

**Remarks of Acting County Manager Mark Schwartz
Fire Station #8 location/relocation
Recess County Board Meeting
September 24, 2015**

Members of the Board: As I stated during the Public Comment portion of the Board Meeting this past Saturday, I am reporting back to you on the progress we have made on the siting of Fire Station 8. I have a fair amount of ground to cover, but I do want you to know that I am recommending that the Board draft and adopt a **charge to create a community task force** to address this issue.

Before I speak to the framework for a task force, I think it is helpful to review the events that brought us to today.

- A study on fire station location was done in 2000
- The County purchased property to expand the site at 26th and Old Dominion (as recently as 2007)
- The Tri-Data study was completed in 2012 and presented to the Board...and discussed with the community
- The proposed CIP (Capital Improvement Plan) (Spring 2014), which included the site at 26th/Old Dominion for Fire Station #8 was discussed with community
- Board action was taken in July 2014 to adopt the CIP. The Board separated out an OEM Office of Emergency Management building from a potential project at 26th and Old Dominion and the Board then charged staff to review locations North of Lee Highway in context of CIP – with dollar amounts associated. Also, the Board adopted CIP determined that a new salt dome should go at 26th/Old Dominion
- The Board made a statement a few months ago that at least a one-acre park go at 26th/Old Dominion
- Since July 2014 we have held 4 meetings with the community that were attended by approximately 100 to 150 at each session. We have a website where we have posted answers to questions and shared a lot of data that was requested. The four parameters used during this process were:
 - 1) Improve response times to the northern part of the County
 - 2) Site should be compatible with the overall fire/EMS network,
 - 3) Site size of approximately 1.5 acres, preferably County-owned because of the constraints of the budget, and
 - 4) The site must be proximate to an arterial street.

Broadly speaking, the feedback we received from the community strongly suggested that residents want some of these parameters to be relaxed – including possibly slowing response times by relocating the fire station and possibly increasing the capital budget for this project.

It is the Board's prerogative as to whether a task force is appropriate in this case. I think you were correct in allowing the meetings over the summer to surface various issues and to narrow the sites that merit consideration. **Now is the right time** for a focused task force.

It is also the Board's prerogative as to what to include in a charge, and I think it is imperative that the Board seek community input on this charge. I have been paying close attention to the suggestions made thus far by members of the community and met just this week with Alexandra Bocian and Richard Lolich, presidents of the John M. Langston Citizen Association and Old Dominion Civic Associations, respectively. You have received several letters with suggestions about the scope of a charge for a task force, including one signed by Alexandra and Richard, and also residents who participate in the affected communities.

Now, my thoughts on next steps. The letters you have received and the input we received at our 4 sessions offer a number of suggested ways forward. We don't agree on all of them and we need more discussion, but I wanted members of the community and the Board to know my thinking. As with everything we try to do, this is subject to change, and will change based on further conversations with the community.

1. I recommend a **work session** – as soon as practical – so we can lay out all the data we have compiled to date, conclusions reached to date by staff and so the Board can agree on a charge **FOR A TASK FORCE** after receiving input from the community and staff.
2. Given the various suggestions being made, any charge by the Board should **be clear what is on the table, and what off the table for discussion.**
3. Timing of task force: I urge that any task force **report back by March 2016 to the Board so funding could be included in the proposed and to be adopted CIP.** This date also allows any input from the community facilities study to be included.
 - a. Another reason to be expeditious: Properties may be available to buy right now, should the Board decide that further land acquisition is desirable. More time will only increase costs and may change willing sellers into unwilling sellers (and vice versa, of course).

- b. Current fire station is in need of replacement within the next few years.
 - c. Delay means we are delayed on locating a new salt dome. You may not realize that the salt dome is actually a repurposed water tank that was constructed in the 1930s -- we urgently need a new structure. The salt dome replacement project is funded and we are unable to move forward with planning the site until the fire station site is finalized.
4. Composition of task force: It should be **broad** but we should explore possible stakeholders including current commissions, civic associations, and other groups representing the entire community.

This issue has been contentious, because the parameters for the discussion to date have not accommodated the desires of the community. The choice will be a difficult one for the Board to make, because it may mean spending more on the fire station than was anticipated at the expense of other important projects.

However, we must strike out on a new process that rebuilds the community's trust while respecting the need to provide fire/EMS service at the most equitable levels possible throughout the County and recognizing the very real limitations on the supply of County land for support uses and the limitations and pressures on the County budget.

In this process staff will offer our best professional advice and the dedicated members of our community can offer their insight, and the Board will make the final decision. If we can do that, then time will permit us to move on to the other conclusions included in the Tri-Data study about other changes needed to handle slower than desired response times in some other parts of our community.

Finalizing this decision will also allow us to move on to consider some of the larger strategic considerations on provision of fire service. As you know, we have started a series of conversations on strategic delivery of services in the County. What will our libraries look like in 10 years. We held that discussion in this Board room two weeks ago. What will our fire service look like in 10 years with changing demographics and a work force that may want to work 40 hours a week rather than the current shifts. Much like how we continue to build schools even though new models of education delivery may make sense in 10 years, and even though we continue to upgrade facilities like libraries, while we envision new models, we can and must rebuild our current facilities while we talk about the future. Let's take the next six months to answer how to rebuild or relocate Fire Station 8.

I suggest a work session, soliciting broad input on a task force charge for a location for Fire Station 8. The Board should solicit input from the community prior to that work session, and then as soon as practical, move ahead with our work.