

**OLYMPIA TUMWATER REGIONAL FIRE AUTHORITY PLANNING COMMITTEE**  
**MINUTES OF VIRTUAL/HYBRID MEETING**  
**November 14, 2022 Page 1**

**CONVENE:** 5:30 p.m.

**PRESENT:** Vice Chair/Olympia Councilmember YẾN Huỳnh, Tumwater Councilmember Michael Althaus, Olympia Councilmembers Jim Cooper, Tumwater Councilmember Eileen Swarthout, Tumwater Fire Chief Brian Hurley, Tumwater Fire Union Representative/Paramedic Lieutenant James Osberg, Olympia Interim Fire Chief Todd Carson, and Olympia Fire Union Representative/Firefighter Steven Busz.

Excused: Chair/City of Tumwater Councilmember Leatta Dahlhoff and Olympia Councilmember Lisa Parshley.

Staff: Tumwater City Administrator John Doan, Olympia City Manager Jay Burney, Tumwater Finance Director Troy Niemeyer, and City Clerk Melody Valiant.

Others: Karen Reed, RFA Consultant; Bill Cushman, Fiscal Analyst; and Neil Blindheim, FBC Consultant.

**WELCOME:** Vice Chair Huỳnh welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Members and staff provided self-introduction.

**AGENDA REVIEW:** Vice Chair Huỳnh provided an overview of the Regional Fire Authority (RFA) planning process. On May 19, 2021, the cities of Olympia and Tumwater entered into an interlocal agreement to study the potential formation of a regional fire authority. Pursuant to state law, a Regional Fire Authority Planning Committee was established and tasked to study whether to create a regional fire authority and a plan for service delivery and financing for fire protection and emergency medical services within the boundaries of the two cities. Members of the Committee include three elected councilmembers from both cities, and ex-officio non-voting members of Olympia Interim Fire Chief Todd Carson, Tumwater Fire Chief Brian Hurley, and union representatives of the International Association of Firefighters Local 468 (James Osberg) and Local 2409 (Steven Busz). The Committee initiated meetings in August 16, 2021 and met regularly for over a year. The Committee has extensively studied the needs of the communities and the best way to provide stable funding for increasing costs of fire protection and emergency medical services by consolidating those critical services. Prior to providing a recommendation to both City Councils, the Committee is conducting a public hearing on whether to form a RFA and the plan for its operation, governance, and financing including a fire benefit charge (FBC).

**FIRE BENEFIT CHARGE (FBC) UPDATE:** Olympia City Manager Burney reported the presentation would include an update by Karen Reed, RFP Consultant, on the FBC followed by a

**OLYMPIA TUMWATER REGIONAL FIRE AUTHORITY PLANNING COMMITTEE**  
**MINUTES OF VIRTUAL/HYBRID MEETING**  
**November 14, 2022 Page 2**

presentation on the Committee's work.

Ms. Reed reported the FBC represents less than one-third of the revenue required to operate the RFA. The Committee extensively studied the option of assessing a FBC. With new data, total FBC collections and the FBC for any given parcel can change. Total FBC collections needed in 2024 would change from current estimates depending on assessed value changes (affects \$1 fire levy), inflation, and other factors leading to adjustments in the final RFA 2024 budget. FBCs for any parcel may change dependent on total FBC collections required, total square footage in the calculation (new construction & building expansions), and changes to the weight applied to structures (lower weights will reduce the FBC if square footage on the parcel and other factors such as sprinklers or property tax exemptions are unchanged). Although the formula for the FBC has not changed, total square footage within the calculation has been updated based on new information. Earlier modeling of the FBC generated some concerns, which resulted in an independent review of the database set used by the FBC consultant to compute the calculations to determine the FBC. The independent review determined the calculation did not account for all structures on parcels containing multiple structures. The initial formula included only one building rather than all buildings that were included in the data file provided by Thurston County. Consequently, the formula includes an additional 30 million square feet that will share in the payment of the FBC. Most of the additional square footage is in the multifamily and commercial categories.

