Meeting Minutes from JOINT SPECIAL PUBLIC MEETING AND PUBLIC HEARING JOINT BOARD OF TRUSTEES FOR COLUMBUS RURAL FIRE DISTRICT AND PARK CITY RURAL FIRE DISTRICT

DATE: September 30, 2026
TIME: 6:30 P.M.
LOCATION: Special K Gymnasium, 34 Special K Lane, Columbus Montana

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I. CALL TO ORDER & ROLL CALL

- **Call to Order: Columbus Rural Fire District #3 Board of Trustees:** Chairman Curt Robbins called to order at 6:30 PM
- **Roll Call: Trustees Present**: Curt Robbins, John Patterson, Chuck Kronz, Brent Parkin, Debbie Parod via Teams video call, Fire Chief Rich Cowger; Lisa Westervelt
- Call to Order: Park City Rural Fire District Board of Trustees: Chairman Chris Southworth called to order.
- **Roll Call: Trustees Present:** Chris Southworth, Ty Heppner, CJ Baker, Tom Rakes, Jenna Fry, Fire Chief Greg Indreland
- **Determination of a Quorum for both boards**: Quorum of both boards was present.

II. PUBLIC COMMENT ON NON-AGENDA ITEMS

- Maureen Davey thanked all who have worked on the consolidation project.

III. CONSOLIDATION PLAN PRESENTATION

Fire Chief Rich Cowger provided a presentation on the history of the proposed Consolidation plan.

- **Review of Approved Consolidation Plan:**
  - Summary presentation of the formal plan adopted by both boards pursuant to § 7-33-2120(2), MCA.
  - **Boundary Map Review:** Discussion of the proposed unified geographical boundaries.
  - **Estimated Financial Impact:** Detailed overview of the proposed unified mill levy limits and estimated tax impacts on property owners.
    - Chief Cowger stated that with the effective date of a new consolidated district of July 1, 2027, which aligns with the fiscal year, tax changes won't start until July of 2027. Estimates provided in the Consolidation plan are based on the current information we have available now.
  - **Operational Plan & Governance Structure:** Transition plan for equipment, staff, and the appointment of the unified Board of Trustees.
  - **Indebtedness & Assets:** Review of agreements concerning the shared assumption of outstanding debt or warrants.
- **Protest Window Clarification:** Presentation of the statutory protest rules under § 7-33-2120(4), MCA.

- **Official Deadline:** Notice that the written protest period will remain open until **5:00 PM on Friday, October 16th**.
- **Submission Instructions:** Explanation of how real property owners must formally submit their written, signed protests to their specific district board.
- *Statutory Note: The consolidation is rendered void if the owners of 40% or more of the real property (representing 40% or more of the taxable value) within either existing district submit valid written protests by the deadline.*

From Fire Chief Greg Indreland:

For perspective: If the Park City Fire District as it stands now were to go out to the tax payers & ask for a mill increase for an additional $150,000 in funding, on a $600,000 house it would increase taxes an additional $93.46 per year. A bond request for $375,000 for a new truck would be a $20.00 per year increase.

We are limited to what we can access, the current business models aren't sustainable for long term. The question is how do we best provide Fire and EMS services for our taxpayers.

V. PUBLIC HEARING: PROPOSED CONSOLIDATION

- **In-Person Public Comments & Evidence:**
  - Q Do people have to provide a reason for their protest?
    - A No, the letters would just need to state 'I protest the Consolidation of Park City and Columbus Rural Fire Districts'

  - Q In regard to letters that were sent out, who gets to protest? We got letters for different properties.
    - A By statute, letters were sent to property owners in each district, and registered voters in each district. Property owners in either fire district may submit protests.

  - Q How does this affect Stillwater Ambulance District, and Park City Ambulance District?
    - A It doesn't, the ambulance districts are separate issues and would be a separate process.

  - Q Resident on Stillwater/Yellowstone County line. How long will it take Columbus to respond? (Benedict Gulch area)
    - A Greg answered: There will be no change in primary response, Park City will still respond first. If the scenario requires, we can request mutual aid, but this requires someone on scene, or at least enroute with eyes on to determine if additional resources are needed. With a consolidated district, auto aid agreements could lead to backup coming sooner – possibly arriving 10-12 minutes sooner than they would currently.

Q For the ambulance, why is ambulance not included if the consolidated district would own the ambulances that Columbus owns now.

A The fire districts and ambulance districts are separate response and tax districts. The ambulance district is the funding mechanism for the ALS staff. There are interlocal agreements in place to transfer the funds to the Columbus Rural Fire District to administratively manage the ALS staff. We will do our best to bolster and support EMS service in Park City. The community will need to decide what level of service they would like.

Q What is the tax for EMS in Columbus now?

A It's similar to the rates for the fire district. Rich can get the specifics for anyone interested.

Q There are rumors that Park City will end up with the worst of all the equipment. Is this true?

A No. We can inventory what's available across the district and jointly decide where it will provide the best service. It's the obligation of the Board to provide adequate equipment across the district.

VI. JOINT BOARD DISCUSSION & NEXT STEPS

- **Trustee Discussion:** None
- **Next Steps & Final Actions Notice:** No board action or voting occurred at this joint special meeting. Public notice is given that any final operational actions or formal adoptions will take place at the next regularly scheduled, individual public meetings of each respective district board, after the protest period has closed. (November 3rd, 2026 for Park City Fire District and November 9th, 2026, for Columbus Rural Fire District respectively).

VIII. ADJOURNMENT

John Patterson moved to adjourn the meeting at 7:39. Chuck Kronz seconded the motion, and the meeting was adjourned.

Minutes submitted by Lisa Westervelt

Chairman: Curt Robbins

Secretary: Debbie Parod