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Views aired, questions asked about Fire District

By Robert E. Kimball

It was the last item on the Sonoita Crossroads Forum agenda that generated the most questions and comments from local residents who attended the March 31 meeting. It was the new Sonoita Fire District that everyone wanted to talk about.

Avoid politics

Sonoita Crossroads Forum President Steve Strom cautioned the audience to ask factual questions and not to editorialize on the political issues surrounding the formation of the Fire District Sept. 29, 2006.

Strom said that by early next week there would be a blog on the Forum Web site where all could add their comments, although Strom said he would do some editing if responders did not stick to the facts. The Web site is www.sonoitacrossroads.org.

A panel of local and visiting firemen expressed their view that the Sonoita-Elgin Fire District is a good thing and according to Fire District Chairman Pete Daniels is here to stay.

Visiting officials were: Tubac Fire Chief Kevin Keeley; Fire chief of the Fry Fire District in Sierra Vista Bill Millerl; and Arizona Fire Marshal John

Rowlinson from Phoenix. Daniels represented the local fire district.

Fire Marshal Rowlinson said there are many rural areas in the state where there are no local fire departments. Without a local fire department, response times from a 911 call to the scene can be 45 minutes to one hour. "You have to decide what level of service you want and are willing to pay for," he said.

All areas in the state are experiencing exponential growth in the number of calls for emergency service, Rowlinson said.

Sonoita-Elgin Fire Chief Joseph DeWolf said that since the department hired an additional six employees last year to work the 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. shift, response times during the day have been reduced by 10 percent to less than five minutes out the door.

Daniels said that in the past it was rare that the department would get more than one emergency call at a time. Last year there were three calls in the same time frame. With the additional staff, they were able to respond to all three calls at once.

According to Daniels, in 1996 the department responded to 110 calls. There were 348 calls last year.

Daniels said the decision to form a fire district was based on increased emergency calls, a limited number of volunteers available to respond to those calls, an erratic revenue stream from assessments and donations, increased training and equipment costs partially as the result of 9-11 and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) requiring higher standards from emergency response organizations across the country.

The tax rate of \$1.50 per \$100 of assessed valuation will generate about the same revenue that was received by the volunteer organization. The state limit on fire district taxation is \$3.75 per \$100, he said.

Salaries paid

"I welcome the petition to dissolve the fire district," Daniels said. "I don't think it will be successful and if that's the case we will have proof the majority of residents want the district."

When asked about the \$490,000 Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) grant that is paying salaries for six new employees, Daniels said it may not have been a good business decision. Had he been on the board at that time he probably would not have recommended accepting the grant, he said.

Just as there are grants to law enforcement, there are strings attached. The district must pay the salaries after the grant runs out in four years and agree to keep the employees.

There was a question about the value of the fire district's assets in the event that the district should be dissolved. Book value is about \$450,000, market value somewhere between \$200,000 and \$300,000, according to Mickey Parker the district treasurer.

Another resident wanted to know if it was true that a lawsuit had been filed against the district. Daniels said a notice of claim has been filed by an anonymous group, but he is not aware of any further action.

Daniels apologized for any problems that resulted from the way the fire department handled the fire district petition process.

Keeley whose Tubac Fire District supplies the ambulance service for northeast Santa Cruz County said his operating cost to supply service to the area is \$150,000 a year. He said his district plans to continue providing service, but would hope in a few years that Sonoita could handle the service as part of its fire district operations.

Keeley and Miller said that their districts were originally all volunteer organizations, but are now fully staffed by paid employees.

One member of the audience said it's not about the fire district, it's about bad government - this presumably is in reference to the Santa Cruz County Recorder's Office being behind in purging the voter rolls.

Similar goals

A group in the Tubac area called the Comprehensive Plan Implementation Team (CPIT) has similar goals to those of the Crossroads Forum.

Bruce Phelenger, who said he seemed to be head of the organization by default, said Santa Cruz County is not implementing the regional comprehensive plans submitted by Tubac and by the Crossroads Forum.

CPIT members regularly attend meetings at the county to recommend that Planning and Zoning personnel follow the guidelines of the regional comprehensive plans. "We win some battles," he said.

According to Phelenger, there have been 500 papers written about urban sprawl since 1950. The cost of sprawl was the focal point of 475 or those reports, he said. "We should do growth smarter and develop what is in close first so that costs associated with sprawl can be reduced," he said.

Umbrella group

This is a new umbrella organization whose goal is to ensure the continued health of the Cienega watershed, which includes some 250,000 acres. Mac Donaldson said that funding was a real problem because Bureau of Land Management budgets have been cut 20 percent.

Crossroads Forum President Strom said he is a member of the CWP board.

Affordable housing

Jeffry Cooper said the Patagonia Town Council is working with the Roy P. Drachman Institute at the University of Arizona to do a housing assessment study for Patagonia.

Cooper said there is a need for low-cost housing in Patagonia. The Affordable Housing Steering Committee has been formed and meets once a month, he said.

A retired builder from Tucson, who asked that his name not be used, told Cooper that the biggest problem with affordable housing is getting construction financing. If you can get it, the loan is usually for only 75 percent of the construction cost. Who's going to loan the other 25 percent, he asked?

Strom asked that the steering committee share the results of the study with the Crossroads Forum because it is also concerned about low-cost housing in the Sonoita area.

Power line site

Strom said the Forum will work with Sulphur Springs Valley Electric Cooperative (SSVEC) on the site of a new 69Kv line to the area in a way that is consistent with the Forum's objective of minimizing visual impact.

Brochure coming

The Forum is working on a brochure for newcomers that would include information about the area - history, culture, water, fire, natural and invasive plants, services, wildlife, grazing, rural living and ideas about how we can all live together as good neighbors, Strom said. The Forum is looking for volunteers to help with this project.

Money, members

The Forum has 270 people on its e-mail list, but only 80 dues-paying members, Strom said. Dues are \$30 per person per year or \$45 per household.

For more information about the Sonoita Crossroads Forum see the Web site at www.sonoitacrossroads.org.

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