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Former Atomic City dealing with disincorporation woes

BY KYLE MANGUM kmangum@binghamnewschronicle.com

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Members of the former Atomic City met with Bingham County commissioners on Tuesday to discuss the plans going forward for fire protection in their area.

KYLE MANGUM SCREENSHOT

BLACKFOOT – History continues to be made as the state sees its third-ever city disincorporation when Atomic City put itself on the ballot for the November election to dissolve the city and turn responsibility over to the county.

Now, as they trudge through the issues that continue to spring up through the process, the county and former city do not see eye-to-eye on some of the topics.

Members of the former Atomic City were in the Bingham County commissioners' chambers Tuesday morning to attempt to reach a consensus on the next stage of the disincorporation — specifically an issue surrounding the need for a working fire district or department.

As part of the dissolution of their city, they were required to relinquish ownership of anything of value including equipment, property, buildings, and supplies. In this process, they were required to release the three different fire trucks they had, some which were donated to them in previous years.

Bingham County has interest in resolving this issue as quickly as possible because currently the area of Atomic City does not have a fire department or district established nor do they have equipment to fight a structure fire. Adding to the complexity of the issue, without a fire district or department, based on Idaho Code, the duties of firefighting for the area falls on Bingham County Sheriff Craig Rowland until a district or department is established.

The commissioners invited Blackfoot Fire Chief Kevin Gray to provide input on the subject as well as asking for his opinion about extending the Blackfoot Fire District to former Atomic City. Gray was clear that it would not be possible with logistics and county civil attorney Chase Hendricks explained that it would have to be continuous from the current location all the way to Atomic City.

Gray suggested establishing a volunteer fire department for the area and explained that they do not have the resources or manpower to create a fire district. Gray reminded the commissioners that trying to rely on Blackfoot or Idaho National Lab's fire departments to fight a fire in Atomic City would be a black mark for either department and would be bad press for all involved.

The Bureau of Land Management also had a representative at the meeting who explained that even though BLM has a station in the area, they do not fight structure fires and would not be able to aid in fighting a fire that started in a building in or near Atomic City.

Tony Bandiera, an Atomic City resident, stated that he feels that Atomic City is becoming an afterthought of the county and does not understand why the county will not just give them at least one truck back.

Commissioner Mark Bair explained to Bandiera that they cannot do that legally and they are welcome to purchase it back but will have to bid against the general public on the matter. Bair's statement upset Bandiera, and he referred to the situation as "Atomic City being treated like an unwanted redheaded stepchild."

Commissioner Whitney Manwaring tried to defuse the situation and drive the conversation toward a more productive outlook, steering the conversation back to a volunteer fire department. Bandiera explained that he and former mayor Chris Polatis, had been training on the brush truck that had been donated to them. The brush truck holds 300 gallons of water and is a two-person operation, meaning they would have the manpower to use it to fight a fire from outside of a structure and providing crucial time for backup to arrive if needed. Bandiera focused on being able to safely fight a structure fire and asked for the county to explore every option available to ensure that the former Atomic City can safely protect itself.

Bandiera also requested that the county find a way to return their two main mowers. He explained that the mowers are an integral part of the former city's defense to potential wildfire-turned-structure fire in their town. When provided with the same answers that he received regarding the fire trucks, he asked if the county would be sending a mowing crew out over the summer to complete the fire barriers for them.

Dusty Whited, county public works director, first asked about the amount of time it takes them currently to conduct this mowing process to which Bandiera explained that it takes two people a full week to complete the project. Whited made note of the time that Bandiera and Polatis spent working on the fire barrier and said they would be able to work something out so that the homes in the area would be protected from wildfire.

Commissioner Jessica Lewis said they will look at all options and asked Hendricks to do so before Manwaring called the meeting to an end.