

Lewis County Fire Commissioners Association meeting – special meeting

7 p.m. Monday, May 15, 2023

Salkum Fire Department (Fire District 8) - 2495 US Hwy. 12, Salkum, Wash.

Present: Commissioner Brummer, Commissioner Pollock, Jenn Libby-Jones, Nic Scott

Guest(s): Various members of the Lewis County Fire Commissioners' Association

Recorder: Rieva Lester

Dinner started at 6:30 p.m., and the Fire Commissioners Association called its meeting to order at 7 p.m.

Jenn Libby-Jones said the Combined User Committee (CUC) has recommended the Board of County Commissioners put to a public vote a 911 sales tax initiative. She said the group would like a change of 911 governance.

Jenn said the CUC is recommending a ballot measure for either a one-tenth of 1 percent or a two-tenths of 1 percent sales tax for 911 funding. She said the one-tenth of 1 percent sales tax would help with budget shortfalls, infrastructure, maintenance and some training. She said the two-tenths of 1 percent option would provide further funding to help decrease user fees and help pay for a stand-alone 911 center. Jenn said the group has discussed contracting out some of the 911 services, potentially partnering with the county for the services.

Centralia Police Chief Stacy Denham, who serves as president of the CUC, said past issues prompted the group to issue the request. He said it costs an estimated \$5.4 million to fully fund the dispatch center and that the group's current budget is slightly over \$3 million.

Chief Denham discussed funding the county has pledged for the center, including \$4.5 million for infrastructure. He said the CUC currently operates as an advisory board and that the CUC members would prefer to have more of a voice and more control over the dispatch center.

Commissioner Brummer said he has been in support of a change in governance but that he is concerned about the possibility of doubling the costs to operate the 911 center.

Commissioner Pollock said she also has been in support of a change in governance but wonders whether "divorcing" 911 operations completely from the county is the right answer.

Chief Denham said the group has discussed several options, including the sales tax, ways to completely divorce from the county, creating a public development authority (PDA) or simply forming a new type of governance. He stressed that the current 911 center is unsafe due to its location, and he noted that seismic activity could destroy the current center, rendering it useless in its most crucial time.

Chief Denham discussed the need for infrastructure improvements and the costs associated with the updates. The group noted that individuals traveling through the area use 911 services but do not pay for them. A tax, members of the group noted, would level the playing / paying field.

Members of the group noted that 20 of the state's 39 counties have a 911 tax.

Members of the group said they would conduct an email survey to determine whether the Fire Commissioners Association would support the tax. They said they would make a determination by the end of June.

The group noted that the next Fire Commissioners Association meeting is scheduled for Aug. 21 at Fire District 6 (Chehalis).

Meeting adjourned at 8:58 p.m.