

**Title for Posting to Nextdoor:  
VOTE TUESDAY 2 MAY 2023 (DEVANEY AND WOODS STRONGLY  
RECOMMENDED)**

Dear friends,

I rarely contribute to this forum, but am writing at length in advance of the Elk Creek Fire-Protection District (ECFPD)'s Board of Directors election this coming Tuesday 2 May 2023 (in person 7 AM to 7 PM at ECFPD Station 1, located at 11993 Blackfoot Road in Conifer, CO. It is too late to vote absentee.) I am quite concerned about these elections and the possible knock-on effects of the election's results.

What I am attempting to do here is provide some context as well as some checks on both facts and overall reality – there have been some odd verging on wild claims made by some of the candidates for the ECFPD Board of Directors. I will also make clear what is fact, what is claim by others (often without substance), and what is my own opinion.

**WHO THE HECK AM I (and why might you listen to me as a result)?**

My name is Philip 'Flip' Koch. I reside in ECFPD, am a graduate of the Conifer Fire Academy (2018), and am honored to be among ECFPD's volunteers – a role I play and have played for nearly five and a half years. I am NOT, however, speaking in any fashion on ECFPD's behalf, but what follows is heavily informed by my experiences there – experiences that are current and have history. (I also am not a newbie: I have over four decades of simultaneous business, teaching, and volunteer experience in other arenas.)

In addition to my personal experience, my analysis also relies on information from the candidates themselves, information that is very much in the public domain (notably the candidate forum held by 5 of the 6 them on 6 April 2023, and available to you on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3BL2eW3QR7E>).

**BOTTOM LINE (for those who don't want any details):**

On Tuesday, I intend to vote enthusiastically for **Dominique Devaney** and incumbent **Sharon Woods** to be members of the ECFPD Board of Directors. I shall also vote for incumbent **Charles 'Chuck' Newby**, but with less eagerness. I encourage you to vote similarly (especially for the first two).

**SETTING THE SCENE – 'THE GAME IS AFOOT':**

There is a long game being played here. It may not be apparent, but your votes on Tuesday constitute the first move in this game and, depending upon how you vote, this may also be your last allowed move. The stakes in this game are your health and safety and those of the other members of your household and community – so good luck (and hey – no pressure)!

Interested? Please read on...

## **WHAT IS THE BIG PICTURE? (What does ECFPD actually do, and how does it do it?)**

The Members of ECFPD answer any 911 call in district that is not 100% law enforcement (LE). We also answer many calls together with LE, provide assistance of all kinds to adjacent fire-protection districts (FPDs), and exceptionally will send people and equipment on wildland fires across the US – especially in the Rocky Mountain states (most notably here in Colorado.) Most of our calls (roughly 2/3) are medical in nature, but many involve, among other incidents, motor-vehicle accidents or what worries most of us living here the most (or should): fires – especially wildland fires (commonly known as ‘wildfires’).

ECFPD is a ‘combination’ FPD, meaning that some of us (about 1/3) are salaried to do this work, and others of us (about 2/3) volunteer. We are all of us professionals and trained to the same levels of proficiency in all domains: were it different, volunteers would in fact be a burden rather than a help during emergency incidents. (I can point to some examples of that elsewhere, but won’t do so here and now.)

ECFPD is a Title 32 Colorado Special District (see Colorado Revised Statutes § 32-1-101 (2018)) and is governed by a Board of Directors with 5 members, each of whom we the registered, voting-age adults in district (the ones who actually cast votes) elect. Of these 5 positions on ECFPD’s Board, 3 are up for grabs on Tuesday. Consequently, the majority voting-block in any ECFPD-Board decision might be decided this coming Tuesday.

Voter turnout in the previous election for Directors of ECFPD’s Board was exceedingly low (3%) and resulted in an actual tie for one office. Per Colorado election convention, the winner was ultimately determined by a coin flip that ‘elected’ Charles ‘Chuck’ Newby to office. (That’s one heck of a way to run a democracy, folks: PLEASE GO TO THE POLLS AND VOTE ON TUESDAY!!!!!!)

