

COLUMBUS RURAL FIRE DISTRICT #3 BOARD OF TRUSTEES
SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES
September 7th, 2026
7:00 P.M.

****Meeting was held jointly with the Park City Fire District Board of Directors at 34 Special K Lane, Columbus Montana****

CALL MEETING TO ORDER:

Columbus Rural Fire: Members present were: Curt Robbins, Chuck Kronz, Brent Parkin Debbie Parod, John Patterson. Also present: Fire Chief: Rich Cowger Assistant Fire Chief: Nick Jacobs Battalion Chief: Travis Hansen Admin Assistant Lisa Westervelt

- Park City Rural Fire: Members present were Ty Heppner, CJ Baker, Jonathan Raby, Chris Southworth. Also present: Fire Chief Greg Indreland, Bill Rash was present via Teams video meeting, and Jenna Fry

PUBLIC COMMENT ON AGENDA ITEMS:

Columbus Rural Fire:

Park City Rural Fire

NEW BUSINESS: Mutual Agenda Item

Discussion and Decision of the consolidation of the Columbus Rural Fire District and Park City Rural Fire District

- **Chief's presentation of the reason behind the consolidation**
 - Park City Fire Chief Greg Indreland shared some opening comments on the process leading up to the proposed consolidation plan. Greg said they were open to comments from the community and considered several options including going to the public for a possible levy increase or bonds or combining with the Park City Ambulance District. This proposed consolidation plan is the best option. Everyone gives up something but gains substantially more. We work well on the ground together now, working together will get even better and more efficient.
 - Columbus Rural Fire Chief Rich Cowger shared that there is a challenge of sustainability going forward with the current structures, and this is something that several other departments and districts across the State are also facing. We can work together and provide mutual aid, but we'd still be duplicating a lot of effort. With a consolidated fire district, we can focus on protecting every citizen equally, no matter where they live.
 - A question came up from a Park City resident asking if anyone has looked at the impact on agriculture, and the costs for agriculture, because agriculture pays differently. Chief Cowger will connect offline and help get this information.
 - Another Park City resident, JW, wanted to make sure the committee had looked at the infrastructure concerns: shortage of water resources in Park City; improving response times; and how this might change insurance rates for residents.
 - A VFIS Insurance representative at the meeting stated that the proposed consolidation *could* save homeowners hundreds of dollars in insurance and commercial policy holders *could* save thousands, based on new ISO ratings for the proposed district.
- **Overview of consolidation plan as required by MCA-7-33-2120**
 - Chief Cowger said in the proposed consolidated district, each station would have their primary response area, but there would be an automatic dispatch to all the district that would give access

to paid staff and volunteer resources sooner. There would be a possibility for more efficient use of resources/apparatus, and insurance costs for apparatus could be combined in a single policy and possibly reduce rates.

- **Timetable**

- Chris asked about the mailers that go out, who would print them and who pays for that? Chief Cowger said the costs would be shared proportionately between the 2 districts.
- Any protests during the 30-day protest period must be in writing and mailed to the respective fire districts. Each Board of Trustees will certify the protests with lists of real property owners in their current districts, provided by the county.
- It was asked if during the protest period, if the protests or public comments would be “substantiated.” By State Statute, there is no substantiation requirement. The only requirement is that protests be made in writing and be submitted individually.

- **Name of the new district**

- It was suggested that the consolidation plan tried to keep “County” out of the new district name since all county communities are not part of the proposed consolidation plan. Regional was used instead and would allow others, Rapelje or Molt for example, to become part of the district at some point if they chose to.
- Chris Southworth said he didn’t like the proposed name, didn’t like “Regional” and would like it to say “County” as that better represents the area and communities served.
- A suggestion was made that the name could be “Stillwater County Fire & Rescue District #1,” to allow for others to use the name with different district numbers.
- **The Park City Board unanimously approved a motion to amend the Consolidation Plan and change the new district name to Stillwater County Fire & Rescue District #1.**
- **The Columbus Rural Fire District Board unanimously approved a motion from Chuck, seconded by Debbie, to amend the Consolidation Plan and change the new district name to Stillwater County Fire & Rescue District #1.**

- **Boundary Map**

- **Estimated Financial Impact**

- It was noted that the financial impacts are based on 2026/2027 numbers. With the effective date of July 1, 2027, these could change some, but these are the best we can come up with based on the information available at this time.

- **Mutual Assumption of indebtedness**

- Chris said Park City is working on getting a new truck, and asked how best to plan for payments, loans, etc. Rich suggested that they keep the plans going ahead, let the providers know about the changes coming and keep them in the loop. This potential loan is included in the proposed consolidation plan.

- **Effective date**

- The proposed effective date is July 1, 2027, which is the beginning of the fiscal year. This was proposed for several reasons: time to allow grant close outs; time for changes to insurance policies; accounting changes and audits to close out books for current districts and open the books for the new district; time to request and receive new EIN numbers, provider numbers.
- The new board could be seated around the first of the year to start work on the implementation phase of the consolidation.

- Ty asked the Fire Chiefs about the July 1, 2027 effective date. Do they see any issues with that date, since that's at a critical time. Rich answered that the background work can be done well head of time, and we can get dispatch guidelines and boundaries in place. Greg answered that we could start blending operations ahead of time.

- **Public Comment after each section**

- A question was asked how this would affect ambulance services with Park City, since their EMS service is separate. We would support the same EMS services as we do now and could look at providing a different level of EMS service system in the future. For example, Park City Ambulance could petition into the Stillwater Ambulance District.
- It was also asked if, since Columbus Fire District owns the ambulances now, would the new district then also own the ambulances, and would the new district then provide ambulance services. Chris said that more than one person had told him they would be in support of the consolidation if it also included ambulance services. Chris also shared that he hoped the new board could put someone in 24x7.
- Rich gave some background on the Stillwater Ambulance District that was created in 2017, and that the Park City board felt at that time they weren't able to gather the support needed, so Park City wasn't included in the creation of the Stillwater Ambulance District. Park City residents do not currently pay taxes into an EMS district. The Park City Ambulance is a 501c(3) system, not a taxing authority, and doesn't receive any tax funds. The ambulance district that was created is bigger than the Columbus Rural Fire District to include Rapelje. The Stillwater Ambulance District provides the funds for the full-time EMS providers, while the Columbus Rural Fire District administratively employs the EMS staff, and owns the resources (ambulances). The Park City community will have to decide what level of service they want.

Park City Board Vote: Ty moved to vote on the proposed Consolidation Plan, as amended for the name change. Bill seconded the motion. The Park City Board voted unanimously to approve the proposed Consolidation Plan as amended for the name change.

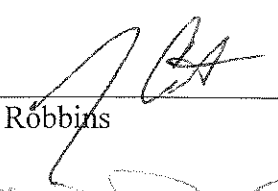
Columbus Board Vote: Brent moved to approve the proposed Consolidation Plan as amended for the name change. Debbie seconded the motion. All voted in favor and the motion carried unanimously.

The date for the public meeting was set for Wednesday, September 30th at 6:30 PM, at the Special K Ranch gym. Bill said he has a commitment on September 30th and won't be available. Debbie will work around scheduling challenges.

ANNOUNCEMENTS/ Public Comment: NONE

ADJOURN: Meeting was adjourned at 8:52 PM

Minutes submitted by Lisa Westervelt


Chairman: Curt Robbins


Secretary: Debbie Parod