



**Seeley Lake Rural Fire District
200 Firehouse Dr.
Seeley Lake, MT 59868
Regular Board Meeting Minutes**

June 15th, 2026 - 6pm

I. Pledge of Allegiance

Led by Blaine Cowan

II. Call to Order/Roll Call

Present: Chairman Mike Weigel, Secretary Alyssa McLean, Vice Chairman Vickie Smith, Trustee Shirley Goudzwaard, Mike Bowman, Blaine Cowan, Kevin Clader, Tyler Robinson, Susan Page, Brian Page, Renee Cotton, Sean Ellinghouse, Dr. Jon Espenschied, Trish Schrieber, David Perez, Pathfinder's Clara Kyrouac, Bruce Suenram of Logistics Inc. appearing via Zoom

Chairman Mike Weigel opened the meeting by reading a Board of Trustees statement of intent, defining meeting procedure.

III. Correction and/or Approval of Minutes

Alyssa McLean made a motion to approve *May 18th, 2026* meeting minutes. With one correction of a date under reports, item A., mistakenly recorded as April 2025. It is to be corrected to "April 2026". Shirley Goudzwaard seconded the motion. Motion carried.

IV. Public Comments/Correspondence

Chairman Weigel called for public comment, making the request 3 times. No public comments were offered.

V. Financial Report and Approval of Checks and Warrants

Alyssa McLean made a motion to approve *May 2026* expenses report in the amount of: \$39,170.35. Shirley Goudzwaard seconded the motion. Motion carried.

VI. Reports

A. Call Volume

1. YTD 2025: 120 Calls
2. YTD 2026: 118 Calls
3. May 2025: 26 Calls
4. May 2026: 23 Calls

B. Recruitment and Retention

1. Blaine Cowan Reports that we currently have 23 volunteers, 12 are active. According to district policy some volunteers are nearing the low-contact for 12 months policy and could receive dismissal letters soon.

2. The Cadet training program is active and under way, being organized by Jessica Navicky. The Cadets are enthusiastic. The age range for cadets is 16-18 years old and there is lengthy policy governing the program. Some cadets are interested in medical experience but current policy dictates that there are no observers on medical calls, which may be a policy to review or reconsider.
3. Chief Cowan reports that he is overworked being that our district is available as a 24/7 advanced life support provider. This may be a policy that needs review and/or reconsider. Our district currently has 4 total ALS (advanced life support) providers, but this is not sustainable for any/all of them at the call volume we're getting, and the hours they're responding. Most medical transports in our district are BLS (basic life support). Assistant Chief Bowman offers that we could choose to be BLS 24/7, with rendezvous agreement with MESI out of Missoula near paws up or at Clearwater Junction. MESI has already expressed that they are willing to head to our district automatically upon receiving medical calls.
 - a. Vickie Smith agreed to coordinate a committee to readdress this issue

C. Grants Update

1. Chief Cowan reports the same update as last month: MDT grant is due on June 30th, it is already submitted. We are waiting to hear back on the Town Pump life pack grant. We intend to apply for a federal AFG grant (for a new fire truck). This application got held up in the process because our agency didn't reapply to be considered in their process as of 2024. The administrator listed needs to be changed to Renee. Chief Cowan and Renee are in the process of making those changes and applying.

D. Updates/Actions

1. Cowan says a big Thank You to all of the volunteers.
2. Volunteer Shelly is about to finish her paramedicine schooling and testing, she is here from Plains doing 48 hour shifts
3. The district would like to recognize Jason Rawlings for doing landscaping on the two district properties/buildings. Cowan notes that we need a weed eater, as they are currently bringing their personal ones to use.
4. Five SLRFD members recently completed wildlands training, and are soon to be credentialed. They will then move on to engine boss training (next year).
5. Engine 711 (large red fire engine at station 2) was brought in for a thorough check-through. A water pipe is corroded and damaged due to obvious years worth of corrosion. Cowan reports that he got the plumbing on discount from a connection in Missoula, and Steve helped fix it. It was repaired and they saved about \$1,000 doing the work themselves.
6. SLRFD took part in the "Touch a Truck" event at Seeley Lake Elementary School. Brian and Susan Page helped with the 2 rigs that they took there, and showed the children around.

