

**CITY OF SAN RAFAEL FIRE DEPARTMENT  
FIRE COMMISSION MEETING**

**Minutes of the Regular Meeting  
April 13, 2022**

**VIA ZOOM**

**Present:**

Chair Larry Luckham  
Thomas Weathers  
Ken Johnson  
David Fonkalsrud, Alternate  
Stan Burford  
Donna McCusker, Alternate  
Fire Chief Darin White  
Special Guest: Council Member Rachel Kertz

**Absent:**

Vice Chair Nadine Atieh

Chair Luckham called the meeting to order at 4:13 p.m. after Fire Department admin resolved some technical problems with a new Zoom implementation.

**1. OPEN TIME FOR PUBLIC EXPRESSION -**

With no members of the public present Chair Luckham started the meeting by welcoming Council member Kertz to the meeting and asked her to give the Commissioners an introduction after which we would do a round robin and give her some of our backgrounds.

Council Member Kertz explained that she joined the Council in 2020 and is actively involved in the Marin Wildfire Prevention Authority and wanted to meet the Commissioners so as to be available for questions related to that work. She's also involved in issues around the homeless and affordable housing.

Chair Luckham then introduced and welcomed our newest Fire Commissioner Donna McCusker and asked her to start the round robin by tell us about her background, her special relationship with SRFD, and her interest in the Fire Commission.

Donna explained that she has been working with the Fire Foundation for about 5 years. The special relationship is the result of her brother serving as a San Rafael firefighter for 34 years, finally succumbing to job related illness. Donna carries on in his legacy.

Continuing the round robin, Chair Luckham explained that he started with San Rafael CERT program, then served on two of the Critical Facilities Committees, and the Facilities Working Group. Then talking with Chief Gray about documenting the department activities lead to getting issued a department pager and responding to fire

calls with a camera. Pretty soon the department Fire Investigator was asking for help with photographing evidence and before long he enrolled himself in the California State Fire Marshall Fire Investigator training program which eventually resulted in becoming the department's Fire Investigator as a volunteer when the original investigator retired. That lasted for nearly a decade until he was about to turn 76 and decided that maybe it was time to turn in the pager and retire from that role anyway.

Tom Weathers relates that he has been on the commission for 8 or so years, is an attorney and tribal member practicing tribal law. He helped set up the Fire Foundation as a non-profit and promotes the department around town whenever possible.

Ken Johnson went next explaining that he is in his first year on the commission and is an insurance broker with the third largest insurance brokerage in the world. He does a lot of property insurance and has a perspective on issues like wildfire and other property risks.

David Fonkalsrud relates that he has been on the commission for 6 years, works for a tech company in marketing and public relations. He has been able to work to help get the messages of the department out to the public. He mentioned noticing that some of the videos put out by the MWPA have been really great.

Stan Burford joined the Commission 4 years ago as an alternate and was just reappointed to another 4 years as a Commissioner. Stan has a 50-year background in broadcasting having spent some of that chasing fire and police departments in the Bay Area. He finds himself regularly explaining to his neighbors why Italian Cypress is an unwanted species.

## **2. APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES – March 9, 2022**

Move to approve: Stan      Seconded: Ken      Voice vote: approved unanimously

**3. FIRE FOUNDATION** – Commissioner McCusker reported that the Foundation has approximately \$92,000 in cash reserves and that the Foundation has voted to approve as a moral booster the delivery of 18 bags of breakfast goods, one to each fire crew. The goods will be sources from Andy's Market, Chief White to deliver.

**4. HISTORIC SUBCOMMITTEE** – Chair Luckham reports nothing to report.

## **5. CHAIR AND COMMISSION MEMBER REPORTS –**

**Thomas Weathers** – Nothing to report.

**Ken Johnson** – Reinsurers (mostly in London) are comfortable with their analysis of hurricane risk, hail storms, but not the risk of wildfires. The sort of material produced by the Marin wildfire groups is invaluable for reinsurers to learn about the risks. One of the most important things a homeowner needs to be aware of is the valuation of your home. The cost of replacement is going up constantly and many policies don't account for that.



**David Fonkalsrud** – Following up on a discussion at our last meeting contacted the IJ to see if they would be interested in running an article on Dr. Mizroch's retirement from the Fire Commission and his years of service. The IJ wasn't particularly responsive. David asked if perhaps Councilmember Kertz might have more luck and she said she will look into it.

**Stan Burford** – Stan pointed out the invitation to the Station 54 & 55 groundbreaking. He discussed a posting on the NextDoor website in which a Marinwood resident was taking umbrage at the new requirements for home hardening for wildfire mitigation. Most responses to this posting were supportive of the new requirements, but there were others with the same position. Stan wondered if maybe residents like this would be more receptive if approached by a "blue shirt" i.e., firefighter, rather than a "white shirt" inspector.