Not up for vote on Tuesday, but lurking in the somewhat longer term, is the matter of ECFPD’s possible consolidation with neighboring North Fork and Inter Canyon FPDs. The ECFPD Board of Directors resulting from Tuesday’s election will consider this consolidation (or at least ECFPD’s part of it) and may choose to place one or more related proposals for voter approval (or rejection) in later elections. If this happens, the ballot initiative(s) likely will appear this coming November in all three FPDs, and could amount to as little as combining administrative services or be as complete as a full merger of all three of these FPDs.

Since the default is to maintain the 3 FPDs as they are, for ‘we the people’ to have a say in the consolidation matter (by voting for or against whatever is proposed) requires Directors on the ECFPD Board willing to bring an intelligent ballot measure forward for our vote. As several of Tuesday’s candidates are on record as opposing any form of consolidation, they could, if elected, in essence ‘pocket veto’ the idea by never bringing it forward.

That is 'game over'.

## **FACT AND CLAIM CHECKING (AS WELL AS OPINION SHARING)**

### **Consolidation Is a Good Idea – My Opinion**

I have read all of the much-quoted consultant's report re consolidation (see [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1\\_glsc1p2CqEbssowcaCuG4svJ9fFm6bN/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_glsc1p2CqEbssowcaCuG4svJ9fFm6bN/view)) and let me state my prejudice in the matter quite clearly: I strongly favor the consolidation of these 3 FPDs all the way to their full merger. (So do the fire chiefs of these three FPDs, at least two of whom will lose their leading roles if merger occurs.) I have no economic incentive to recommend this (I'm a homeowner, taxpayer, and a volunteer – all in ECFPD), yet I do say this because I believe that administrative economies will result and, more importantly for those of us who reside here, better and more timely services also will result – including for those of us in ECFPD (despite assertions to the contrary by certain candidates).

Why do I say this? I have studied business (extensively) and have myself been through multiple mergers and acquisitions, most of these in a Fortune 5 company and, while mergers are no cure-all for organizational problems, when done well, and in the long run, they invariably result in reduced overall administrative operating cost. As for better and more timely service, the merger proposal (if it is ever made and approved) would augment, in the three FPDs considering consolidation, the number of fire stations staffed 24 / 7 / 365 from one (in ECFPD) to three. If you want quick response to emergencies, you need to have people near enough to the incident and very, very near to the appropriate equipment (and both trained and ready to use this). The only practical way to accomplish this objective in our remote, mountainous, and spread-out area is to have fire stations that are strategically located and are staffed around the clock – for all intents and purposes, that means having people paid to do this. (Volunteers are unlikely to be able to make such commitments of time and location, and if I, as a volunteer, respond from my home, unless I have by chance taken the right vehicle there with me – thus making it unavailable to anyone else – it takes me 12-15 extra minutes to get from my home to my nearest fire station where I might get the correct apparatus and then proceed to the incident. If your home or woods are on fire or you and your loved ones are unable to exit a smashed and overturned vehicle in the middle of US-285 or you are having a heart attack or a stroke, you CANNOT afford to wait that extra time for someone trained and equipped to arrive first on scene. We volunteers could all respond from home with apparatus, but ECFPD doesn't have as many apparatus as we have volunteers qualified to operate them and willing to take them home to use them, if responding to a call. And to acquire and maintain that much equipment would be VERY expensive, indeed.)

Among the advantages of merger would be several operational matters. For example, within the same FPD all personnel are automatically aware of every call in-play in their FPD (not the case today between FPDs), and can coordinate between the staffed stations and volunteers without having to go back to dispatch, request help from another FPD, confirm with dispatch that help is coming, switch frequencies of FPD-radio

transmission, coordinate with incoming personnel, etc. It is operationally simpler, more straightforward, and most importantly response can be faster if we are all in the same FPD – and in many if not most emergencies, time often makes the difference between life and death.

So, in my personal and professional opinion, as residents of all three FPDs (including ECFPD), we would all be better served as a result of such a merger.

