

'Don't let the door hit you (on the way out)': Passions run high at North Summit

Fire meeting

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Alexander Cramer / KPCW

Isaac Rackliffe addresses a gathering of officials at a meeting to discuss the future of the North Summit Fire District. The entire roster of firefighters remains suspended.

Thursday's public meeting about the North Summit Fire District was not

supposed to be a chance to air grievances. But some residents and Summit County officials offered their unvarnished takes on the problems in the district.

It's been about two weeks since the entire roster of North Summit firefighters was suspended. A public meeting Thursday night was convened to figure out a way forward.

No decisions were made about structural issues like how to staff the district or what happens when the suspension is lifted in early April. A county official outlined potential staffing models, but they weren't discussed in depth. And officials didn't reach a consensus about solutions for — or causes of — the district's underlying issues.

While the meeting was mostly cordial, emotions ran high at times. Some said the suspension made them less safe

Others spoke out against the firefighter who did not respond, while still others passionately defended the North Summit fire service and its volunteers.

County officials have said the suspension came amid a broader effort by firefighters not to sign up for shifts, which they called a boycott. Those defending the firefighters Thursday night said there was no boycott.

According to statistics released at the meeting, from Jan. 1 to Feb. 7, only 44% of North Summit firefighting shifts were filled.

Summit County Councilor Glenn Wright said that level of coverage left North Summit unprotected, and those who did not work should no longer be part of the district.

"As far as the folks who did a work stoppage and precipitated this crisis, if I have anything to say about it,

they will never come back to the department,” Wright said. “Don't let the door hit you in the ass, folks.”

Wright's comments prompted outcries from the audience. Some shouted insults, saying Wright disrespected the volunteer firefighters.

From the back of the room, Hoytsville resident Toby Kershaw asked about the incident that prompted the suspension. He and other commenters alleged the district had told firefighters they couldn't offer medical help when responding to calls. The district denies this.

Kershaw suggested the firefighter who did not respond would not have been able to render aid. Councilor Roger Armstrong replied that the firefighter disobeyed a direct order.

“What are you expecting the firefighters to do? Because

on that. So in the situation of whether that firefighter responded, I know I wouldn't want to be put in that situation of responding to a family in distress on a medical emergency, and my hands are tied that I have no ability to do anything other than show up with an apparatus. What is it that you expect firefighters to do when there's not an ambulance available at the same time?" Kershaw said.

"I expect them to follow the orders of the deputy chief, is what I expect," Armstrong said. "Do you have a different expectation?"

Both sides — those who spoke to defend the firefighters and those who issued the suspension — seemed to agree that fewer people have signed up for shifts in recent years, a trend that was accelerating.

The question is why.

Some county officials said volunteer districts across the country were struggling to fill shifts and that North Summit was experiencing the same challenges.

Some public commenters said the issue was with the district's leadership, specifically referring to the administrative control board. Those commenters said two chiefs have left in quick succession and the turnover and suspension show poor management.

Firefighters have declined to speak on the record, saying they fear reprisal from the board.

Members of the administrative control board said firefighters had never come to them with their issues. Board Member Jim Rees said firefighters instead tried to get the board's attention by refusing to work.

"How can you trust a force that dropped to 44% in six

A separate theme that ran through the meeting focused on emergency response in Tollgate Canyon. Some Tollgate residents said they were begging the Summit County Council to reinstate the first responders who live there and handle emergencies in the remote neighborhood.

Officials seemed amenable to finding a solution to the legal issues they say prevent them from reinstating those responders, though no resolution was reached.

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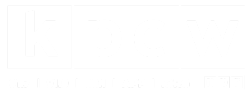


Alexander Cramer

Alexander joined KPCW in 2021 after two years reporting on Summit County for The Park Record. While there, he won many awards for covering issues ranging from school curriculum to East Side legacy agriculture operations to land use disputes. He arrived in Utah by way of

Madison, Wisconsin, and western Massachusetts, with stints living in other areas across the country and world. When not attending a public meeting or trying to figure out what a PID is, Alexander enjoys skiing, reading and watching the Celtics.

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