

March 23, 2021

Subject: Whitefish Fire Service District Candidates Please Step-Up and Engage the Community

Dear Whitefish Fire Service Area Board Candidates Messrs. [Dyck](#), [Dyon](#), [Losleben](#) and [McGrew](#),

First, thank you for committing your time to the pursuit of serving our community through the Whitefish Fire Service Area Board. The community that this board is obligated to support needs leadership to close the massive resource gap that have accumulated as development has far outstripped reinvestment in fire emergency response capabilities. The negligence of this delayed or denied reinvestment became obvious last Spring when the existing Board sent out letters to the community explaining their focus on boosting our sole station by redirecting our modest fees from securing ongoing support from the City of Whitefish rather than investing in more stations in the District. Yes, we need more career/professional fire fighters but for a very long time we have needed many more fire stations to (1) stage equipment and organize volunteers closer to more structures in the district, (2) enable property owners better access to more insurance carriers, (3) deliver substantial insurance savings to the 1,400+ property owners that are currently beyond five miles from a responding station and (4) provide station locations that can house ambulances and in time resident EMTs as career staffing becomes affordable. The present value (i.e., the value of the perpetuity) of the excess insurance premiums paid by those property owners is more than \$25,000 per insured structure or \$35 million across the district. The “*under-stationed*” gap in the district is 6-10 fire stations, we need to address this crisis.

### **Sizing the Gap**

The northwest corner of Flathead county has just four fire stations. The four include: The Whitefish Fire Service Area’s station at the corner of Whitefish Stage and Hodgson Roads, Olney’s station, Big Mountain’s station and the City of Whitefish station. These four stations provide fire response support coverage to buildings with tax record valuations totaling \$3,334,333,495 across 8,302 parcels or \$838,583,374 per station. Most of this geography is “the Whitefish Fire Service Area.” The balance of private lands in Flathead county has 34 fire stations supporting 37,025 parcels with buildings of value totaling \$9,460,424,132. The 34 fire stations support an average of \$278,247,769 in building value per station. If northwest Flathead county had the same

burden per station that the balance of the rest of the county currently has, then it should have 12 stations not 4.

Similarly, the northwest corner of Flathead County has 11,931 acres of private lands that are beyond five (5) road miles of an existing fire station with tax assessed building values of \$748,591,792. The taxable value per parcel of these buildings is \$575,397. The balance of private lands in Flathead County which are beyond five miles from a fire station is 28,886 acres with building values of \$497,466,380 or \$227,465 per parcel. This means that the four stations in northwest Flathead County supports/protects approximately 12 - 20 times the value per station (gross value per station and value per parcel per station respectively) versus the balance of the county's under stationed territories.

The recently completed study by Carnegie Mellon University graduate students used advanced GIS analytical tools and financial modeling to size and structure the necessary fire station additions to meet insurance industry standards in northwest Flathead County. That study demonstrated that up to nine new stations would be required to bring fire stations to within five miles for the 1400+ structures that are now inadequately addressed. The project also demonstrated that six or more of the stations could be funded today from property owner insurance savings generated from the improved network footprint that the new stations would support. The balance of the needed stations would be fundable within a few years as growth drives up structure density for those locations.

If the rigorous analyses above are not sufficient evidence for the points made, then please review the attached PDF file, named "*FC\_5 Mile Service Areas*," which provides visualization of the issues. It shows all the stations in Flathead County, the five-mile service areas around them and reveals the large number of underserved properties in the District. The existing Board, nor the County, should take pride in the massive gap in coverage in the northwest section of the county.

### **Expectations**

1. Refocus the board's agenda and priorities to serving the needs of the entire district meaning "closing the fire station network gap."
2. Collaborate with the City of Whitefish, Big Mountain and Olney districts to create a seamless network capability delivering ISO rating five or better performance standards to the entirety of the geography efficiently.

3. Initiate public engagement in 2021-22 as follows: go to each specific property owner of record and tell them which node community, as defined by the Carnegie Mellon project (or a variant refined subsequently), they are assigned to in the proposed network design. Then ask them to indicate by voting (by ballot or signing a petition) whether they support their specific node to get a fire station which would also mean that they would be accepting the ongoing tax/fee increment associated with that commitment. All the nodes that get sufficient support to secure a fire station would get one and those that did not support the vote would not at this time. All the opt in nodes would then be included in a redefined fire district or authority so there could be shared management oversight and efficiencies. Those nodes that did not opt in could revisit that decision in the future, in the meantime they would be supported by the legacy district that they are now assigned to. *Why might one favor this approach? Enables all property owners a clear choice with transparency. You get to choose what you elect to pay for, and you do not pay for what you did not elect to get; an approach that Montanans can respect and support.* (Note: any approach that is an incremental station at a time but funded by the entire district will be met with resistance or frustration by the many who would not benefit but would be expected to pay for in fees/taxes).

### **Alternatives with Strong Analytics/Plans Welcome**

If you can provide an equally rich and compelling body of hard facts and analytics to justify a different solution, please do so. But given the high growth and value of the area the gap is getting bigger. There is hunger for intelligent leadership to address our needs. In a survey of over 190 residents conducted by the Carnegie Mellon team, the vast majority of respondents supported adding new fire stations. And it was reported that the support to pay for better fire service was overwhelming in all the public meetings held last fall. The people of the district want action!

Again, thank you for your engagement in the democratic process and your desire to serve this community. Please take a clear position and make that position visible. The best outcome in this upcoming election, and those that will follow, is securing a mandate for the future and push back against any remnants of the legacy inertia of the past.

Concerned property owners within the “***under-stationed***” Whitefish Fire Service Area District,

Bill Adams

Tom Bandy

Melissa Best

Katie Callahan

Pat Carloss

Nick and Karen

Chickering

Chuck and Angela  
Fenton

Michael Frost

Hal Nolde

Zak Kearns

Wayne Kasworm

Bob and Denise Kuhl

Ed Lieser

Mark Mance

Brian and Allison  
Massey

Sharon Morrison

Phil and Tawnie  
Norman

Nathan and Holly  
Purdy

Tom and Teresa Quinn

Joe and Beverly  
Raudabaugh

Bob Reich

Brent Stratton

Jamie and Janna  
Shennan

DeWayne Sweet

Matt Trebesch

David Trousdale

John VanDenBurgh

Debe Vanderlip

Randy and Tameria  
Wheeler

Debra Wolf