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of former SVFR Operations Chief Jim Dickerson, who left the district a few months ago for a position in a larger fire department. Current Chief of Operations Matt House has been filling both his position as well as Dickerson's for the past few months.

"That is still working great, Matt is doing a fantastic job. I have no doubt that he will continue doing a great job," Schick said, proposing that WLFEA drop Dickerson's former position all together from the budget.

Schick also proposed cuts to healthcare benefits for some WLFEA employees, requiring the majority of employees to pay more out-of-pocket expenses for health insurance. However, the cuts don't apply to some administrative staff, including Schick and WLFEA Office Manager Dina McClure, whose contracts lock them in at 100 percent of health insurance costs.

"My concern from a strategic standpoint is, when you publish a budget like this, it's very hard to get the working staff to accept a cut that the administration isn't taking equally," said Farnsworth. "It's really hard to get your rank-and-file people to accept a cut that's not the same for the administrative staff."

In a Western Lane budget meeting last month, more severe cuts were proposed for WLAD employees, including decreases in PERS payments and health benefits for spouses. How-

ever, those cuts weren't represented in the WLFEA budget.

"We're moving completely in the opposite direction of where we started as two boards," Farnsworth said, arguing that if the true goal of WLFEA was to more closely align WLAD and SVFR, then benefit cuts should also match — particularly in WLFEA.

He also feared that locking WLFEA into a budget that is less than what WLAD is offering would hurt both districts in the union negotiation processes, which is still ongoing.

"It's costing us less, but it's going to cost us more because it will erode the negotiating positions our attorney is asking for," Farnsworth said.

"Well, we have a one-year contract," said WLAD and WLFEA board member Rick Yecny. "We're going to be negotiating again within six months. And I think it's quite a sacrifice. ... So I would think this is a really good offer. I think it's going to be really difficult to get to the place that Director Farnsworth is talking about. If this is a line item on a budget, maybe how we get there isn't as important as getting to that number. And this gets to that number, which I'm very pleased to see."

Farnsworth stated that, while he respected Yecny's view, he disagreed.

"We can be penny wise and pound foolish here," he said. "We have spent hundreds of hours working as a labor committee trying to come up with a package of cuts that kept

our revenue above our expenses. We came up with a range and we came up with items that we wanted to see changed in the contract for two reasons. One, there were possible areas we could save money, and two, they improve the optics of the excesses in the contract. Now, if we back down from all of the things we agreed to in those sessions, we're just looking at saying, 'Everything's fine.' How's it going to be any different next year? Why do we waste our time?"

While Farnsworth agreed that the proposed budget does save money, it may cost more at the negotiating table.

He also pointed out inequity in benefits payments, bringing up the example of Voluntary Employees Beneficiary Association Plan (VEBA), which is a tax-exempt plan that helps pay for medical expenses and deductibles.

"Where else does this happen in Florence? Is there a VEBA at the bank? Is there a VEBA at the city? The casino? How about the hospital?" he asked.

Green agreed with what Farnsworth was saying in principle, but the pandemic and resulting shutdowns have made the future uncertain.

"We're going into a likely prolonged recession, or not," Green said. "There's so much that's yet to be determined and discovered."

Because of the uncertainty, WLFEA and SVFR director Ned Hickson suggested that now is not the time for drastic cuts.

"We really don't know where we're going to be a

year from now," he said. "If we could revisit this in a year, make some manageable cuts now that isn't to the bone, then we can get through that year, have a better idea of where we're going to be financially in both districts and then decide what we really need to do."

That's not to say that Hickson disagreed with Farnsworth's call to make more cuts.

"We've got to do something about the ballooning budget," he said. "But at the same time, everything I've seen is that people are not behind that. They love their EMTs, they love their firefighters. This is not the time to go on a public crusade about making cuts to people who are saving their lives. I'm not trying to say this is all about public optics, but I think it's something we need to consider."

Farnsworth agreed that the public was not behind cuts at the moment, but stated they were largely uninformed about the true economics.

"I had a conversation with a community member, he had some questions, so I sent him the collective bargaining agreement. He was appalled. If the community did know, they would be concerned and upset," Farnsworth said.

