

Goodland ponders fire protection problem

Kansans walking for better health

By TOM BETZ

The Goodland Star-News
GOODLAND — Citizens grilled city commissioners last Thursday about when they first knew volunteer firemen wanted the fire chief fired, and what they did to try to keep the 12 volunteers from turning in their resignations Feb. 20.

The letters were to be effective Monday, leaving the city with only a dozen hastily recruited replacements to run the fire department.

The commissioners and city manager said they received a letter from the volunteers late in January asking that the fire chief be removed because he had "humiliated and embarrassed" the fire department. The volunteers said they no longer felt safe under his leadership.

Fire Chief Scott Gilmer, riding in a rescue truck, responded to calls on I-70 during a snowstorm the night of Jan. 20. Gilmer was taken to the Sherman County Sheriff's office by a state trooper to take an alcohol breath test.

City Manager Wayne Hill put Gilmer on 30-days unpaid suspension because the test showed an alcohol level of .026, just above the limit in city policy.

About 30 people attended a 45-minute public forum with the city commission to ask about the status of the city fire protection and the training of replacement volunteer firemen.

Commissioner Dave Daniels, who asked for the special meeting, said he felt it would be good to have citizens ask questions and hear from the commissioners about the dispute. All 12 volunteer firemen turned in their resignation, effective Monday, to protest the city manager's decision to reinstate Fire Chief Scott Gilmer.

"We took an oath to enforce city policies," Daniels said. "There are people who want us to take actions outside the policies."

"We are following the policies and all city employees are given the same treatment."

"The volunteer firemen are good men, and I appreciate their work. I am sorry this happened. I would like to see some of them come back."

Mayor Rick Billinger opened the meeting at 5:30 p.m., asking City Attorney Jeff Mason to explain the ground rules on what could be discussed.

Mason said personnel matters are confidential and the commission may discuss them in closed session. He said he had copies of city personnel policies and a proposed fire protection agreement with Sherman County.

Billinger said the commissioners do not hire or fire any city workers, except the city manager.

He said that is why they have a manager, who is in charge of all the city employees.

Commissioner Annette Fairbanks said she had faith that the city was making the right decision.

"We are trying to do the best for the people we represent," Commissioner John Garcia said. "We have to evaluate where we are at as a commission. Every problem has a solution, and we have to find the best one possible."

"I ask people to give the commission the room to see how the decision comes out. Some will not like what we do, but that is part of a representative democracy."

Billinger said the city had met with the county commission on Tuesday, and heard that some city volunteers have applied to join the county fire department. He said some of these are highly trained, and, with them working with the county, if the city has to call on the county for help with a fire, they will cover all the bases.

The first question from the floor was if the city is going to change its alcohol policy?

Daniels said when the commission hired Wayne Hill as city manager, one of the first things he asked was to have all the city policies reviewed.

"Wayne has been looking at the employee handbook," Daniels said. "Some changes will be made very quickly."

Daniels said the commission had talked about this when they were talking to Hill about the situation.

No specific discussion about reviewing the city policies had been brought up in open commission meetings, but Hill said he had asked the commission about reviewing the policies when they offered him the job in 18 months ago.

Another question was, "If the city doesn't have control, why not disband the city fire department?"

Billinger said combining the city and county departments is one of the things on the table.

Daniels said there were some logistical questions dealing with firehouse locations and response times, but he said there are programs that might be worked out.

"I want to thank the guys who stood up to take the burden of the city," said Tina Roe. "We have a petition about this, but want you (Hill) to know it is not personal against you."

"I have lived here for 50 years. I am proud of all the guys, both the old group and the new group."

"We are trying to push forward to get new businesses here, and this is a black eye."

"I appreciate the comments," Daniels said. "What is best for citizens is what we are making decisions based on. We are thinking of the people and what we feel is the

best interest of all."

Former City Commissioner Dean Blume asked how long this issue had been known to the city.

