

August 30, 2023
Reno County Courthouse
Hutchinson, Kansas

The Board of Reno County Commissioners reconvened in a study session with Chairman Daniel Friesen, Commissioner Ron Hirst, Commissioner Randy Parks, Commissioner Don Bogner, and Commissioner John Whitesel, County Counselor Patrick Hoffman, County Administrator Randy Partington, and Minutes Clerk Cindy Martin, present.

Emergency Management Director Adam Weishaar gave a presentation explaining that in 2019 the commission at that time asked for a countywide fire study to form a plan of what fire districts should look like. The study was finished in 2020-2021, it was delayed because it was hard for the Five Bugle gentleman to travel from Wisconsin due to COVID restrictions. He did a fact-finding study making suggestions for goals and consolidation recommendations. They made several changes to fire districts, one of those was to have all district budgets go through emergency management instead of nine individual fire districts. He said they wanted to provide the same professional service in the fire districts and the goal was how to improve service and safety of firefighters and to the community by having multiple units responding. He wanted the administrative side to not have multiple districts but one large fire district. Another cultural change was to have all firefighters to be trained professionally.

The reorganization was necessary for the county as a whole. The goal was to have the commission give directions today, no decisions have been made by his office. He spoke about hiring Fire Administrator Travis Vogt and his goals plus plans for training all fire districts the same. After a long discussion with fire chiefs and 177 firefighters, Option 1 was recommended for approval by the commissioners.

Adam Pickett, 22617 W. Irish Creek, Arlington, KS spoke about concerns of open transparentness, communication, citizen volunteers and lack of trust. He stated Fire District #4 had already been doing accountability. He wanted the fire districts to have a voice since he felt they did not. He suggested a pilot program with the selection of a steering committee made up of five members from the Fire District #4 area.

County Counselor Patrick Hoffman reminded everyone that the commissioners were the fire board.

City of Hutchinson Chief Steve Beer Fire District #2 stated he did not have a stake in the game, but the system was broken. This strategic plan was a business decision and would fix most of the problems within the system. It was a new proposal for consolidation. Chief Beer recommended supporting Option 1 since every Fire Chief from all districts voted yes for this option.

Craig Childs, 103 N. Abby Street, Abbyville, KS said he was retired from USD 310 and a volunteer firefighter. His concern was the equipment and was not sure about consolidation. He mentioned recruiting fire fighters, training, and said was President of the Reno County Firefighters Association. He suggested a new station in Abbyville.

After some discussion Chief Rick Graber from Pretty Prairie clarified why after 42 years, we cannot stay status quo. He said all fire districts need to work together supporting Option 1 which was least invasive.

Doug Smith, Arlington, KS resident supported people having some input to talk to volunteers at a community meeting.

Fire Administrator Travis Vogt stated this plan was proposed to all fire chiefs and a decision was made. He clarified they put information together and presented it to the Board, said no decisions have been made, and they were requesting direction from the Board by presenting options.

Fire District #3 Chief Wiens went over the five plans with his volunteer firefighters and brought the input back to Mr. Weishaar to let him know what they thought would make it better.

Mr. Friesen stated there was consensus for moving forward with Option 1 in an ongoing effort. Communication had some gaps, so the suggestion was to include volunteers and have public meetings getting dates for availability. He appreciated all coordinated efforts from staff and the public.

At 12:35 a.m. Mr. Friesen adjourned the meeting until Wednesday, September 13th, 2023, at 9:00 a.m.

Approved:

Chair, Board of Reno County Commissioners

(ATTEST)

Reno County Clerk
cm

Date