



**GARY & KAYE
LICHTENSTEIN**

Bluff, UT 84512

Date: May 10, 2026
To: Bluff Town Council
From: Gary Lichtenstein
Cc: Chief Dilego, Erin Nelson
Re: Proposed \$50k Emergency Services Manager

Members of our Town Council (TC) and Bluff Fire know that I have championed building a sustainable fire department for the past two years. I applaud the TC for finally tackling our Fire and EMS challenges. Unfortunately, I believe the TC is leading in the wrong direction, for two reasons.

1. I don't believe that the \$50,000 Property Tax increase addresses the critical problems this town faces regarding Fire and EMS.
2. I believe that the TC goes into this process with insufficient understanding of the laws, policies, and jurisdictional complexities that govern municipal emergency service management.

I explain my reasons below. My experience is with Fire, so I'll focus on that. Many issues also pertain to EMS, but may manifest differently.

1. The Property Tax Increase Won't Address our Most Critical Emergency Services Needs

The Bluff Volunteer Fire Department has operated for over 50 years relying on extraordinary volunteers driven by community pride, a spirit of "giving back," and commitment to the training and discipline required to keep themselves and their comrades safe while serving their neighbors. These qualities still exist, but in Bluff, as with volunteerism nationally, they are eroding. This reality prompted the prior TC administration to forego paying themselves for their service so they could hire community members to do work that in the past was undertaken by volunteers.

I don't question the intention of those on our roster or those contemplating joining the fire department, but those intentions have not always manifested in action. The reality is that about 1/3 of those on our roster regularly attend training and respond to calls. We often roll with two crew members, each taking a different truck. Sometimes we get up to four. We get a lot done with so few people, but we never know if we'll be able to pull together a crew. The most active (and most trained) regular responders are three senior members who are likely to retire over the next year. We do not have a well-trained cadre in the wings to replace them.

Besides recruitment and engagement, Bluff Fire has no regular truck and equipment inspection or maintenance. We used to have volunteers such as Melvin, Jim Hook, and a few others regularly perform truck and equipment maintenance. But not anymore. The County will make major vehicle repairs, but by the time the needs are detected—such as during calls—our safety is already compromised. We have always lacked sufficient equipment, but in the past we have tended to be more aware of our gaps. During a recent training, we discovered that our Brush Truck lacks hoses, nozzles, and fittings needed to respond effectively to wildland or wildland-urban interface incidents. Bluff Fire's capacity to respond is also increasingly challenged by buildings' increased height as well as density.

The town lacks any strategic plan to address these and other issues related to our emergency services infrastructure. Instead, the TC proposes the maximum allowable increase in property taxes to fulfill fire-related administrative tasks. Certainly the fire service has become increasingly bureaucratic, but the primary mission of a fire department is to protect lives and property, not push paper. The TC should be explicit about the proposed job description of the Emergency Services Manager (ESM) and how their responsibilities will directly address our capacity to recruit and engage crew, train them up, keep our trucks safe and equipment working and up-to-date, and ensure effective protection of residents and businesses.

2. Laws, Policies, and Jurisdictional Issues Complicate Local Emergency Services Management

In 2024, as Assistant Chief, I reached out to Steve Helgerson and Ron Clark to work as consultants to BFD to conduct regular vehicle and equipment inspections. I also reached out to Melanie Kranz to take over the bookkeeping. All three were agreeable, but the Mayor would not permit the town's EIN to be used to pay them. BVFD has an EIN, but we couldn't use that either. We learned that because Bluff Fire is technically only a station under the County, if BVFD or the TC expends funds for fire services, it results in our station's bookkeeping taking place off the Department's (i.e. SJC County's) books, which is illegal.

I later found out that paying a fire department officer (e.g., Chief) any meaningful salary can be construed as converting that officer to a professional, thereby causing them to lose their Good Samaritan status under the law. The line is ambiguous, but one document I looked at suggested that incentivizing firefighters with \$500 annually carries the same risk.

I also found out that if a Bluff Fire station officer (e.g., Chief) were to be paid by the Town of Bluff, it has chain-of-command implications that have to be negotiated with as well as blessed by the County. Would there be similar ramifications for a position that was entirely administrative? It's an open question that can only be explored in collaboration with the County, under which Bluff operates. The bottom line is that as far as the County is concerned, Bluff Fire Department is not a department at all; we are not autonomous.

When the TC contemplates instituting an ESM, it risks bumping up against County jurisdictional boundaries or moving towards taking on the liability and perpetual funding of a town fire department. Either way, there are significant issues with substantial implications that require protracted conversations with the County.

The maximum amount of property taxes that Bluff can raise by law, given our current demographics, is \$85,232. The current proposal takes us up to that limit. Furthermore, the total combined tax revenue of the Town of Bluff in FY2025 was \$249,302. The cost of running a sustainable Town of Bluff fire department, which I calculated based on budgets of comparable towns throughout the state, would be about \$228,366, and that excludes certain County offsets.

Key Takeaways

1. The Town of Bluff might or might not need an ESM administrator, but first we need a vision and a strategic plan for how to manage our critical emergency services. We have serious infrastructure challenges in both Fire and EMS and strategizing how we will address them should be our first priority. If we created a plan such that the contemplated position would be an essential first step in rebuilding our Fire and EMS services, residents and business owners might be willing to support it.
2. Bluff TC needs to consider whether to continue as a station under the County or begin building our own Fire and EMS departments. This might not be entirely our decision, but however we decide to proceed must engage County leadership, who currently has jurisdiction.

3. It is entirely feasible for Bluff to support our own Fire Department—it's done in similar jurisdictions across the state. But largely due to lack of tax base and fears about liability and perpetual budgeting responsibility, these departments organize as Service Districts or Special Service Districts (SSD's). My research suggests that an SSD would be an ideal solution. An SSD makes it easy to raise funds without increasing taxes; it frees the town from any fire-related administrative burden; the town has no exposure for general, auto, and personal and property liability; nor is the town responsible for perpetual funding.

However, between continuing as a station under the County and supporting our own department, there may be intermediate alternatives that make BFD effective and sustainable. Same with EMS. But any and all alternatives must be contemplated through discussions with the County, which currently has primary jurisdiction for both.

Bluff Fire and EMS face significant challenges. A proposal to raise property taxes to its highest cap for an administrative position that wouldn't on the face of it substantially impact Fire or EMS operations seems like the wrong starting place. Let's instead take the time to assess and then address strategically the full scope of the emergency services challenges we face as a small, rural, community striving to provide the best medical and fire protection that we can to serve residents, businesses, neighbors, and visitors.