"What we are hearing is that this has been going on for some time," Blume said. "Did you call an executive session?"

Billinger said the commission had talked with Hill. Daniels said the first they knew was when the city got a letter from the firemen on Jan. 26.

"You did not know about the problem before?" Blume asked

Daniels said they expected some of the volunteer firemen to come to a commission meeting last month, but they did not show up. An hour later, he said, they turned their resignation letters in to Chief Gilmer on Tuesday, Feb. 20.

Former City Commissioner Curtis Hurd asked if any of the volunteers has talked to the commissioners.

Daniels said two talked to him on Feb. 19, about coming to the city commission meeting before the resignations, but no volunteers showed up at the city meeting.

"Mr. Hill, how long had you known about this?" Blume asked

"Not until I got the letters," Hill said.

Fairbanks said there are lots of rumors, especially in a small town.

"This is a fact," Blume said, "what I am hearing. When did you know?"

"I did not know until I got the letter," Fairbanks replied.

Billinger said he did not know exactly when he got the information.

"Why wasn't it discussed in executive session?" Blume asked.

"It was discussed in executive session," Billinger said.

"Why didn't people know about it?" Blume asked.

Daniels said because no one showed up at the city meeting.

"I did talk with them after the letters of resignation," Fairbanks said, "but they had no facts."

Someone asked if any of the firemen had asked to take their resignations back.

"They can request a meeting," Hill said. "We need some of these guys back."

"Have you called them?" Connie Carson asked.

"No, I felt their letter made it pretty clear," Daniels said. "Then they handed in the letter of resignation."

"When a person resigns, they step away and go on. If it is a ploy, that is wrong."

"Why didn't they come to us and ask? They made the decision. I feel they have the responsibility."

Billinger said he had talked to most of the firemen, and they seemed to feel they weren't being heard.

Carson said it seemed the decision put the city in a bind.

"It was a tough decision to make," Hill said. "I had to follow the city policy that is in place."

"We need to unite people," Roe said. "We do not need to be divided."

"This is the worst thing that has happened. I consider this Goodland's 9-11."

Billinger thanked everyone for coming and the meeting was adjourned at 6:12 p.m.

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Registrations are due immediately. However, registrations will be accepted until March 16. So act quickly if you have not already picked up your packet.

Every team member will receive a small gift of appreciation for walking and participating. If you participated last year in Walk Kansas and did not receive your gift, contact your team captain or the Extension office. There are

some team gift bags from last year which still have not been picked up.

The purchase of Walk Kansas T-Shirts is a possibility, but is optional. They are also available for \$5 in addition to the individual registration fee.

Last year was an outstanding participation year for people in Norton County. Get busy now, so that we can beat the record numbers from last year. Call 877-5755 today!

Red Rover, Red Rover

Send the new kindergartners over...



After he found his big brother Dylan's desk, 4-year old Riley Goss announced that was where he would sit when he starts kindergarten in the fall. Riley's parents are Rusty and Shannon Goss.

— Telegram photo by Carolyn Plotts

Norton Schools

Staff Spotlight

Classified Employee



Lee Smith

Mr. Lee Smith is in his first year of employment in USD 211. He began the year as an assistant cook in the JH-SH kitchen but has just recently been promoted to head cook. He and his wife Sandy have five grown children. Woodworking, remodeling houses and reading science fiction are his favorite leisure activities. The best thing about his job is that there is something new every day.

Certified Employee



Don Mordecai

Mr. Don Mordecai teaches instrumental music in both Eisenhower Elementary School and the Norton Junior High School and works with students in grades 5-8. He has been a teacher for nineteen years and eleven of those have been in Norton USD 211. Mr. Mordecai earned his Bachelor's Degree from Bethany College in Lindsborg. He and his wife Cindy have three children and two foster children. His hobbies are disc golf, fishing and hunting. Working with kids is what he likes best about his job.