



Holding Their Feet to Our Fires:

*Rural Emergency Services and the Struggle to Serve in
the Face of Ignorance and Corruption*

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Introductory Thoughts

- Change IS COMING – either help shape it or risk getting crushed by it.
- Such ‘shaping’ should be based upon the thoughtful consideration of facts, not simply on reflexive emotions.
- Listen to experts offering their public services (and perspectives) for the public good – especially when they do so for free!
- Ask yourself why ANYONE would be opposed to greater public safety.

The Context

- Emergency services (fire, rescue, medical, and law enforcement) are needed throughout the United States – not only in cities
- In rural areas, services (ex law enforcement) are often provided by 'fire departments' largely staffed by volunteers: these are very expensive to run
- In Colorado, most of our fire departments are now organized as Fire-Protection Districts (FPDs) that, after concurrence of the citizenry served, levy taxes on property within their boundaries
- One or more Fire Chiefs provides operational oversight of each FPD
- Elected Boards of Directors (BoDs) oversee FPD funds, Fire Chiefs, and assist in setting FPD strategic direction

The Problem

- Management / oversight (which is the Director's role) requires prior knowledge of the subject matter, or a willingness to learn it on the job
- Elections in the US, even for something as apolitical as BoDs overseeing public safety should be, are now microcosms of national politics – and all of the ugliness this entails
- Those attracted to be a Director include extremes:
 - Experienced persons who seek to understand and foster the common good
 - Corrupt political hacks with neither topical experience nor interest in learning and who believe that they have somehow spontaneously mastered the subject
- Elk Creek FPD (SW of Denver in the Front Range of the Rockies) has both types of Directors on its BoD, and the latter type has created many recent problems endangering all – with potentially fatal consequences



This Problem's Specifics

- Corrupt Directors of the BoD use their positions to promote their own agendas, which usually have nothing to do with the FPD's work (e.g. preventing changes, such as by development)
- Elk Creek FPD does have real issues to address:
 - Increasing numbers and acuity of incidents (and costs to handle them)
 - Decreasing volunteerism (a broad, national phenomenon)
 - Greater draw on mutual aid from neighboring FPDs than Elk Creek offers in return (so we are being subsidized by our neighbors)
 - Overseeing fire safety in one of the 'reddest of the red' Wildland-Urban Interfaces (WUIs)
 - One call away from catastrophe
- Red-herring tasks (such as thwarting development) dilute the FPD's true tasks and detract from meeting their responsibilities

A Proposed Solution: 'Consolidation' (1/2)

- Last Autumn, the Chiefs of three FPDs – including Elk Creek (with support of their Membership and majority support of their BoDs) proposed combining their districts as a practical way forward
- This 'Consolidation' would have raised property taxes slightly, and consequently met with immediate resistance from one underinformed (and uninformed) member of Elk Creek's BoD (and his special interest cronies)
- This Director acted in violation of his BoD by-laws (for which he was formally sanctioned by his fellow BoD members)



A Proposed Solution: 'Consolidation' (2/2)

- They founded an organization they entitled 'Save Elk Creek Fire', further confusing the electorate by coopting the FPD's trademarked logo (hiding behind 'Fair Use' and Freedom of Speech when served with a formal 'cease and desist' demand)
- They spread misinformation and disinformation re the consequences of Consolidation and called these inventions 'facts', thus spreading fear
- They violated election laws (and consequently were fined – a further, more serious case rests with the county DA)
- They stole Pro-Consolidation yard signs and banners – repeatedly
- They refused to debate issues and
- They engaged in vitriolic, personal smear campaigns against the department overseen and the Chiefs who run all three of them
- A citizen's group countered the nay-sayers, but started too late and were always 'on defense'
- We also were unwilling to counter their dirty tricks with more 'dirt'

The Voiced Criticisms of Consolidation

1. A lack of strategy (red herring)
2. An increase in property taxes (de minimis)
3. A loss of local political agency (total red herring)
4. Change of role for individual fire stations (operational, ergo, opinions welcome, control of the outcome is not)
5. 'Distrust and vilify' approach of critics (who ARE well organized)

The Outcome

- All three FPDs had to pass their equivalent ballot measures for Consolidation to occur.
- While the overall electorate in the 3 FPDs voted in favor of these ballot measures (54%), only Elk Creek's rejected theirs (by 0.36% = 45 votes out of 5374 ballots cast): so, Consolidation failed.
- Emergency services continue to limp along, but the structural challenges remain.

Why Such a Fuss by the Corrupt?

I postulate that it was both a 'zero-sum game' philosophy and a threat to local politicians with axes to grind:

- Service provided a neighbor 'threatens' availability of that service when needed in district
- Consolidation would have reduced the total number of BoD positions in this aggregated region from 15 (5 in each) to 5 (only 2 of whom would be from Elk Creek)
- The corrupt main agent fighting Consolidation likely would lose his position and his platform for his apparent favorite cause: stasis / negation of change

Citizenry Concern

When public service and safety are at the mercy of having a local political playground for the power-hungry:

SOMETHING IS VERY WRONG!



What's a Citizen to Do?

Our citizen's group (about 30 strong across the 3 FPDs) held an 'After Action Review' that highlighted the following needs for any 'next time':

1. To protect and defend the use of the FPD's logo from rogue users
2. To define the field of play / issues from the beginning
3. To reach out directly via personal networks and fora (rather than just social media and websites)
4. To expose dirty tricks IMMEDIATELY when they occur
5. To provide a detailed Elk Creek FPD 'strategic plan'

In the Fullness of Time...

- A 'strategic plan' was formulated, presented, and garnered no objections
- A smaller group of citizens from Elk Creek FPD (originally 4, but now 8) agreed to provide a constructive force for any next move
- Calling ourselves the 'Guardians of Sanity', we emphasize fact, truth, and prefer affirmative messaging (sometimes that proves difficult – even impossible) – and we act below the radar
- We are mostly concerned citizens and Elk Creek FPD volunteers– all with the greater good in mind
- We are helping support a new approach to the combining of FPDs and associated streamlining needed: 'Unification'

Epilogue...Perhaps

- Unification does NOT require voter approval, results in lower taxes, has been formally proposed by the three Fire Chiefs, and is currently under review by their respective BoDs
- Preliminary indications for Unification remain encouraging, but the opposition is crying foul and starting its campaign of craziness
- Our Guardians are organizing informational meetings and making clear the wide support this has among those of us who serve (topical experts rather than underinformed political hacks)
- If certain parties run for election (or re-election), we may need to be less gentle...

Why Do We Do This Work? (1/4)



Why Do We Do This Work? (2/4)



Why Do We Do This Work? (3/4)



Why Do We Do This Work? (4/4)



We Also Help with Hurricane Clean-Up..



A scenic landscape at sunset. The sky is filled with vibrant colors of orange, red, and purple, with a bright sun low on the horizon. In the foreground, there are dark silhouettes of evergreen trees. In the middle ground, there are rolling hills and mountains, some with patches of snow. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and majestic.

THANK YOU!

Any Questions?