



MINUTES – May 5, 2025 – 1:00 PM
BENTON COUNTY EMERGENCY SERVICES EXECUTIVE BOARD
INDEPENDENCE WORKSHOP SPECIAL MEETING
Richland Public Library ~ 955 Northgate Drive
Richland, WA 99352

The workshop began at 1:15 p.m.

Attendance

Members

*Stephen Bauman

Franklin County (2 Votes)

*Matt Rasmussen *Remote (In for Michael Alvarez)*

Benton County (2 Votes)

Erin Erdman

City of Kennewick (2 Votes)

Kevin Crowley

City of Pasco (2 Votes)

Jon Amundson

City of Richland (2 Votes)

Erin Gwinn *(In for Brent Gerry)*

City of West Richland (1 Vote)

Absent

Michael Alvarez

Benton County (2 Votes)

Brent Gerry

City of West Richland (1 Vote)

Rachel Shaw

City of Prosser (1 Vote)

Bill Reed

City of Benton City (1 Vote)

Paul Carlyle

Benton County Fire Districts (1 Vote)

Also Present: BCES Executive Director *Jay Atwood; SECOMM Manager *Kim Lettrick; Emergency Management Manager *Deanna Davis; Richland IT Operations & Services Supervisor Blayne Smith; SECOMM Dispatch Lead *Tim Harter; Accounting Specialist *Jordan George; Administrative Assistant/Board Secretary Carole Cimrhakl

Other Attendees: Stuart Consulting Group, Inc. President *Dr. De Hicks; Stuart Consulting Group, Inc. Vice President *Donnie Quitugua; Franklin County IS Assistant Director Michael Namchek; *Connell Police Chief Chris Lee; Richland Fire Chief Tom Huntington; Benton County Fire District 1 Chief Scott LoParco; Kennewick Police Chief *Chris Guererro; Kennewick Fire Chief *Chad Michael; Kennewick Finance Director Jessica Platt; Pasco Police Chief *Ken Roske; Richland Finance Director Brandon Allen; Richland Police Chief Martin Pilcher; Richland Deputy Fire Chief *Randy Aust

**Task Force Member*

Items of Business

I. Introduction of Stuart Consulting Services, Inc.

Dr. De Hicks introduced himself and Mr. Donnie Quitugua. They have worked with communications centers for about thirty (30) years. Their objective is to get attendees up to speed with the Task Force regarding decisions or the recommendations that have already been made around structure, governance, and what it would look like for the organization to become independent both financially and structurally to meet public safety needs.

The legal structure could evolve quickly but funding models have been difficult to nail down as some agencies see their costs go down while others see huge increases. It has proven difficult to find a simple, predictable, and equitable method.

2. 2026 BCES Stand-Alone Agency Budget – Overview

Three options were presented with discussion on fee structures and what a fair methodology might look like. Should it be a flat rate? Should owners (the Big 5) pay one rate with contracted and user agencies paying a higher rate or do we look at some other methodology for billing?

Even in a model where nothing changes, the city of Kennewick would still realize nearly a \$500,000 dollar increase in their annual assessments for dispatch services, plus the \$800,000-ish dollars for their portion of the radio system payment that is due next year in addition to about a half million that will be due in microwave assessments. A two (2) million dollar increase for 2026 is a lot of money to find to support these expenses.

Perhaps the discussion should be driven around what we want to see the independent agency look like. We can focus later on how we put together our billing methodology. We know that moving to independence hinges on sustainable funding.

Becoming independent gives us the ability to go after the one-tenth sales tax that can pay for CAD, RMS, radio system, infrastructure and maintenance, and the technicians to service that. The only thing it doesn't pay for is dispatchers and paying for dispatch labor is significantly less and much easier to fund.

3. Proposed Staffing

Positions that we anticipate we will need, positions we have already added, and positions we will need regardless of independence:

Finance Manager – likely need for independence

Accountant (upgrade) – needs to happen regardless of independence

HR Manager & Generalist – most likely will need a manager for independence but could function with a capable Generalist

IT Network Admin – we think we should add as the former BCES IT Department was seriously overloaded but don't have to fill currently

IT Network Admin (upgrade) – currently an open, budgeted position to be filled soon

Communications Technician – as we assume responsibility for the radio system, this is a necessary position regardless of independence

GIS Analyst (upgrade) – the GIS position has already been upgraded to the analyst position

Communications Supervisor – (x2) these positions had been cut years ago but the need exists to reinstitute both positions now

The positions needed for independence were figured using mid-level salaries. If we moved to independence, additional positions would likely be added using a phased approach and would not necessarily be all new money.

4. Assessment Methodology – Recommendation

Attendees agreed to push forward with independence. The next step would be to have the counties create the charter that creates the regional authority and then appoint the board (the Big 5) and have a go live date with ILA's to bridge. This allows us to prepare for a tax initiative that would potentially fund the entire organization. The new board would then be able to decide what the pathway forward is for future fee structures.

We also need to analyze how much tax is needed before asking the public to support it and identify when the best time is to make the ask. The group agreed that we should give plenty of time to educate the public to pass the initiative. The tax would provide enough money to take the current delta of approximately \$8 million down to about \$1 million, making it much easier to fund going forward. It also would allow us to build capital for future needs.

Final takeaways:

Push towards independence, work on the charter and a date for go-live. The governance structure is built around the Big 5 who make up the Board. The Board is a County Administrator from each county and the three City Managers, one each from Kennewick, Pasco, and Richland. There are two advisory groups under the board: The SAT (Strategic Advisory Team) made up of both Law and Fire Chiefs & Sheriffs, and the Finance Advisory Team. A future third advisory group may be a technical advisory group.

The Board's job is strategic plans to approve and hold accountable, to manage the Executive Director and to take advice on policy changes stemming from operations.

County Commissioners can change the details of a charter, including dismantling it. Things would go back to where they were before. The ILA could state the agency would operate "as is" until the tax passes. Educating the public is key to passing the tax.

The next Task Force meeting will focus on branding the new organization, look at boilerplate of the charter to get input and feedback, and how to prepare for the tax initiative.

A discussion was held in April with Emergency Management from both counties with the recommendation to keep things "as is" with Benton County EM to stay within the organization and Franklin County EM to remain independent for now until there is some compelling reason to change.

Adjournment

The workshop adjourned at 3:24 p.m.

APPROVED:



Jon Amundson, BCES Executive Board Chair

ATTEST:



Carole Cimrhakl, BCES Board Secretary

Date Approved: May 22, 2025

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