

## HAPPY NEW YEAR HAWK TALK

2006 may be in our collective rearview mirror, but turbulence in the local news world will carry over into the new year in a big way. So allow me to ponder and meander a bit as we ease into 2007. The distractions of the Holidays temporarily smothered the flickering flame of various Hualapai Valley Fire District meltdowns, but the embers will soon be stoked into fully involved controversial conflagrations. That's where I'll start.  
MERGER MADNESS?

Only time will tell if the consolidation of the Hualapai and Valle Vista Fire Districts is a good idea. If it brings about an enhancement in the public safety arena, some injuries are minimized and some lives are saved--Hallelujah!

In many ways the pooling of resources and savings associated with supposed reduction in administrative overhead achieved through merger makes great sense. Economies of scale, bigger bang for the buck and so on and so forth. I get it.

I don't live in either of the soon-to-be wed Fire Districts. But if I did, I'd be asking some questions. Consider that both Districts operate on budgets where tax levies are set at, or near, the highest allowed under Arizona law. So how might that change through merger?

Hualapai Chief Wayne Eder and Valle Vista Chief Victor Riccardi and the members of the Boards that employ them have not answered the question. "It's possible, but there's no guarantee," has been their sort of collective response.

They've offered the same response to the question of whether residents in the merged Districts, particularly Valle Vista, might benefit from lowered private property insurance premiums through consolidation.

Valle Vista Board member Gene Newman has said the possibility of improved service, lower levies and reduced insurance is a chance that both Boards and Districts must take--a sort of a calculated gamble. Some might say educated guessing is a factor in the management of anything while others might argue you shouldn't "roll the dice" when it comes to public safety.

And I understand that just because nothing in life is guaranteed doesn't

mean you don't live it.

Yet I wonder why Hualapai District residents aren't questioning why it should reach all the way out to Valle Vista to take in a smaller fire district with its undisputed challenges in terms of resources and remote location. And I wonder why residents of Valle Vista would want any part of the dark cloud we're told that hangs over the head of the Hualapai District and its embattled Chief.

## PENDING UNION

As they prepare to take their vows at the altar we must ask ourselves if the marriage of these two fire districts is "for Eder or worse" (pun fully intended, of course). Chief Wayne Eder, after all, is accused of extorting an unnecessary fire hose purchase from a local school district and bullying businesses and entities within his fire fiefdom in similar fashion.

From the cauldron of controversy bubble allegations of wrongful termination, misappropriation and document falsification---all by the hand of Chief Eder. But what's true and what's not and where's the proof? We look for answers in 2007.

## A TAPESTRY OF APATHY?

Where are the people of the Districts? Issues exposed and questions raised in this editorial enterprise have filled radio airwaves and newspaper column inches for weeks. Compelling stuff it seems to me. But the common citizens, for the most part, have at least been uninvolved if not unconcerned.

Only a handful of your basic everyday residents have taken an interest in the merger mayhem. Good for them, but what gives with the others? Are they unaware, uninformed or uncaring? Perhaps they support the merger and choose not to involve themselves in the quibbling. Maybe they simply entrust the people they elected to make the decisions.

## THE PLAYERS

If not the general citizenry, it's been professional firefighters who've been the most volatile and vocal in questioning the merger. And, yes, they concede, many of them are members of a union working for the ouster of Chief Eder.

Led by President Robert Borker, they've charged that 33 of their "brothers" have been fired or forced to resign during Chief Eder's three year tenure. A fair-minded member of the media or general public must ask if their principle motivation is public safety or headhunting.

Those possibilities are not necessarily mutually exclusive. I'm sure that Borker's boys would argue they're headhunting in the interest of public safety.

## TAKE OFF THE MUZZLE

Have they been gagged by their lawyers? Chief Eder, Chairman Patti Lewis and her fellow Hualapai Valley Fire District Board members have declined numerous invitations to respond to questions regarding the various issues and controversies. That's especially uncharacteristic of Eder and Lewis who've staged fierce fights over the years in the public domain. Strange that they don't step up to defend themselves or their District.

