

Board: Former fire chief just 'didn't do the job'

Community praises former Cannon Beach Chief Mike Balzer

By Dani Palmer
Cannon Beach Gazette

Tempers flared Monday as community members criticized the Cannon Beach Rural Fire Protection District Board of Directors' handling of former Fire Chief Mike Balzer's termination. The manner of releasing the information was "in poor taste" and Sharon Clyde, the board president, should never have locked the former chief out of his own office, they said.

Board members countered that residents were misinformed, and more information regarding the mid-October dismissal was released.

Board member Gary Smith, who has background as a volunteer firefighter, said Balzer did not fulfill his job duties and, despite mentoring, did not improve over time.

Balzer was not in attendance at the meeting and his family declined to comment afterward.

"Mike was an incredible, exemplary firefighter for 30 years," board member Bob Cerelli said. "Nobody is questioning that. But I'll be 100 percent truthful now, a great firefighter isn't necessarily a great administrator in the office."

There were issues that had been ongoing for two years, board members said. If community members had come to more meetings, Cerelli noted, they would have known.

Community member Alaina Giguere said many were shocked by the termination. Her concern was with how Balzer was let go. She said it felt criminal and was "in poor taste" to have a police presence at the meeting he was dismissed.

Clyde said the police department asked if board members wanted that presence there and she said yes because it's hard to predict what someone will do when terminated.

Giguere said Balzer is a former police officer and respected community member.

"He has been a respected member of this fire department for more years

than any of us can remember," she added. "And, truly, for you guys to terminate him in the manner that you did is disgusting and disrespectful and reprehensible. And I think you owe him and all of us a complete apology."



Mike Balzer

She said it "looks crazy" that Clyde bought a lock from Balzer's son-in-law's store for the fire chief's office. Clyde replied it was the only hardware store in town.

Community member Erik Meyer said the board should have placed Balzer on administrative leave for transparency and given him a chance "to save face."

Smith said Balzer was given the chance to resign or retire. He added that the board gave Balzer multiple opportunities and presented him with a time frame in June, "so he wasn't just suddenly ousted out of the fire department."

Cannon Beach resident Susan Neuwirth said she and others would have helped "fill in the gaps" by assisting Balzer in filing or filling out paperwork.

"Don't let this man go," she said. "He's golden."

Community member Mary Peterson said she'd heard Balzer had good rapport with the firefighters. "Whether he deserved it (termination) or not is really not the issue," she said, but rather the treatment Balzer received. He deserved better, she added, asking the board to resign.

Cerelli said she and others would have heard a different story if they had attended past meetings.

"None of you were there. None of you know what happened," Clyde said. "None of you know the job he has done. None of you know all the things that you are complaining about. Now we all love Mike a lot, but it's our responsibility to have a person in that position that is going to do the job. Whether he's a nice guy or not, he still needs to do the job."

Frank Swedenborg is serving as interim fire chief while the search for a new leader is in progress.

Interim fire chief says successor could come from the outside

Main goal is 'continuity of the fire department'

By Dani Palmer
Cannon Beach Gazette

The Cannon Beach Rural Fire Protection District Board may bring in an outside interim to stand in as fire chief until a permanent leader is found.

On Saturday, Nov. 21 the board will interview interim candidates from the Special Districts Association of Oregon in executive session.

Former chief Mike Balzer was dismissed in mid-October due to personnel issues and Assistant Chief Frank Swedenborg has been covering his post since. The Cannon Beach Rural Fire Protection District provides firefighting and emergency service to the North Coast communities of Cannon Beach, Arch Cape and Falcon Cove.

At a special fire board



ERICK BENGEL/CANNON BEACH GAZETTE

Interim Fire Chief Frank Swedenborg at a 2014 holiday volunteer event at the Shorewood Apartments.

meeting on Nov. 2, Swedenborg noted he would fill in as chief until March at the latest. Then he suggested the district not go with an outside interim as it "mixes the pot for the firefighters."

"My main goal is continuity of the fire department," he said at the board's regular meeting at the fire station on Monday, Nov. 9.

But presented with the possibility of a permanent chief not to come until after March or during the middle of budgeting season, he



DANI PALMER/CANNON BEACH GAZETTE

Bill Anderson, the Special Districts Association of Oregon representative working with the Cannon Beach Rural Fire Protection District board.

said a Special Districts Association of Oregon interim might be best. He added having someone with better knowledge of the industry in the post might relieve Captain Matt Gardner of extra duties he has taken on, as well.

"This gives us some time so we're not rushing it," Special Districts Association of Oregon representative Bill Anderson said.

He added that the retired chiefs they recommend are familiar with the budgeting process.

Swedenborg is ready to retire and not looking to fill in permanently for the fire district. He currently works about 12-16 hours over a four-day week.

Anderson said the Special Districts Association of Oregon could also assist in the search process. It typically brings in five candidates to speak with a community and technical panel, comprised of neighboring fire chiefs and the police chief, to narrow the search down to three or less candidates.

"Our goal is to have someone that is a community fit run your department," Anderson said.

The board began updating the chief's job description during a special meeting Nov. 13, and is examining nearby fire departments and similar-sized departments to determine salary. The district paid Balzer \$36 an hour for 2,000 hours annually.

Once a decision is made, Cannon Beach could have a new interim chief within two weeks.

Cannon Beach wants carbon tax

City Council takes action on climate change

By Dani Palmer
Cannon Beach Gazette

Cannon Beach has joined five other cities and Benton County in asking the Oregon Legislature to enact a price on carbon and pollution.

The Cannon Beach City Council passed a resolution earlier this month asking for a carbon cap or tax because "climate change is a threat to public health, national security, food security, business supply chains, wildlife and future generations."

The goal is to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to pre-1990 levels. Page Atcheson, field director of Oregon Climate, a grassroots campaign that worked with Cannon Beach, said carbon pricing

would discourage fossil fuel consumption and encourage renewable energy and conservation.

"The basic idea is that climate change is this large problem that we all know we have to address, and that by putting a price on carbon," she said. "You essentially make polluters pay to pollute," Atcheson said.

A 2013 Portland State University Northwest Economic Research Center study stated putting the right price on carbon would be effective in reducing emissions. Oregon Climate is advocating for returning 100 percent of tax revenues to Oregon taxpayers as a dividend check. Known as price and dividend, the method would benefit the lower- and middle-classes, Atcheson said. Taxpayers could save more by choosing lower carbon options while high-energy users would be most impacted. The resolution asks the

Legislature to "craft legislation to enact a carbon price, in the form of a fee or a cap, using the best available research to ensure a policy that significantly reduces emissions while mitigating impacts on low-income Oregonians."

Cannon Beach councilors voted 3-2 for the measure, with Mayor Sam Steidel, Melissa Cadwalader and Mike Benefield in favor of the measure. Vetter and Wendy Higgins vote against it. The city joins Hood River, Eugene, Milwaukie, Corvallis, Portland, and Benton County in calling on the Legislature to tax carbon.

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