

FIRE/EMS from page 1A

employees, overtime and how both districts can work together moving into the future.

That discussion would lead to a third workshop suggested by Schick.

"It would be to start a dialogue about mergers and consolidations in the districts," he said. "Just go over some very preliminary questions about what a merger would look like and whether it's beneficial and even feasible. It should also include concerns from staff and district employees — what bothers them, what do they think would be good. It's not saying we're going down that path. We're not hiring anybody to do a consolidation study. This is just to start the dialogue to explore the topic."

The question of whether or not the two districts should enter a full merger has been discussed for years, and while the two entities have been inching closer with cross training and communication, along with the creation of WLFEA to centralize administrative work and costs, the decision on whether or not they should completely merge has never been decided.

"We're starting to reach out to our employees on what their hopes and concerns might be," Schick said. "On the negative side, we might lose our health district, or we might lose SVFR and WLAD culture. I think those are things we would have to address. I'm not saying they would happen, but they are definitely a fear we have to address. We also have the PERS unfunded liability, which is much greater on the WLAD side. How would a

merger affect that?"

On the positive sides, Schick stated that it would be easier to share resources, both with personnel and through finances.

"There would probably be more advancement opportunities in a larger district," Schick said. "I know a lot of WLAD employees are interested in becoming firefighters as well."

While there has been no decision either way, Schick wanted to move forward to getting to a final word on the discussion.

"It's been a little difficult getting input from employees because they want to see what it looks like first, and I certainly understand that. But we want to at least start the initial dialogue on that so we can give them a more accurate picture of what that might look like," he said.

One of the major suggestions that the boards gave was to get a firm recommendation from staff before the board begins discussing the issue.

"Some of my personal challenges with the prior leadership of this district was there was never a recommendation from management," said SVFR director Ron Green. "I'd like to see that it gets vetted with staff before. This is too big of a deal based on one voice."

Murphey agreed, stating, "I think you can start a committee by bringing in SVFR and WLAD staff, and you have a staff meeting, come up with the pros and cons, and make a recommendation to us."

Throughout the discussion, one of the issues that needed to be addressed was whether or not a merger was even possible under current laws and regulations govern-

ing special districts.

"What would be the legal structure? What would legally be possible to accomplish?" Farnsworth asked.

Schick stated that he would also look into that question as well.

Once staff members answer the question of whether or not they actually want a merger, their recommendation will be discussed publicly.

"At this point it's just exploratory," Hickson stressed. "We don't want to give people the impression that we're moving toward a merger or consolidation. But we need to at least ask the questions so that we can decide whether it's even worth pursuing at some point as part of long-term strategic planning."

The three meetings are tentatively planned to begin in August.

The discussion then turned to House, who has been acting as the operations chief for both SVFR and WLAD since Jim Dickerson retired earlier this year.

"When we first presented this, there was a request by the board to review after six months, and that's where we're at today," Schick said. "For me personally, it is working fantastic. Matt has taken to it. He's performing both roles flawlessly. He's doing a fantastic job. He's helped us push the fire department in a great direction, without sacrificing the good things he was doing at Western Lane."

Schick also reported that of the operations chiefs he spoke with, all were unanimous with praise of House.

"They were also unanimous that they don't want him to become overwhelmed with doing two jobs," Schick said. "Of course, that's on my

shoulders to make sure he has the tools and resources. ... If there's no comments, I'm looking forward to making this a permanent position until such time as we need to bring in additional help"

The boards did not object to the decision.

Later in the meeting, Schick gave an update on COVID-19.

"We're starting to be notified of multiple patients that are positive in our area. Most, if not all of the ones we've been notified about, are recovering at home," he said. "The county has been giving us some addresses. Those addresses are given to our dispatch center, with the idea that if we are dispatched to that address, our crews will be notified. They can take extra precautions and make sure everything is okay."

Schick also gave a reminder that brush fire season has begun in the region.

"With temperatures rising and the wind very strong in the afternoons, those are the conditions you get bad fires," he said. "The Oregon Department of Forestry has been very active responding with us to fires in the area. That's a good thing. The challenge is that it's also the time of year we lose a lot of our more experienced firefighters to wildfire response in other parts of the state."

On that same subject, Schick also said SVFR was losing one of its most experienced wildland firefighters with the retirement of Battalion Chief Dave Beck, who has spent 40 years in the region's fire service as the chief of Canary station (see feature on B1), as well as a wildland fighter over the summer.

"It's a big loss in our leadership that we have to look to fill," House said.

PANDEMIC from page 1A

Lane County Public Health authorities have confirmed a total of 458 COVID cases in the county as of noon on July 28, resulting in 3 deaths due to the virus.

The number of confirmed cases in the 97439 zip code rose from 12 on Friday to 15 on Monday, then 18 as of yesterday, with more test results being added daily to the county's collected data totals. People can visit lanecounty.org/cms/One.aspx?portalId=3585881&pageId=16503774 for a map of current virus counts by zip code.

Lane County Health & Human Services Public Information Officer Jason Davis said he is not surprised that Florence has experienced an uptick in COVID-related closings.

"Absolutely, we at Lane County Health feel and understand that Florence has unique challenges as people go to the coast after being stuck at home for so long," Davis said. "The coast is more and more of an option for people looking to get away for a few days. We have discussed in our meetings the number of cases being tracked by zip code — and we are well aware of what's going on out there."

According to Davis, Lane County is "between a rock and a hard place" when it comes to modifying COVID protocols, as officials are striving to attain a balance

between maintaining the health of the public and allowing for the reopening of businesses closed due to the pandemic.

One of the local organizations that has been proactive in addressing the new requirements is the Boys and Girls Club of Western Lane County.

"Last Wednesday morning (July 22), I got a call that one of our Teen Center employees had been exposed to someone with COVID," said Boys and Girls Club Executive Director Chuck Trent. "Out of an abundance of caution, we closed the Teen Center and sent the employee home for 14 days of self-quarantine. We had Cintas Corporation come in and disinfect both buildings top to bottom and all surfaces with medical grade disinfectant."

Trent said the Boys and Girls Club also contacted Lane County Public Health to inform them of the situation and explain what the club was doing.

"Everything they told us we should do had already been done," Trent said. "We also contacted the Office of Child Care to let them know what happened and what we were doing. We got the approval from both agencies to reopen the Teen Center last Thursday, based on the actions we took as soon as we got the call."

"Everything worked exactly the way it should work, which is why we were able to

reopen."

According to Davis, other businesses, like Dutch Bros., have instituted a more robust cleaning and disinfectant regimen than required in order to maintain the highest levels of safety.

Davis added that the changing nature of COVID-related spread in coastal communities like Florence makes it difficult to combat, with vectors now including potential transmission from out-of-area contact in addition to residents who become infected

after leaving the area and returning.

For the latest updates, visit lanecounty.org and oregon.gov. Both sites have COVID-19 pages with the most current official data, reports and recommendations from state and county health officials.

Testing for COVID-19 is available in the Siuslaw region at PeaceHealth Peace Harbor Medical Center. For more information, visit www.peacehealth.org/coronavirus/Florence#testing or call 541-997-8412.



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