It's possible they've been instructed by legal counsel not to address the press and their inquiries. It's possible they don't care for the press, myself in particular.

That does not excuse them from their duty and accountability to the people they serve. And like it or not, the press, myself and other members, are an important link between elected and appointed officials and the taxpayers---all of you.

I'll accept the premise that the fire hose stuff is something they don't care to talk about. But what about levies and insurance, alleged misappropriation and document falsification and personell turnover that seems distinctly abnormal?

I say it's time they unmuzzle themselves and answer legitimate questions.

## COMING ATTRACTIONS

#1) Hualapai District Board members have appointed two of their own to look into the "hose hassle" but clearly they so far have sided with the Chief and his contention he did nothing wrong in getting the school district to cough up \$3,800 for fire hose for the district. While the "fox guarding the

henhouse" maxim might apply when investigating oneself, we can look to state officials for an independent review of the matter. Or can we?

State Fire Marshall John Rowlinson has said he or his staffers will visit the North Kingman High School Campus early this year to conduct an inspection that would theoretically include a review of Chief Eder's assessment of need of additional fire hose. At the same time, more than twenty years experience in this news market conjures up numerous examples and memories wherein the powers that be in Phoenix have looked the other way to steer clear of local politics whenever and wherever possible.

#2) Lawsuit(s). For weeks we've been hearing from union members that wrongful termination litigation naming Chief Eder and the Fire District is forthcoming. Nothing yet, but the new year is only beginning and I don't think they're blowing smoke.

#3) Recall(s). It appears a drive will be launched to recall fire district board members over the merger and possibly other matters. But that can't happen until after the joint board meeting.

#4) Members of both boards are tentatively scheduled to meet January 10. Attorneys have indicated that the law requires that three of the five members of the Hualapai Board and two members of the Valle Vista Board be appointed to an interim board that will oversee the merged districts.

I think it likely that the new board will consist of the most active and vocal of the two panels--- Lewis, Ed Schrum and Fred Bunge from Hualapai and Newman and Roger Leggett from Valle Vista.

#5 The naming. The newly formed Board gets to name the newly merged district. During one recent board meeting someone slipped, and by mistake I'm sure, used the term "Victor Vista". Surely, they won't choose that name as Chief Riccardi has made no bones about his plans to retire in the near future.

Surprisingly, an invitation to people in my e-mail address book to nominate names for the new district drew no- that's right- zero responses. After pondering the possibilities of the EEFD---the Extort and Extinguish Fire District, Hose Heaven and Patti's Place, I instead settled for a more mellow alternative and personally offer the nomination of "Wayne's World"

for the newly merged district.

## REJECTED RECALLS

2006 ends with the second failed effort to gather sufficient valid signatures to give the electorate a chance to recall a Kingman Council member who has declined public calls for his resignation. The petition drive was haphazard at best, and any review of the signatures was handled in sloppy fashion—hence, two failed recall missions.

I wonder if a better managed drive would have pushed the recall to the ballot this spring or if the general public is simply pleased with Tom Spear's unquestioned public service. We probably will not learn the answer to that question.

And only a handful of us know the identity of the credible candidate who anonymously waited in the wings to challenge Spear had his proposed ouster been placed before the electorate. And we won't know the outcome of that potential ballot brawl.

We will, however, someday in the future, learn if Spear will seek another term of office in the spring election cycle of 2008.

## RAID REFERENDUM(S)

While 2006 ends in a recall failure, 2007 begins with the referendum effort led by a new group called "RAID"—Residents Against Irresponsible Development. We journalists love a little pot-stirring now and then and I expect RAID will do just that this year.

RAID's first referendum effort targets Kingman Council approved rezoning for a stripmall off Airway Avenue. But the group promises to fight other battles and serve as a watchdog.

If at all successful, look for RAID to receive a backlash from the business community—dirt merchants, realtors, developers and the like. 2007 should provide a glimpse of whether RAID is perceived as a thought and debate-provoking community conscience, or a band of anti

development rebels.

STAY TUNED AND HAPPY NEW YEAR EVERYONE!