Since the Committee's last review of Option 3B, the staff team reviewed new data to determine the best method for reallocating the costs given the concerns conveyed by the Committee in terms of ensuring smaller homes pay less than larger homes, exempting mobile homes which represent less than ½% of 1% of all housing in both cities, and a desire to ease the financial burden on smaller commercial properties. Based on the Committee's feedback, apartments are weighted at 1.5 with all other class weights are reduced as compared to Option 3B. Mobile homes remain weighted at zero. Because of the amount of additional square footage within the commercial class, the Committee could achieve its policy goals without shifting additional costs from the residential sector to commercial sector. The new FBC model reflects that each sector of housing types pay in total the same percentage of the FBC as represented by each category's percentage of total square footage. For example, if residential categories 1, 2, and 3 combined represent 35% of the total square footage, all residential FBC payments would reflect 35% of the total FBC collections.

Ms. Reed shared updated information on the six classifications of uses reflecting lower FBC rates because of the increase in total square footage in the two cities. The parcel count has changed significantly as well. She shared a summary of the information reflecting the goal of collecting \$10.5 million in FBC for the RFA in 2024. The formula incorporates a discount for structures with sprinklers.

**OLYMPIA TUMWATER REGIONAL FIRE AUTHORITY PLANNING COMMITTEE**  
**MINUTES OF VIRTUAL/HYBRID MEETING**  
**November 14, 2022 Page 3**

Ms. Reed shared a table depicting approximately 20 different parcels with a calculation of the FBC under various options the Committee considered. Each row represents a property for each classification. For an average home of 2,000 square feet, the cost of the FBC has dropped by approximately 23% and is 20% less for a 2,500 square foot home. The FBC is calculated on the fire risk for type of structure and size of structure.

Ms. Reed responded to questions from Committee members. She explained that the FBC is an annual payment that is subject to change because of future development activity adding more square footage to the calculation. The “no shift” model is basically a “pro rata” model that includes multiple classifications depicting residential, commercial, and multifamily uses. Within the current model, commercial properties would be paying approximately 40% of all FBC collections and are about 40% of the total square footage. When the Committee reviewed the first FBC model, the total FBC did not reflect shift costs between sectors. The Committee expressed concerns that the burden would be too high for residential households. Subsequently, 6% of the rate was transferred to commercial uses with 6% deducted from residential, which was reflected in all subsequent options the Committee reviewed. Based on the addition of square footage in apartments and commercial, the staff team recommends eliminating the 6% shift because it is no longer necessary to achieve the Committee’s policy goal. The FBC is evaluated each year by reviewing the tax base from Thurston County to identify new parcels. The FBC will be recalculated each year based on the RFA’s new budget and updated data. Mobile homes will not be assessed a FBC per direction of the Committee.

Ms. Reed reviewed a sample of FBC estimates for 2024 for residential, apartments, and commercial properties. The estimates will change depending on the RFA adopted 2024 budget, final property assessed values for 2023, and new construction.

Councilmember Cooper inquired about the identity of the third party reviewer. Ms. Reed said data was reviewed by a retired member from the Valley Regional Fire Authority who worked extensively on FBC calculations. He was asked to review Thurston County’s database to compare with FBC calculations. His review discovered the underreporting of square footage within the calculations. Following notification on the outcome of the third-party review, the consultant team initiated another review of Thurston County’s database and documented the initial exclusion of additional structures on tax parcels.

Councilmember Cooper asked about the timing of the budget process for the RFA. Ms. Reed said the first RFA budget would be adopted in fall 2023 for 2024. The proposed financial model includes calculations of expenses and revenues for a seven-year period. The forecasted need of \$10.5 million in FBC revenue in 2024 is based on the financial model. Additionally, the RFA plan is structured not to change the weights and classifications during the

**OLYMPIA TUMWATER REGIONAL FIRE AUTHORITY PLANNING COMMITTEE**  
**MINUTES OF VIRTUAL/HYBRID MEETING**  
**November 14, 2022 Page 4**

first year (2024).