7. Captain Espenschied went to the Missoula EMS council meeting. He reports that he got great positive feedback from Providence/St. Pats hospital regarding our professionalism. Espenschied also reports that there is a big push for rural districts to carry blood products, but he does add that he is skeptical due to the huge undertaking that it would be.
8. Cowan reports that we are in need of the cardiac monitor which we wrote a grant for. It costs \$58,000. We have no recorded history of our cardiac monitor being serviced, and it appears to be possibly out-of-code chinese equipment. We have 3 defibrillators total.
9. The district recently got a letter from the IRS stating that we were overdue for a payment in excess of \$13,000 on payroll taxes. Those should have been submitted for the 3rd quarter of 2025, but they were not sent. Renee worked with the IRS on the phone, and we made the payment and paid the late and penalty fees. Renee ensured that we will now get notifications from the IRS so this can't happen again. The IRS representative told us that the reason they would not waive the fees on this is because they had waived these fees for our district in the past. This caused \$200 in fees that were not accounted for in the budget, which drives our bottom line deficit further for the end of this month, June 2026.
10. Cowan reports that they are working on a picture board for the BOTs and staff in their department shirts, and working on a flag backdrop. This is for a morale boost, and so that people can get to know each other.
11. This past weekend Bowman and Cowan had the opportunity to serve some tourists driving through our district. They were 4 brothers who hit an elk just north of town in their brand new truck. They totaled the truck, and they were very cold at 3am with no coats. Luckily none reported injuries. With no hotel to stay in and a lengthy wait for highway patrol to arrive, Cowan had them come back to the fire station to hang out and get warm while they waited for their pickup. Volunteer Evan stayed with them.
12. Vickie Smith asks for a Gold Cross billing company update. Cowan reports that the old billing company will not provide us our full signed contract, and won't contact us back. The former billing company seems to be in breach of their own contract, and we are likely ready to run with Gold Cross come July 1st.

VII. Old Business

1. Chief Position Update:
 - a. The previous board appointed a 6 member committee to complete this job search. Most of the committee is in attendance at this meeting minus one member, John Baker. The committee members are Jon Espenschied, Michael Bowman, Kevin Clader, Brian Page, John Baker, and Tyler Robinson. They were coordinated by Chairman Mike Weigel. Committee member Tyler Robinson was nominated to present the committee's recommendation. Robinson reports that they did a nationwide search,

and had 9 total applicants. He reports that many were disqualified, either by background information that was publicly available, or by not following the hiring process instructions. The committee then narrowed it down to 2 applicants which were Cowan and Bumgarner. Both applicants answered the same 26 prepared questions via zoom meeting. The questions each had a scoring system of 1-5. Cowan scored higher than Bumgarner in areas like public relations hypotheticals, and active-shooter hypotheticals. The board of trustees then met for an executive session and watched both interviews in their entirety. After much consideration and research, Tyler Robinson reports that the committee's recommendation for the Chief Position is Interim Chief Blaine Cowan.

- b. Chairman Weigel reports that since we are a board of only 4 currently, he is unable to vote in this decision as we need an odd number for voting purposes. The votes of the remaining 3 board members are as follows:
 - i. Vickie Smith voted yes to accept the committee recommendation of Blaine Cowan for Chief
 - ii. Shirley Goudzwaard voted yes to accept the committee recommendation of Blaine Cowan for Chief
 - iii. Alyssa McLean voted yes to accept the committee recommendation of Blaine Cowan for Chief
- c. Vickie Smith petitions to officially accept the committee's recommendation of Chief Blaine Cowan, Shirley Goudzwaard seconded. All were in favor and the motion carried.
- d. Chairman Weigel asked Blaine Cowan if he would accept the nomination? Blaine Cowan accepts.
- e. The Chief Position contract is to be discussed by the board and Chief Cowan, and signed in the upcoming couple of weeks.

