Citizens brainstorm about how to shrink Wescott

By Lisa Hatfield

Sixteen members of the public attended the Jan. 17 Donald Wescott Fire Protection District (DWFPD) Board of Directors meeting, which was full of discussions about the future of the district and the upcoming mill levy vote planned because Wescott’s revenue will be cut 66 percent by 2019. The debate with neighbors of the Sun Hills Station 3 about the potential sale of that station continued. The public heard more about a Wescott wedding with Tri-Lakes Monument Fire Protection District (TLMFPD). And at the end of February, Wescott staff will be using the old Glenegale Golf Club clubhouse as a training for a continued burn.

After the executive session, the directors voted to hire Webb Strategic Communications to help with public education about the mill levy, said Executive Administrator Stacey Popeck.

How did we get here?

Chief Vinny Burns summarized that DWFPD is currently “in a bit of a financial crisis” since the City of Colorado Springs annexed the southern half of Wescott in January 2004, and 12 years later the Colorado Springs Fire Department (CSFD) opened CSFD Station 22 at 711 Copper Center Parkway off Voyager Parkway. A court decision allowed DWFPD to continue collecting full property taxes from the city’s annexed area due to the city not providing a staffed local fire station until April 4, 2016, when CSFD Station 22 was opened. The city never gave a discount or refuse to these annexed Wescott property owners. See www.ocnme.org/vinby.htm for the https://coloradosprings.gov/sites/default/files/planning/annexplan06.pdf , page 13, and https://csfd.coloradosprings.gov/article/event/station-22-grand-opening .

The Oct. 18 intergovernmental agreement (IGA) between DWFPD and the city covers the exclusion of the portion of the DWFPD service area now annexed into the city from Interquest Parkway north to Old Northgate Road. All of Flying Horse Ranch was annexed, as was the Northgate Highlands subdivision at the north end of Voyager Parkway. See www.maptechnics.com/colora-map.Colorado-Springs-CO80160 .

The overall effect will be to reduce the size of the district’s service area by half of its current 22 square miles and reduce its total revenue by 66 percent beginning in 2019 under the current district property tax of 7.0 mills. In 2017, DWFPD’s property tax revenue will not be affected, but in 2018 it will receive 33 percent less revenue, and in 2019 it will receive no property tax revenue from the part of the district south of Northgate Boulevard. Revenue loss is skewed because so much of the half of its territory Wescott is losing is commercial areas that are taxed at a higher rate. See www.ocnme.org/v16web.html#tax.

Resident Lois Williams asked about TLMFPD’s statement in December that Wescott’s Shamrock Station 2 is closed. Burns said, “When they get shut down 46:30 notification is beyond me. Our board is fully briefed that it is not fully closing. There are days when it will be closed, but not an everyday occurrence... Officially it is open, although at times it will be unstaffed.” Due to the district’s decision in December to eliminate almost all overtime pay to save over $100,000 in 2017. See www.ocnme.org/v17web.htm.

The district hopes voters in the sub-district north of the Colorado Springs northern boundary will approve a November 2017 mill levy increase ballot measure that would start generating revenue for DWFPD in 2019. During public comments Gary Rusnak, a Wescott homeowners and Glenegale North Homeowner’s Association Treasurer, said he had done his own calculations on the budget and that the tax gained by the district were $1.4 million short of what was needed to get them through to 2019. He asked the directors to move faster on adjusting the budget and getting the word out to district voters about the implications of the upcoming ballot measure.

A workgroup for residents interested in working with the district to analyze the financial future was scheduled to meet Jan. 17 and report back to the regular February board meeting.

Public education consultant hired

Burns said Pinnacle Consulting Group Inc. recommended public relations firm Webb Strategic Communications to assist DWFPD with consumer and voter education regarding the November mill levy ballot measure.

Keith Webb of Webb Strategic Communications, who has 28 years’ experience in the fire district business, said:

• The time to educate voters is now. Once the ballot language is in, the district cannot spend any money on advocacy for a mill levy.

• The citizens committee should look at what the mill levy does to stabilize finances but also a third party to try to negotiate some kind of agreement with TLMFPD or Black Forest Fire Rescue Protection. There are definite advantages to unification, and we can help you with that.

Burns said, “We missed the mark in prior elections, and