Councilmember Althaus asked whether multiple residential structures on one parcel were also tracked by Thurston County. Mr. Blindheim explained that all parcels were reviewed. Additional residential structures on parcels were added after eliminating driveways, swimming pools, and tennis courts, etc.

Councilmember Cooper noted that structures under 400 square-feet would be exempt from the FBC. Ms. Reed clarified that if a parcel containing a 2,000 square-foot home also has a 400 square-foot barn, the parcel would be calculated at 2,400 square feet. Only those parcels with a 400 square-foot structure or less would be exempt.

**PRESENTATION:  
OVERVIEW OF THE  
REGIONAL FIRE  
AUTHORITY (RFA)  
PLAN AND PROJECT  
SCHEDULE:**

City Manager Burney introduced the presentation on a proposal for both cities to form a regional fire authority and the recommendation by the Planning Committee.

Fire Chief Hurley described the reasons for considering the formation of a RFA. After a review of services provided to the community, a study was completed in 2019. The study recommended forming a regional fire authority because of limited city resources, growing demands on fire departments, declining response times, and the lack of ability to maintain fire/EMS service levels to meet growing community needs.

Fire Chief Carson reported on trends in Olympia. The numbers from Thurston County Regional Planning Council project growth in population along with growth of call volume and response times. Currently the Olympia Fire Department has experienced an increase in call volume by 100% since 2010. The department struggles to meet response times. The Department is also on pace to respond to 16,000 calls for service with four stations and no new resources added since 2010. That situation has affected both fire departments.

Fire Chief Hurley reported call volume in Tumwater has increased 20% over the last five years with average response times increasing except during 2018 when the City opened Station T2. He reviewed Tumwater Fire Department budgets.

Fire Chief Carson reported some of the RFA operational enhancements include two basic life support transport units and the CARES Unit. The CARES Unit is an alternative response unit to reduce the number of non-EMS calls in the system. The RFA is a two-battalion chief model with the RFA projected to respond to 20,000 calls for service. Establishment of the RFA eliminates borders between the cities and creates some efficiency by reassigning apparatus to specific locations resulting in quicker response

**OLYMPIA TUMWATER REGIONAL FIRE AUTHORITY PLANNING COMMITTEE**  
**MINUTES OF VIRTUAL/HYBRID MEETING**  
**November 14, 2022 Page 5**

times. The proposal includes a ladder truck stationed in Tumwater. Ladder trucks are highly specialized equipment benefitting the community and enabling response to a greater number of alarms in both cities. Fire and EMS training is difficult to schedule because of high call volumes. As the fire service has evolved, continuous training is beneficial and vital for firefighters. The RFA would provide community risk reduction by enhancing the database model to identify issues in the community that might benefit from outreach. The RFA would also enable a reduction in reserve apparatus to maintain.

Fire Chief Carson reviewed the membership of the RFA Planning Committee.

Fire Chief Hurley reported the planning Committee has been meeting every two weeks and reviewed every element of the plan as it was developed. All fire department personnel have been engaged throughout the process, as well as with both fire unions, which voted to support the RFA Plan moving forward. A joint City Council meeting was held on October 25, 2022 to review the plan. The Committee will finalize and present the plan to both councils in December for consideration of a ballot measure in April 2023.

Fire Chief Hurley reviewed the proposed RFA organizational structure reflecting all existing positions, reclassified positions, new positions (primarily administrative), and positions supporting the BLS Transport and FD CARES Programs.

Fire Chief Carson reviewed the proposed governance structure of the RFA. If approved, the RFA would establish a seven-member Fire Commission responsible for overseeing the RFA. The initial board as required by law includes three councilmembers from each city for the first several years to develop policies and render budget decisions. The initial board phases out over the next several years and by 2028, membership of the Board would include one councilmember from each jurisdiction and five RFA Fire Commissioners elected at large.