2. District Operations Assessment Overview

- a. Former MRFD Chief Bruce Suenram of Logistics, Inc. did an operations/performance assessment of SLRFD. He is attending tonight via zoom. He states that upon listening to the updates and actions that Cowan has presented tonight, it is obvious that Cowan is working on the list of things defined as needing improvement in the Operations Assessment Report. Mr. Suenram states that a performance assessment is an exam of our documents, policies, and procedures. It also offers a comparison of our district with similar fire districts in Montana, like Polson Rural Fire District and Corvallis Rural Fire District. They are the most similar, as they both have paid chiefs, clerks, and a captain. Mr. Suenram would like to highlight the following from his assessment:
 - i. Regarding our policies: A good portion of our BOT policies and procedures were intermixed with district standard operating procedures. He recommends we separate SOP and Board policy, as the chief is meant to develop the SOP. The board policy seemed to have a lot of 501(c)3 language in it that is not

appropriate for board policy. For example: there is language about filling board vacancies that has a conflicting process and timeline from Missoula County. The correct process to fill a board vacancy is by going to the county commissioners to interview applicants and then appoint a trustee. Mr. Suenram has included a list of recommended policies.

- ii. Mr. Suenram suggests the Chief establish the Standard Operating Procedures.
 - iii. Suenram reports that he compared our district to state and national standards, including some non-mandatory. When it comes to our ISO grading, they use NFPA standards to measure us by. So the de facto requirement is working toward the NFPA standards.
 - iv. He recommends we develop an out-of-district billing policy so that when we respond out of bounds we can charge for that service. For example, Hamilton Fire district established a board policy that they bill people when they live outside of the district, but still get responded to.
 - v. In looking at our budget, he believes that there is potential carryover every fiscal year. With that he suggests that we carve out some money to build an "apparatus reserve fund", and a "future projects fund".
3. Acquisition of new Turnout Lockers
- a. Cowan reports that we could use 12-15 wire lockers which will cost \$4000-\$6000 and we are waiting on revenue to make that purchase as soon as possible, as it is a health and safety risk currently. Brian Page, from the Fire Foundation, reports that he is going to get the Fire Foundation to contribute \$2,000 toward the lockers. The meeting broke for 5 minutes, and all got up to tour the truck bay and view the wooden lockers which are molding and in need of replacement. Chairman Weigel reports that \$500 from the Sasquatch Poker run that was held last weekend is also pledged towards the locker's expense.
4. Budget 3rd and Final Draft Review
- a. Cowan reports that there are some edits from the last draft:
 - i. We did change the "paid residents" to volunteers, which then removed the wages, taxes, etc.
 - ii. The new cost flat rate was then moved to the EMS paid call-on-call expense. That was \$21,900, which overall allows us to still save at least \$2,000. We are currently saving even more right now because we are currently not filling every night shift as we had hoped. He foresees that improving in the near future as we get more people on board.
 - iii. They increased the taxes receivable, which is revenue, by 2.5% which is what the county typically lists. It was \$280,539, but is

now \$286,149. That is a minimum increase, sometimes we see 3-4% increase from the county.

- iv. We increased our insurance payment to \$22,368 to err on the side of caution to accommodate insurance rates increasing.
 - v. EMS equipment maintenance was decreased to \$6,000, which is Stryker's (maintenance company) annual fee, plus a little extra for maintenance emergencies that Stryker would not touch
 - vi. The Fire Vehicle maintenance budget was decreased to \$5,000 from \$10,000, annual pump tests and DOT inspections are included in this budget and \$5,000 is an absolute minimum
 - vii. The original excel spreadsheet of the draft did not include EMS maintenance category, so we were unable to shave off as much as we thought we would be able to.
 - viii. The final draft does show an overspend amount of around \$11,000. We could continue to try and shave more down, but it would not be what is most healthy for the district at this time. Renee and Cowan are going to try to underspend to the best of their ability in the coming year.
 - ix. We have a definite need for a fire apparatus acquisition fund, and currently we have \$2,500 for EMS and \$2,500 for Fire equipment to carry forward.
- b. Cowan notes this does nothing to whittle down our deficit and there is still work to be done to get into the black.
 - c. Cowan reports that we are still working to get the county to supply us with current and accurate accounting reports, we are missing April and May currently, and the county is slow. Renee had to send back some corrections that needed to be made.
 - d. Vickie Smith inquired about our mill levy status. Cowan reports that we are at max for our mill levy, but a minimum percentage increase is given by the county each year for cost of living increase, etc.
 - e. Cowan reports that our security system has a piece of equipment that is out-of-date software wise, which is preventing us from signing in new volunteers and getting them a key card. We now need to pay \$500 for an equipment update to that security system. The security company told Cowan that it is possible to reduce our security contract with them, which would save us around \$3,000, making the \$500 cost a wash. We are bound to a contract with this company. Reducing the contract to save \$3,000 would only alter the maintenance part of our service, all security equipment and procedure remain in place. Cowan had to call the company to receive a copy of the modular contract we have with them, as there was no record of it in the office or in the chief's email.
 - f. Cowan reports that we are not billing on every call like we should. Some calls do not require a transport, but sometimes \$50-\$100 worth of supplies are still being used on the call. It can be tedious to collect

vehicle insurance information on an MVA scene, but it is doable. We should be billing for non-transport responses. Cowan does his best to educate stable patients on the cost of transport when it is appropriate.

