

Erin Nelson

From: Gary Lichtenstein [REDACTED]
Sent: Wednesday, May 27, 2026 7:26 PM
To: Josh Ewing; Jennifer Davila; Britt Hornsby; Gary Haws; Spencer Wade
Cc: Erin Nelson; Dawn Dilego
Subject: Why Bluff Taxes Should Not Fund the Proposed Emergency Services Admin Position

[Please enter into the public record]

Greetings Town Council members,

Over the past few weeks I have applauded the Town Council for tackling Fire and EMS protection in Bluff. I've also argued that the proposed Emergency Services Admin (ESA) position funded by a \$50k property tax increase leads us in the wrong direction. Now I want to tell you why.

First, based on an AI search, I question whether it's even legal for a municipality to raise taxes for a volunteer fire department (and presumably EMS as well) that is under County jurisdiction. This is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to sorting out the jurisdictional issues, which I've mentioned before. Second, the Town Council has only made vague allusions to the role and responsibilities of this position. Even now, a few days before the Town Council votes, we still haven't seen a job description.

My greatest opposition stems from my strong belief that funding this \$50,000 position applies 20th Century thinking to our 21st Century problems. What are those problems?

Some say recruitment is a problem. I disagree. Our Fire Department has about 12 people on the roster, roughly the same as were on the roster when I started in 1998. But in the past, our roster was fairly active. We typically got at least four responders each call, and they were a mix of the entire roster. Our problem today is *engagement*. Of the approximately 12 firefighters currently on our roster, 7 (60%) *rarely or never* respond to calls. We typically get two or three of the same five people, and three of those, including me, will be aging out over the next several months without a well-trained cadre to replace us.

People have excellent reasons for not engaging emergency services, either as rostered volunteers or potential recruits. They are the same reasons people reading this might have: Want to spend time with family; struggle to stay afloat with the high cost of living; no time to train (especially when getting certified takes a minimum of 131 hours for Fire and more for EMS); disinclination to drop whatever you're doing at any time of day or night to respond to a potentially traumatizing, life threatening situation or, alternatively, a mundane one, like traffic control or a lift assist.

The calculus of emergency services volunteering works the same way outside of Bluff as it does in town. For emergency services dependent on volunteers, the decline in volunteerism is a national crisis, especially in small, rural towns throughout Utah and the West. The number of volunteer firefighters nationally has declined 26% since I started in 1998, with precipitous drops during and after COVID. The situation is no different for EMS. Here's a quote from recent publication from the Utah Dept of Public Safety, EMS Division:

"Nobody wants to volunteer anymore and our staff is aging. 85% of our volunteers are age 40+. The certification process to be qualified is lengthy, expensive, and challenging, and is a lot to ask of someone who receives no compensation for it." Clarkson Fire & Rescue, Cache County, UT. *Addressing Critical Issues Affecting Rural EMS Agencies*. February 2025.

We have other significant challenges. Funding is a big one. Federal funding for volunteer emergency services has decreased over \$1.464 billion over the past 2 years, causing drastic reductions or elimination of *State Fire Capacity Grants, Volunteer Fire Capacity Grants, USDA Rural Development Community*

Facilities Grant & Loan Program, Community Development Block Grants and the Overall FEMA Budget. At the same time, cost for equipment continues to rise due to increasingly expensive materials, technologies, and transportation costs.

Locally, our County struggles to support even the basics for Fire and EMS. Up until the early 2000's, Bluff Fire raised over \$1.1M in grants. Grants have become increasingly difficult due to shrinking dollars and increased competitiveness from professional grant writers working for equipment companies. In any case, you can't pay on-going operational and administrative expenses with grant funds.

These are just two examples of pervasive, persistent, extremely challenging problems facing Fire and EMS in Bluff that were not on the horizon at the turn of the century. In Bluff and nationally, the paradigm of an emergency services system dependent on volunteers has run its course. Our 21st Century problems cannot be solved by doing what we've always done to run Fire and EMS in Bluff, or even within the County.

Departments throughout the West facing the same 21st Century challenges that we are--with similar populations and tax bases—are innovating solutions. Blanding is one of them. The County is as well, through discussions with UNHS and the Navajo Nation. That's where our efforts should be going, building strategic partnerships that provide opportunities we haven't yet explored. I have advocated for such conversations and strategic planning for the past two years. I still see opportunities that haven't been available previously. Let this be the administration that pursues them.

Bluff is full of forward-thinkers and social entrepreneurs. So let's put our heads together to solve the real problems that hinder our emergency services. Living in a town in which the average age is 68 years (compared to 35 for the rest of the County) as well as having among the highest home values in the County, we arguably have a an greater need than other jurisdictions to design durable solutions to developing and maintaining reliable and trained emergency responders and supporting them with sustainable funding.

I urge this Town Council to reject the ordinary solution to raise taxes to fund an ill-formed position with questionable value and impact. Instead, let's do the extraordinary: Initiate efforts to strategically design effective and sustainable Fire and EMS solutions that solve 21st Century problems in ways that leverage our unique circumstances and meet our unique needs.

Sincerely,
Gary Lichtenstein
Bluff Resident