### **Dominique Devaney and Sharon Woods Are by Far the Best Candidates on the Ballot – My Opinion**

Each of these women is level-headed, open-minded, thoughtful, experienced, well-informed, fiscally knowledgeable (as well as responsible), listens well, and is attentive to and places first (and foremost) the needs of those served by ECFPD. They do so with humility and without either grandstanding or political axes to grind. (I cannot say this about some other candidates on Tuesday's ballot.)

### **Charles Newby is the Least Objectionable Third Candidate – My Opinion**

While I intend to vote for Chuck Newby, I do this because I find each of the other candidates more worrisome. Among these other three are some talented persons who might be suitable for the role of ECFPD-Board Director one day, but today have deficiencies in prior and current experience and understanding of what ECFPD does as well as failures to appear and to 'do their homework' about ECFPD.

Directors on ECFPD's Board fundamentally oversee the management of ECFPD. As a very experienced manager I can assure you that, no matter your talent or knowledge of correlative fields, it is not possible to manage or oversee the management of something that you do not fundamentally understand well.

To my knowledge, **Shannon Peterson** has never attended an ECFPD Board of Directors meeting (unless he was present at the most recent, fractious one, which I was unable to attend), did not attend the candidate forum, is new to this district, has no connection to ECFPD, and yet wants to help run it. That inspires no confidence here with me.

**Todd Wagner** has prior ECFPD experience, but it is rather dated. So is his model of how to staff this FPD: if you as a resident want the level of service you have come to expect from ECFPD, the days of relying exclusively or even primarily on volunteers are long gone – and very unlikely ever to return. Mr. Wagner also suggested that ECFPD 1) should allow volunteers in a subset of the services it performs (EMS vs. firefighting, for example: ECFPD already does this), 2) paid \$150,000 for a chipping truck (it paid \$111,000 and will be reimbursed for half of that), and 3) also should hire a full-time mechanic. This last is indeed a great idea – such a good idea that it was implemented at ECFPD over a year ago. (This talented mechanic's name is Adam Hojnowski.) These are honest mistakes by Mr. Wagner, perhaps, but do you want someone who doesn't check his facts advising how ECFPD ought to be run? I don't.

Mr. Wagner's odd preference for exclusive or at least primary reliance on volunteers seems to be shared by **Debra 'Deb' MacPhee**. While her backgrounds in the law and accounting are no doubt useful, to my knowledge, she has no prior fire experience (other than reading a consultants' report) and attended her first ECFPD Board of Directors meeting moments before filing as a candidate in this upcoming Tuesday's election. While she is correct that a merger of the 3 FPDs would not by its approval alone create new physical assets, new assets are planned with resultant costs: staffing two fire stations (likely one each in what are today the two current FPDs other than ECFPD) around the clock for the first time will cost a significant amount in new salaries and in making these facilities suitable to such full-time service. (You cannot live for long in a fire-equipment barn.) Her claim that there is more than a single call in-district only 7% of the time is patently incorrect: that number at ECFPD is 36.6% (more than one third. ECFPD alone has had days when it responded to upwards of 30 calls: imagine how many volunteers and other resources that requires! While that is truly unusual, running on 2 or even 4 calls at once is not.) Such synchronous calls are among the reasons we require 'surplus' staff and equipment beyond what can be utilized by the paid shift-staff who are present on any given day. Staffing such 'extra' but essential equipment is one of the key roles played at the present time by our volunteers. And, when not on calls during daylight hours, ECFPD paid-staff are not twiddling their thumbs at the fire station waiting for something to happen: they and volunteers are training, maintaining equipment, and doing essential administrative work (much of it required by law and regulation).

**Volunteers are Treated Less Well and Have Fewer Opportunities Than Do Paid Personnel – Claim by Todd Wagner and Debra McPhee (mostly after the consultants' report)**

While I have heard tales of this from the distant past, this has not been my experience during the past 5+ years, nor do I know ANY current Member of the department (salaried or volunteer) who has experienced or would say otherwise about the recent past. I attest that Elk Creek Fire is not perfect, but it is collaborative, supportive, focused, responsible (generally as well as fiscally), disciplined, and well run.