City Administrator Doan described the funding sources for the RFA. One piece is property tax. The RFA will assess \$1 per \$1,000 of assessed value, which essentially transfers money from the cities property tax levy to the RFA, resulting in no net property tax change. The financing plan recommends a FBC that is related to the risk associated with the type of the structure and its size. Other funding sources include the EMS levy and fees assessed for service (permits, service contracts, & state facilities).

Two legal options considered by the Committee were first, a fire levy up to \$1.50 per \$1,000 of assessed value. Under that scenario, total revenue sources to the RFA would be EMS revenue, fees for service, no FBC, and a

**OLYMPIA TUMWATER REGIONAL FIRE AUTHORITY PLANNING COMMITTEE**  
**MINUTES OF VIRTUAL/HYBRID MEETING**  
**November 14, 2022 Page 6**

fire levy up to \$1.50. That option would affect the vote to form the RFA. A second option, recommended by the Committee, is adding a FBC in addition to shared EMS levy revenue, fees for service, and a fire levy limited to \$1 per \$1,000 of assessed value rather than \$1.50. The second option requires 60% voter approval.

The FBC formula consists of identifying classifications of structures within the communities, square footage of those structures, assessment of weights for different classifications of structures, and any discounts that might apply (current property tax exemptions or sprinklers). The FBC formula is used by other RFAs in the state. The formula includes the calculation of fire flow as the function of the type of building and size.

By law, collection of FBCs cannot exceed 60% of the RFA budget. The proposal estimates FBC collections will be less than 30% of the RFA budget. Each year, the RFA board determines how much revenue is required from the FBC to meet expenditures and to ensure sustainability of the RFA over the long-term to meet community needs. State law governing assessment of FBCs includes an appeal process for property owners. The proposed RFA organizational structure includes staffing to facilitate the release of FBC information and work with constituents. The FBC is assessed as part of the property tax billing. The FBC must be reauthorized by voters after six years or the FBC expires. Following the initial six years, the RFA board can consider whether to assess the FBC permanently or extend the FBC for six or ten years.

In terms of property tax implications, the RFA would assess a \$1 per \$1,000 assessed value of the property tax capacity. The cities each lose \$1 of property tax capacity. The cities have agreed to reduce their respective property tax levy by \$1 per \$1,000 of assessed value. In terms of property tax, the proposed RFA financing plan is revenue neutral.

The Committee developed a seven-year financial plan addressing operations, capital facilities, equipment, staffing for service enhancements, implementing the two-battalion model, and a reserve fund. Due to cash flow issues for the RFA during the first months of operation, the RFA will incur some debt.

The cities will continue to assume LEOFF liabilities for retired firefighters, and transfer of the remaining \$2 million from Tumwater's fire levy lid lift to the RFA to fund fire apparatus. Some capital acquisitions will be deferred during the transition period. Current payroll obligations for fire personnel by each jurisdiction would be transferred to the RFA.

City Administrator Doan recapped the revised option for the FBC for each category based on the increase in square footage.

**OLYMPIA TUMWATER REGIONAL FIRE AUTHORITY PLANNING COMMITTEE**  
**MINUTES OF VIRTUAL/HYBRID MEETING**  
**November 14, 2022 Page 7**

City Administrator Doan summarized the reasons for establishing a RFA, which was developed from a 2019 study articulating current and future problems. The Committee believes the RFA is the best solution for both jurisdictions. The RFA would provide a dedicated, adequate, diverse, and sustainable funding source to ensure the provision of quality fire and emergency medical services into the future. The next steps include the RFA Planning Committee submitting the RFA Plan and a recommendation to each City Council. Each Council will deliberate and make a decision on whether to move forward. The Councils are scheduled to consider the plan on December 6, 2022. If approved, the plan to establish the RFA would be placed on the April 2023 ballot for consideration by voters. If approved, the effective date of the RFA would be October 1, 2023 with tax and charges assessed effective January 2024.