**Donna McCusker** – Nothing further.

**Larry Luckham** – Mentioned that traditionally we are used to seeing firefighting aircraft responding to wildland fires, helicopters dropping as well as fixed wing dropping the red Phos-Chek retardant which is basically a fertilizer. In Marin we haven't been seeing seaplanes, most of which are old WWII planes converted for firefighting. Seaplanes are helpful because they can land on a body of water, take on a load and be back in the air in minutes rather than having to return to an airport to be reloaded. A Canadian company recently announced that they have begun manufacturing new seaplanes purpose built for firefighting that will be capable of taking on a full load of fresh or salt water in under 15 seconds and getting back in the air. That means they will be capable of more passes over a fire during daylight hours (the only time that piloted aircraft are employed on fires) in a day.

The next thing he talked about was the two recent significant fires in the Bay Area, the Valero refinery fire and the San Jose Home Depot fire. Fortunately, the Valero fire didn't involve flammable fuels which can be very challenging. Instead, it involved a solid byproduct of the refining process. The Home Depot fire caught his eye as an investigator. At first it looked like it was probably an arson fire because of the totality of the destruction. Usually with rapid response, the spread of fires can be kept to a limited area. This is particularly true of sprinklered buildings. Reports are that the fire started in the lumber section. Most of us who visit a Home Depot know that much of the lumber is still very wet as it comes from the mill and would not burn very readily. He suggested that this fire may be a case study similar to the Charleston Sofa Superstore fire in 2007 that killed 9 firefighters when the roof collapsed. Larry mentioned that it appeared that the fire was being carried across the roof maybe by flammable roofing materials.

Chief White commented that SFRD has inspected our Home Depot and that although there were issues that we had Home Depot address, those were addressed and he feels that we are unlikely to face the same problems. He also stressed that because of the nature of the construction of the roof structure of large warehouses, he would never put a crew on the roof during a fire. The exceptionally high fuel loads with materials stacked up to 30 feet high and including things like paints and plastic chairs make these fires

challenging.

Larry mentioned some classic photos of fire aftermath which show a charred heavy wood beam with a steel “I” beam draped over it, the steel beam having been softened to the point of having no strength left.

Larry also explained the function of the sprinkler system in a building like Home Depot including that a responding engine can be utilized to support pressure to the sprinklers as happened some years back with a fire at Rafael Lumber. That fire started outside but got into the building and it was the sprinkler that knocked down the fire inside.

## **6. FIRE CHIEF REPORT –**

Chief White referred to his written report on the work at Stations 54 and 55. He then commented about the retirement lunch for Captain Bob de Lambert and the fact that it turned out that every member of Bob’s seven member fire academy class was present for the lunch and we were able to get them to reprise the photo of their graduating class in front of our 1938 ladder truck. He also mentioned that Captain de Lambert was recently recognized by the Fire Commission, the Fire Foundation and the community for his exemplary contributions to the Fire Foundation fund raising with the crab feed and other efforts. The Chief understands that Bob plans to retire on his ranch in Wyoming and wishes him a long and healthy retirement.

Chief White also mentioned seeing Scott Preckwinkle at the lunch. Scott started as a firefighter in San Rafael, but then applied to the Oakland Fire Department during the Chief’s tenure as Fire Chief in Oakland. Scott had mentioned that he wanted the move in order to see more action and experience. Chief White explained that he would get that, but that as fire service professionals the best thing that we can do is to prevent the incident from ever occurring. The fire service has always emphasized response to incidents over preventing them in the first place. Prevention is what serves our communities best.

A draft of our 2022 workplan is available and there’s an officers’ meeting tomorrow to continue to work on it and get to a finished product. There will probably be some adjustments as far as what projects need funding and maybe what might not need to be done this year. Among the projects are things like vegetation management using non-mechanical methods like goats. Should we own our own goats? Another is a demonstration of the sort of landscaping around a home that people could come and look at to get ideas. Engine companies were recently assigned to survey their areas, particularly along evacuation routes for vegetation issues like canopies that might become problems in the event of evacuation. The idea is that evacuation may be avoided if there is good vegetation management in the first place. We would still plan for and be prepared to evacuate if needed but the best situation is if evacuation can be avoided. We had a recent incident in the San Rafael hills in which the crews were able to get to the fire quickly and knock it down because of some prior vegetation management work. More to follow.



In answer to a question from Chair Luckham, the Chief says the workplan should be available on the MWPA website.

On COVID, the latest is that CDC has approved a second booster for people 50+. A pharmacist that he spoke with confirmed that we are probably looking at a situation in which COVID vaccination will be an annual event much like the current flu shots. One concern in the department is that members will become either vaccine weary or wary. There are still new variants out there.

Councilmember Kertz added that the meetings of the MWPA are open to the public and the website has a wealth of materials. There are plenty of opportunities for public input.

Chief White mentioned that there has been a process at the county level dealing with accommodations for medical or religious reasons for those not wanting to be vaccinated. It is ongoing and the requirements vary depending on circumstances.

Chair Luckham asked if anyone had more to add and there being none, adjourned the meeting at 5:17 p.m.