However, that doesn't mean that he wanted "to blow up" the district, as he said.

"Do we want our employees to be well compensated? Yes we do," he said. "Do we want them to be ridiculously compensated? No we don't.

I'm not suggesting that we get all the cuts in one year. But what we have done is a series of budget maneuvers with not much on the table. So we're really just kicking the can down the road."

Farnsworth also stated how difficult the discussion can be.

"I don't like to be the person that's waving the flag saying, 'By the way, if your job was down the street, it would pay \$15,000 less,'" he said. "That's a difficult situation. There were mistakes by (former Fire and EMS Chief Jim) Langborg that ratcheted up pay in a variety of positions and benefits."

All board members agreed with the sentiments, with Yecny proposing that both districts look at pay scales and benefits from other organizations.

"I think overall we should maybe think about moving to the market," Yecny said. "Some kind of definition of market. If we find that fire districts' comps are below market, and WLAD is above, the solution to get to the same place is not going to be the same."

Farnsworth agreed with Yecny and thanked him for the suggestion.

For Green, "I think a lot of this needs to be directed and worked on in a strategy session. Besides the pay, the district needs to balance a compensation culture with also taxpayer responsibility. ... I think these are all great questions, and I think pay equity is something that needs to be addressed."

When the time came

for a vote, Farnsworth suggested changing the budget to help preserve negotiating range with the union. But Green pointed out that the meeting was already public, so voting based on strategy would be moot.

Green, Yecny and Hickson voted in favor of the budget, while Farnsworth voted against.

"I appreciate us having a dialogue and you listening to my opinions, even if you don't agree with them," Farnsworth said. "Each of us is doing our level best and we are all volunteers here. We're spending hundreds of hours on this work. The truth is, if there are savings in our district, they're staying in the district. This is money that is going to be used for the public good. It's not going to get refunded to taxpayers. It's money that can be used in other ways to benefit the public. It's just a question of priorities."

Green pointed out that, despite some of the recent public disagreements, both districts have come a long way in the past three years.

"I think we need to continue to leverage that success for the benefit of our taxpayers and the services we provide," he said. "The strategy is going to provide that. I think we'll continue on with good momentum. And I hope we'll have the courage to say what's on our mind. I appreciate Director Farnsworth and Yecny for speaking their minds. We have a lot of work, and let's continue the great success we have."

RAINmaker ACCELERATOR LAUNCHING IN JULY

Prior to the beginning of the pandemic in March, Oregon RAIN's Catalyze Rural 2020 event had more than 150 registered attendees. The event was set to include five venture firms, a keynote speaker and dozens of rural startups to showcase their products and services at the inaugural Catalyze Rural event.

However, to support social distancing and comply with the State of Oregon's gathering-size restrictions, the event has been postponed.

While RAIN is considering shifting Catalyze Rural 2020 to an online

event, feedback from entrepreneurs has shown a preference to do live pitches and have the opportunity to network in-person with the community, other entrepreneurs and investors. As a result, RAIN has decided to postpone the event and will announce a date for 2021 once there is a better understanding of when large groups will be able to gather again.

RAIN coordinators gave a special thank you to its Main Title Sponsor, Peak Internet, for financially supporting the event, along with Silver Sponsors, which includes

Boson Hub Digital Development, Amanda Loman Photography, Bellwether Legal, and Boulder Falls Inn.

Though the Catalyze event has been postponed, a 10-Week Virtual Accelerator focused exclusively on generating revenue for business is set for July.

Every Wednesday from 9 to 10:30 a.m., beginning July 8 and concluding Sept. 15, Oregon RAIN is launching a free virtual "RAINmaker Acceler-

ator," which is a 10-week series focused on sales and marketing.

This series is designed to help Oregon entrepreneurs and business owners who have seen significant revenue losses due to COVID-19 strategically invest their resources in the most critical part of any business: generating revenue.

Startups and businesses interested in applying can visit the RAIN website for more information and

submit applications. The accelerator is free, but an application is required. Those wishing to apply are encouraged to do submit applicants as soon as possible. Deadline to apply is June 24.

Oregon Rain (Regional Accelerator and Innovation Network) has

partnered with the City of Florence since 2015.

For more information, visit oregonrain.org.

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