Vice Chair Huynh invited comments from both fire union representatives. Paramedic Lieutenant Osberg and Firefighter Busz offered that the RFA will provide a solution to continue providing service to the community. Having the tools and the ability to provide those services are important. The RFA is a solution to a problem that is facing the jurisdictions in the near term.

**PUBLIC HEARING  
ON RFA PLAN:**

Vice Chair Huynh reviewed the format for providing testimony during the public hearing. Public testimony is limited to three minutes. Written comments submitted by 4:00 p.m. were provided to all Committee members.

Vice Chair Huynh opened the public hearing at 6:38 p.m.

**PUBLIC TESTIMONY:** **Karen Messmer** said she is a former Olympia Councilmember. Fire and emergency response are important public services. She wants the community to be able to rely on fast and effective response when a fire or other emergency occurs. From the fire insurance rating of the City of Olympia, it appears fire and emergency service provided by the City of Olympia is great service. She would be happy to support an Olympia tax levy that would provide more funding if that is needed to maintain excellent service. The RFA proposal has two major concerns. The first is that the assessment is regressive. If mobile homes can receive an exemption, then the formulas, the FBC could be tailored so that it does not inflict economic harm to people least able to pay. She cannot support the proposal unless the formulas are shown to be equitable. The Committee needs to resolve the regressive approach before approving the proposal. In Olympia, the proposal will result in major reduction in parks funding. Over two different tax measures, voters have indicated that they want to build, maintain, and improve a much more extensive park system. When those measures were passed the expectation was that parks funding from the city's general fund would be increased along with the inflation increases and that it would be sustained into the future. The new money voters approved would be additional to existing parks funding. Having great parks and recreation

**OLYMPIA TUMWATER REGIONAL FIRE AUTHORITY PLANNING COMMITTEE**  
**MINUTES OF VIRTUAL/HYBRID MEETING**  
**November 14, 2022 Page 8**

systems help people to stay both physically and mentally healthy. It can help in reducing emergency calls. The Olympia City Council needs to adopt a commitment to show that the proposal would not reduce park funding and it must be completed prior to placement of the proposal on the ballot. Thank you.

**Jim Lazar**, resident of Olympia, said he is a former Thurston PUD Commissioner. He supports quality fire service and recognizes the need for adequate funding to ensure an adequate and capable response to emergencies. The current proposal has two unacceptable features. The first is reversing the Robin Hood feature quietly buried in the FBC formula. The second is the \$1.3 million per year adverse hit on Olympia parks funding. The proposal is 23 cents a square foot for a small apartment building owned by a local family, dropping to 3 cents a square foot for a large apartment complex owned by a national corporation. That problem can be solved by applying a uniform FBC per square foot for all residential buildings and perhaps a different uniform charge per square foot for all commercial buildings. The square root must be removed from the FBC formula. He urged the Committee to take action immediately to remove the square root from the formula and use a uniform fee of square footage. His other concern is the adverse impact on parks funding in Olympia. This is an Olympia issue and not a Tumwater issue. He believes Olympia Councilmembers understand how it works. He plans to provide Olympia City Councilmembers with language that could be incorporated into the interlocal agreement with the Olympia Metropolitan Park District to keep parks funding whole. The language must be adopted before the measure goes to the ballot. He has been involved in many elections and his environmental friends would not vote on a measure that reduces funding for parks and open space. His economic justice friends would not vote for a measure that steals from the poor and gives to the rich. There are many people in the community who will not vote for a big tax or fee increase of any kind. He is frankly hard-pressed to think of who would vote for the proposed measure as written. There is an alternative to the proposal, which is easier and more equitable and it avoids all the problems of this measure. The alternative is a levy lid lift to restore adequate property tax revenue reversing the damage done to the communities by initiatives that the communities did not support. It would generate more funds for fire and more funds for parks, police, and potholes. It requires only a 50% vote, which is the better choice. It is time to park this proposal. Thank you.

