



City of Bellingham-Whatcom County Fire District 8 Regional Fire Authority Planning Committee Meeting Minutes for July 20, 2026



Committee Members Present:

Roger Buswell, Whatcom County Fire District 8 Commissioner

Dan Hammill, City of Bellingham Council Member

Michael Lilliquist, City of Bellingham Council Member

Kim Lund, City of Bellingham Mayor

Robert Neher, Whatcom County Fire District 8 Commissioner

Sheena Williams, Whatcom County Fire District 8 Commissioner

City of Bellingham Staff, Officials, and Others Present:

Andy Asbjornsen, Finance Department Head

Bill Hewett, Fire Chief

Christopher Hughes, Fire Systems Analyst

Forrest Longman, Deputy City Administrator

Rod Topel, RFA Project Manager

1. Welcome and introductions

Mayor Lund called the meeting to order at 2:01 p.m.

2. Minutes review

Action:

Council Member Dan Hammill moved to approve the 7.6.26 minutes. Commissioner Roger Buswell seconded the motion. Motion passed 6-0.

3. RFA Benefit Charge, total amount of revenue to collect and introduction to Appendix E content

Fire Chief Bill Hewett gave an overview of the expected RFA expenses and revenues, which concluded that about \$21.5 million would be needed from the fire benefit charge. Chris Hughes reviewed the Fire Benefit Charge estimator tool, which includes a formula established by the legislature. Certain factors can be changed to alter how much is paid by different tax payer groups, but the total will remain the same. Members discussed:

- Policy decisions they can make and how the factors could be altered.
- Scenarios that had been run before coming up with the numbers presented.



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- Considerations to think about when making changes, such as assessed value, square footage, housing affordability, what collected money will be used for, etc.
- Possibility of tiering the residential category based on square footage, which would be possible, but with a number of complicating factors, such as types of structures to be considered in the square footage.
- Benefits of keeping the calculations relatively simple, compared with creating more categories and more tiers.
 - Other agencies who have gone through this process have advised to not get too complicated on the risk factors in the beginning.
- Alternative ways to use actual risk to determine fees rather than square footage, similar to how an insurance company may do it. The insurance industry would have more detailed risk calculations, but they are not required to share that information with the City or the fire authority. Those companies also rely heavily on occupancy and square footage in their assessments.
 - Idea of using data from calls for service was also suggested. Chief Hewett said that more calls are in residential properties, but those properties also represent the majority of parcels in the city. Fires in commercial structures typically take more effort to control.
- This is a starting point. Ultimately the board of the RFA will have an opportunity to make changes each year as lessons are learned, conditions change, or more information becomes available.
- Which kind of properties would be exempt and the committee or board's ability to override an exemption.
- How the commercial buildings are tiered and if it is a fair scaling.
- Members expressed a desire to reduce impact on residential and small businesses. Housing affordability and job creation are both important considerations.
- Financial impact to a median homeowner and the City's budget.
- Without the FBC, there will not be enough money to make the RFA successful.
 - Every six years, the FBC would go to the voters, commissioners will set the actual charge yearly.

At the conclusion of the discussion, Chief Hewett stated that he will do more research on insurance risk factors, tiers for residential properties, and ability to consider storage buildings separately from residences.



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4. Plan Document Draft – Introduction

Rod Topel explained that this section has been reviewed by legal, but section 6 is still a work in progress that needs to be addressed by the committee. He suggested that members take time to carefully look over the document before the next meeting. Each section has been seen by members, but revisions have been made to get it into a more final form, including revisions that take into account members' feedback.

5. Public comment

One person gave public comment.

6. Next meeting

The next meeting is scheduled for August 3, 2026.

7. Adjournment

Mayor Lund adjourned the meeting at 3:42 p.m.