And all 'Members' (paid and volunteer) who are listening receive news of each incoming call: the volunteer opportunity is ever-present, and it is to respond to these calls. (Nobody solicits you – you volunteer, for heaven's sake.) What would encourage more such participation is an important but much longer conversation, and if motives to do so don't include service to the community and learning high on the list of reasons to volunteer, then that volunteer is lost from the start.

Let's retire this old saw of tension between paid and volunteer staff and stop revisiting fights past by apparently bitter and divisive persons long gone and not missed – shall we?

### **More Volunteers are Available Among Tradespeople – Claim by Todd Wagner, Debra MacPhee, and Chuck Newby**

This assertion can only be made by someone who either doesn't know how tradespeople work or has a naïve understanding of what a call is like at ECFPD (or both).

When a call 'drops' at ECFPD, call time until you are free to go about your business again (on shift or back in your normal life) could take a few minutes (a false alarm, for example) or could take days (a wildland fire, for example). Typically, the dislocation to one's schedule (call start to call finish) is of the order of multiple hours. If you are in the trades, even if self-employed, when you are away from your work, you are not earning income. Few tradespeople can afford this (certainly no tradesperson in my family can). Similarly, if you as a customer of such a tradesperson are being 'helped' by someone who downs tools and disappears for the rest of the day leaving say, your water or heat off because volunteering in an emergency at ECFPD, are you going to be a satisfied customer? Even if civically minded, I believe the answer generally will be 'no'.

Of the 'bumper crop' of 5 firefighters / rescuers / EMS personnel from my 2018 Fire Academy who still participate at ECFPD (there are zero from 2017 and 2019, BTW), exactly none of us is a tradesperson. This doesn't mean that there are no tradespeople suitable to be ECFPD volunteers, only that I don't know that many who have chosen and continue to participate.

We need to look much more broadly than tradespeople: they are not 'the' solution to sourcing volunteers in- or out-of-district. And yes, volunteer retention is a huge issue – one at least as thorny as attracting volunteers in the first place, but that also is well beyond the scope of this essay. These are problems in ALL arenas of volunteerism in today's United States, not just the fire service or ECFPD.

### **Property Taxes Will Go Up if the FPDs Consolidate – Claim by Debra MacPhee**

Property taxes go up for two main reasons: appreciation in the value of a property and an increase in its tax (mill-levee) rate. ECFPD and its Board of Directors cannot accomplish either of these things, and voters have no direct control on the former. Voters do have a direct say in the latter, and no such tax increase can be made without formal voter OK (through a ballot initiative not on Tuesday's ballot).

The famous consultants' 'Cooperative services feasibility' study included a survey asking residents about the possibility of an increased mill levee. The vast majority of respondents living in the 3 FPDs indicated, among other things, that they would be willing to be taxed significantly more highly to receive better fire (including wildland fire), rescue, and EMS services. That doesn't mean that such tax increases should be unjustified, but as a fellow ECFPD resident and taxpayer, I broadly agree with the idea of paying some more to receive more and more timely emergency services.

As with so many things in life, it is about balancing associated risk and attendant reward and cost. This cost will depend upon what is proposed but, in the case of a full merger,

is of the order of the cost of a few cups of coffee per month. I'm willing to pay that for improved service – which is the reward. (The estimated monthly increase in property tax for the 3.5 mill increase proposed for ECFPD is just over \$13 for a residence whose market value is \$650,000. If you want to see what difference it would make to the property taxes on your own home, go to <https://www.mountainfireresources.com/tax-calculator/elk-creek>.)

In the end, it will be up to those of us who vote to decide about a possible mill-levy increase (if asked), but that is not what is on Tuesday's ballot. Selecting informed, civically-minded people who will represent and serve us well (including bringing us key matters for our approval as voters) IS on Tuesday's ballot: please go to the polls and select wisely. I am selecting Devaney, Woods, and Newby.

Be well. Stay safe. Enjoy today!

Firefighter Philp S. 'Flip' Koch –  
a proud resident and volunteer Member of ECFPD