**Shirley Erickson** asked about the differences in the FBC for residential categories.

Ms. Reed explained that the residential category includes three classifications. The table was intended to serve as an example of the FBC rate for structures of different sizes. The six homes would fall within one of the three categories. The tables also included FBC rates for each of the two options. She offered to follow-up and clarify the information with Ms.



**OLYMPIA TUMWATER REGIONAL FIRE AUTHORITY PLANNING COMMITTEE  
MINUTES OF VIRTUAL/HYBRID MEETING  
November 14, 2022 Page 9**

Erickson after the meeting.

**Tim Erickson** said he was surprised about the presentation as his intent was to glean some information about the proposal. He and his wife are receiving information about the proposal from *Jolt News* published on the internet. He suggested pursuing efforts to educate the public better. He questioned the lack of information on government buildings and whether the plan includes government buildings for fire protection, as he understood that existing fire protection services are provided to government buildings. He asked whether that would reduce taxpayer costs.

City Manager Burney explained that the City of Olympia currently contracts for fire services with all state agencies in the City. Those contracts are factored within the RFA Plan. The FBCs are reflective of the state contracts currently in place. A future Fire Commission might expand those contracts to other agencies, which could lower the FBC for all categories. Currently, existing contracts are included in the seven-year financial plan and in the FBCs.

Mr. Erickson said he assumes the ladder truck to be assigned to Tumwater would be used for state buildings. City Manager Burney explained that ladder trucks also include specialized equipment in addition to the ladder. Mr. Erickson offered that perhaps state agencies should pay for the ladder truck rather than citizens. He noted that mobile homes are exempt from the FBC and that perhaps they should pay their share as well.

With there being no further public testimony, Vice Chair Huynh closed the public hearing at 6:51 p.m.

**ACTION BY  
COMMITTEE:**

**DETERMINATION  
WHETHER TO  
RECOMMEND RFA  
PLAN FOR  
ADOPTION BY BOTH  
CITIES:**

Vice Chair Huynh invited a motion.

**MOTION:**

**Tumwater Councilmember Eileen Swarthout moved, seconded by Olympia Councilmember Jim Cooper, to recommend the formation of the Olympia Tumwater Fire Authority and to approve the Plan for its operation, governance, and financing including a reasonable fire benefit charge for consideration and legislative action by the Olympia and Tumwater City Councils on December 6, 2022.**

Councilmember Cooper remarked that the cities are in crisis in terms of

**OLYMPIA TUMWATER REGIONAL FIRE AUTHORITY PLANNING COMMITTEE**  
**MINUTES OF VIRTUAL/HYBRID MEETING**  
**November 14, 2022 Page 10**

emergency services as response times are decreasing and the ability to transport people is becoming more difficult each day to the point where the City of Olympia is investing money and time to build transport programs. In response to some of the comments, it is important to have fast and effective public safety services with low response times to the extent possible while also planning for the future. At this time, both cities are not doing a very good job, which speaks to the crux of the conversation. When considering the possibility of delaying or reducing other funding sources because of a mechanism, such as a RFA, those are important conversations, but they are secondary to the ambulance, aid vehicles, or fire engines showing up on time. Bonds can wait and public facility planning and design can be delayed; however, fire engines must arrive on time. Those are situations as the cities are growing in an environment where tax revenues are not keeping pace. It is no longer possible for the cities to provide services as mandated. The RFA proposal is an option that affords both cities a partnership to create an organization that may not save funds, but over the long-term, maintains service level in line with the growth of the cities without severely affecting parks funding. He noted the importance of acknowledging the extent of the work by the Committee to develop equitable rates. The Committee reviewed all options to reduce regressivity to the extent possible and even considered a flat rate per square foot option. Unfortunately, that option has never been tested in the state and the Committee considered the possibility of jeopardizing the new entity if the Committee established a FBC as a flat rate. The proposal includes messaging to the Fire Commission that the issues should be studied to consider the best fire benefit charge in the future. All members have explored ways to reduce regressivity and the inequity of the FBC. Voters in both cities should be proud of their efforts and because of ongoing conversations in both communities around inequities that many people of color face both financially and with the justice system. Those conversations continue to be carried forward by local officials and are manifested in the proposed financial plan. For those reasons, he supports the motion.