- g. Cowan reports that we do have the ability to do interfacility transports for Providence St. Pats which can generate revenue for us. He states we would have to judge those opportunities as they come, depending on if they're out of the area, if we have the staffing, etc. We recently had the opportunity to do a medicare transport, which generated around \$690 in revenue for us after PCOC and fuel was paid for. Doing this occasionally could make a big difference in revenue for us.
- h. According to board policy, the board has to approve or deny the cost of living (COLA) increase of 2.5% with a cap of 5%. 2.5% is reasonable and required and we have the budget for that in the wage package. Cowan states he has completed an annual review with the employees.
 - i. Alyssa McLean motions to accept COLI and final budget draft. Vickie Smith seconded. The motion carried.

5. Station 2 Parking Lot Repair

- a. Station 2 parking lot repair is still in the works, it is currently coned off. It will probably be fixed in the next fiscal year. Cowan reports he received quotes for \$1500 for a reseal, which we can squeeze out of station 2 infrastructure money from this fiscal year budget. Part of the \$8,000 budget for station 1 included roof repair.
- b. Shirley motions to approve \$1500 for parking lot repair, Alyssa seconded. The motion carried.

6. District Policy Review: Auxiliary Membership, Meeting Agenda, and Paid Call/On Call (as presented at last meeting)

- a. Some policies were last established or edited in 2018. Vickie Smith proposes we form a committee to go through each policy individually to keep it as legally sound and up-to-date as possible.

VIII. New Business

1. Board Meeting Policy Review: Meeting policy, procedure, Robert's Rules of Order, Public Comment best practices

- a. Chairman Weigel explains that there are open meeting laws specifically for small boards like ours. It allows for a more interactive and relaxed meeting atmosphere. Those guidelines include the following policies:
 - i. The board will not read statements or letters from the public. They must be read by the author themselves. In the event the author cannot attend to read their own statement, they will be asked to submit the statement in writing, or to wait until a time when they can attend in person.
 - ii. Each member can have 3 minutes for comment, the time can only be extended by majority vote of the board or the Chairman's permission

- iii. Following public comment, the board has the authority to authorize or request expert comments from any subject matter expert in attendance.
- iv. Under small board rules the chairman will have motion and voting rights as a 5th person, as the state requires a 5th voting member on the board to avoid any ties.
- v. The board doesn't need to rise to make any motions
- vi. The board commits to transparency by ensuring all our email correspondence is public information available upon request. Each board member created a new e-mail address for the sole purpose of SLRFD communication. We are all available to the public via e-mail communication.

2. Consideration of Committee Guidelines Proposal by Vickie Smith

- a. Chairman Weigel expresses that it is the Board's duty to help the Chief execute when there is a need, not to just approve things and let the responsibility lie solely on the Chief's shoulders.
- b. Vickie Smith reports that after researching State Laws and governing rules, to improve the quality of board discussions in meetings, we should form committees to be doing work and research outside of meetings. She explains that committees cannot make decisions, but rather they take time to look in-depth into research and equip us with all information needed to execute upon. Committees can be formed of at least 2 people, they are public (unless personnel related like a hiring committee), and would aid us in including the public, some of which could be subject matter experts, in department progress.
 - i. We discussed the immediate need of a committee to go over the Chief's contract, Vickie Smith offered to coordinate that effort. The board agrees to all meet in the near future for an executive session to address this contract. We acknowledge to need to establish a forward-thinking contract that would be sustainable in the future when hiring another Chief.

VIII. Adjournment/Next Meeting

- A. Alyssa McLean motions to adjourn. Shirley Goudzwaard seconded. Motion carried.
- B. The Next Meeting is July 20th, 2026 at 6pm