the homeowners should a fire occur and they have no protection.

Kovacs said the EPCSO provided the letter to allow the district under state law to bill property owners that were not included in the fire district. The district would collect for services rendered if the district provides fire and EMS to those properties, he said.

Division Chief of Administration/Fire Marshal Jamey Bumgarner said that a property owner's insurance would be billed if services are rendered, but not only would the district claim, the mutual aid partners would also be eligible to file a claim.

Donald Wescott sub-district dissolution update

Kovacs thanked the L4319 members for working diligently to educate the voters in the DWFPD, and their efforts helped pass ballot initiatives 6A/6B. The next steps will be for the DWFPD district counsel to continue the legal steps and complete the dissolution process and dissolve the Wescott district, he said.

Career Fire Academy development

Kovacs said that Division Chief of Operations Jonathan Bradley led the charge in short order to create a new Career Fire Academy with the first class of 24/01, to commence January 2024. The district developed the academy over the past couple of months with Pikes Peak State College and Black Forest Fire Rescue Protection District (BFFRPD). The instruction will be provided by Colorado Springs Fire Department (CSFD) employees. The firefighters will complete a 640-hour Career Fire Academy course with college credit, and all certifications provided during the academy are required by the state. Several other districts within the region have expressed interest in sending recruits to the joint academy. It is another strong collaborative effort that MFD has been leading in the county by recognizing the value of community partnerships and making things happen, he said. See www.ocn.me/v23n11.htm#mfd.

Battalion Chief Micah Coyle said the oral board interviews for the new recruits set to attend the Career Fire Academy had concluded the interview process, and eight conditional offers had been made. The final phase of psychological, background and medical tests were underway, and the new hires have a variety of experience and age ranges.

Bradley said the Career Fire Academy course will begin with 14 students in January (nine from MFD and five from BFFRPD). The Career Fire Academy will be held at the BFFRPD Training Center and students will also attend Fort Carson for training three days per week. The goal is to have a permanent regional fire academy, he said.

Hildebrandt said the addition of a fire academy is commendable, noting that the district had a fire academy for one year in 2013.

Chief's report

Kovacs said the following:

- Mutual aid request to American Medical Response had returned to three requests in October after reaching 11 requests in September. Hopefully it was an anomaly, and the requests will remain low for the rest of the year.
- The district assisted the Colorado National Guard and Drug Enforcement Agency with Red Ribbon Week activities in the local schools.
- The district is applying for a grant from the International Firefighters Association to send two firefighters to gain valuable

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