Councilmember Althausen echoed similar sentiments especially surrounding the pressing needs of fire and emergency medical services. His concern is how the cities will respond to 911 calls in ten years. When he considered the plan, he considered feedback from the community on how services currently provided are insufficient, and in particular for Tumwater, the array of services are also insufficient as some of those additional services exist in Olympia. Those services are based on proven models. More efforts are required to improve service levels. The cities lack the necessary resources today to meet community needs. The proposal represents an option and a potential future of more and increased service levels for both communities. He believes the Committee completed due diligence to ensure the proposal was equitable to the extent possible. He thanked and acknowledged Councilmembers Cooper, Parshley, and Huynh for their assistance in pursuing a positive conversation. He supports the proposal as it provides

**OLYMPIA TUMWATER REGIONAL FIRE AUTHORITY PLANNING COMMITTEE**  
**MINUTES OF VIRTUAL/HYBRID MEETING**  
**November 14, 2022 Page 11**

voters with a choice for a future scenario to consider.

Councilmember Swarthout thanked and acknowledged the contributions of representatives from the fire unions, as they helped educate the Committee, as well as enabling an understanding by the Committee of the need for a RFA. Both unions voted in support of the RFA proposal. She agreed to the importance of reaching out to the community to respond to questions and conveying the need of providing critical public safety services.

Vice Chair Huynh commented that great comments have been conveyed. She is proud of the efforts by the Committee and the team. The Committee completed good work and shared divergent perspectives that eventually lead to a place that was better than when the process first started. The proposal is not perfect but there was a substantial amount of effort to produce the Plan. Should the RFA be approved by voters, the RFA Commission will continue the work.

**MOTION:**

**The motion carried unanimously.**

Vice Chair Huynh invited closing comments.

Councilmember Althausen thanked staff members and the consultant team for guiding the Committee over the last several years. The work completed on the proposal was a tremendous effort.

Councilmember Cooper thanked staff and the consultant team. The pace of biweekly meetings afforded little time to prepare for the next meeting. Members appreciated increasing the frequency of meetings as it maintained the pace of conversations and enabled a thorough review of the information presented throughout the process.

Vice Chair Huynh acknowledged the contributions and participation of Olympia Councilmember Lisa Parshley and Tumwater Councilmember Leatta Dahlhoff.

Fire Chief Hurley thanked Committee members for all their efforts in developing the proposal. The proposal is a sustainable solution to provide service in the future.

City Manager Burney commented that one of the most difficult tasks is asking communities to tax themselves for services. As a City Manager, his concerns surrounding public safety are the ability to respond on time, save lives, and ensure firefighters go home to their families. Funding levels for jurisdictions are approaching a crisis point and the divide in funding is worsening. It is important to act to ensure the community remains safe.

City Administrator Doan commented on the collaborative nature of both cities working together. The effort is worthy of an article about how both

**OLYMPIA TUMWATER REGIONAL FIRE AUTHORITY PLANNING COMMITTEE**  
**MINUTES OF VIRTUAL/HYBRID MEETING**  
**November 14, 2022 Page 12**

cities shared resources, expertise, and leadership to move the proposal forward.

Vice Chair Huynh advised the public of the availability of the Regional Fire Authority Plan at both cities, as well as on each city's website. Community members can also email each member to receive additional information.

**ADJOURNMENT:**      **With there being no further business, Vice Chair Huynh adjourned the meeting at 7:14 p.m.**

Prepared by Valerie L. Gow, Recording Secretary/President  
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