

ALLEGATIONS TRADED AS BICKERING BOARDS MEET AT FIRE STATION
HOSE AND HYDRANT AND ATTITUDE DEBATED

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THE STANDARD
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Hualapai Valley Fire District officials turned the tables on their accusing Kingman Unified School District (KUSD) counterparts during a December 7 joint meeting at Hualapai Fire Station #1. KUSD officials who requested the meeting to allege wrongdoing by Hualapai Valley Fire Chief Wayne Eder were caught off guard by Fire District allegations that they don't have proper permits for modular buildings housing hundreds of students at the north Kingman High School Campus.

Fire Chief Wayne Eder and Board members blasted the KUSD with information they said they obtained from the Mohave County Planning and Zoning Department.

“They advised me that you are required to have permits and the permits are sitting on their desk and have not been paid for and there are flood control issues with your project that have not been addressed and the planning and zoning coordinator has not yet signed off on your project because there are other concerns,” Eder said. “I spoke with the Office of Manufactured Housing in Phoenix and they were unable to confirm at this time, as of today, that there's ever been an occupancy permit issued for your school.”

Board member Ed Schrum asked KUSD Board members why they placed students in structures without obtaining building permits. Board Chairman Lewis went a step further, suggesting the KUSD should consider removing students from the classrooms.

“It appears to me that the KUSD Board has tried to cut costs at the expense of the safety of our children by ignoring the Fire Chief's authority and professional expertise,” Lewis said, reading from a prepared statement.

KUSD Board President Mike Cobb and member Pat Carlin Jr. conceded that officials handling the modular project made several mistakes. Carlin explained that the KUSD apparently applied for a building permit with the county but never followed through after learning that state officials rather than the county has authority over modular structures.

Lewis had identified Julie Eddy as the P and Z staffer who confirmed that another permit was incomplete and still pending with the county. That turns out to be a zoning permit.

Planning and Zoning Director Chris Ballard said Monday that the zoning permit is the least significant of the permits that were discussed at the meeting she did not attend. She said that she would be looking into the zoning permit matter, but that the occupancy permits are the most important of the bunch.

School District Superintendent Maurice Flores and Facilities Manager Gary Blanton said they visited with the P and Z Department's Kevin Davidson on December 8 to clear up the permit questions. Davidson didn't respond to a telephone inquiry regarding that meeting, but Flores and Blanton both said they learned that the KUSD had been issued the state and local certificates of occupancy in question.

Flores and Blanton expressed relief that the zoning permit was the least important of the permits in question and they said the KUSD would work with P and Z to resolve anything necessary. Flores, Blanton, Ballard and others expressed some level of surprise, intrigue or bewilderment that the occupancy permits had issued while the zoning permit was incomplete.

Use of the permit information and issues by the Fire District officials diverted discussion of the allegations brought forward by the KUSD. Cobb and Carlin detailed their series of communications with Chief Eder and his assessment that the modulars should not be occupied unless a fire hydrant was moved or the school district paid for fire hose that the fire district could use to access the hydrant in the event of an emergency.

Cobb said Eder abused his authority to fabricate safety concerns. Cobb told Hualapai Board members that the inexcusable conduct should cost Eder his job and that the Fire District should reimburse the KUSD the \$3,850 it paid for the fire hose the Chief demanded.

“We were extorted for that (hose),” Cobb charged. “There’s no ifs ands or buts about it. He (Eder) lied to me. His demeanor the whole time was ‘I’m in charge here and this is the way it’s going to be.’”

Carlin, too, said Eder was rude and unprofessional in his dealing with school officials.

“He came off very arrogant when we met with him the first time and the second time he was extremely insulting,” Carlin said. “For this community I’m embarrassed how he treats people.”

And Carlin joined Cobb in calling for Eder’s ouster. “Chief Eder should not be in a position of authority because he cannot handle the power,” Carlin said, the firehouse audience erupting in applause.

Eder responded that facts and issues had been distorted by misinformation.

“At no time have I ever tried to extort. At no time have I ever tried to coerce,” Eder said. He defended his assessment of the hydrant and hose situation at the KHS campus and denied fabricating a safety issue to swindle the KUSD for a hose purchase.

Eder said it was Carlin who was rude during their meetings. The Fire Chief said Carlin, for leverage, made reference that his brother was a police officer in Scottsdale.

“You started making threats and trying to be coercive towards me,” Eder told Carlin. “When people come into my office and they have an attitude and say ‘hey, my brother’s a cop’, you know what, that has a tendency to get people a little on edge.”

Carlin responded he only mentioned his brother, an officer in Scottsdale, because his brother has a good friend who is an expert in the firefighting profession who was consulted about Eder’s hydrant and hose assessment.

Cobb said Kingman Fire Chief Chuck Osterman and a number of other firefighting professionals had either visited the campus or reviewed Eder’s findings and found them to be invalid. “A number of fire people have said everything is up to, or above code,” Cobb said.

“I’ll dispute that with you,” said Hualapai Board member Fred Bunge. He said that he and Board member Jimmie Bodenhamer visited the campus, making measurements that supported Chief Eder’s conclusions.

Discussion evolved into a heated exchange between Carlin and Bunge, with Bunge pushing a semantics and definition debate over the meanings of the words “intimated” and “inferred”. “That is pure unadulterated garbage sir,” Bunge shouted at Carlin at one point.

Cobb said that Eder's findings will ultimately undergo an independent review by the Arizona State Fire Marshall's office. Fire Marshall John Rowlinson, two days before the joint board meeting, confirmed his office would visit the campus at the request of the KUSD.

"We'll get it scheduled as quickly as possible," Rowlinson said. "Given our scheduling and the number of people that are going to be out over the holidays, we haven't had a chance to sit down and look at it yet, but we'll get it done as quickly as we can."

Rowlinson clarified his office would conduct the annual inspection required of all schools and county or state-owned buildings. He said the inspection should not necessarily be considered a review of Eder's work alone. Nonetheless, he also acknowledged that some will likely be most interested in the portion of his inspection that would focus on the hydrant and hose matters that Eder has identified as issues of concern.

Early last month, Rowlinson, by letter, informed the fire district that the state would take back the inspection responsibility regarding schools and government owned buildings that had been delegated to the fire district through an informal arrangement dating back to 1997. Eder said he's not particularly happy about that.

"The Arizona State Fire Marshall cancelled our gentlemen's agreement concerning the inspection of schools," Eder said. "Yet, the Arizona State Fire Marshall has not contacted me to ask me my side of the story."

Rowlinson said weeks ago that his office early this year initiated an effort to turn a number of "gentlemen's agreements" regarding locally delegated inspection authority into formal intergovernmental agreements. He said his office contemplated revoking the agreement in north Kingman only because the Hualapai District officials and their legal representatives had been slow to respond, or respond at all to that effort.

Near the start of the meeting Cobb conceded that the KUSD was tardy in its submission of plans to place the modulars at the north campus to Chief Eder when the Fire District was still in authority for the inspections. "We screwed up," Cobb said.

Eder said he felt KUSD officials tried to push and force him into hasty approval after that submission error. "Basically, this project, the way I felt when I was given it by your staff was being forced down my throat and they said well, 'here it is'."

Cobb and Carlin said they felt Eder's hostility and hose and hydrant assessment was the Chief's way of punishing the KUSD for late submission of the modular placement plan.

"He was going to teach us a lesson because he was butt-hurt," Carlin said. "I can tell you I don't need any lesson from Chief Eder."

At the end of the meeting, the Hualapai Board assigned members Schrum and Bunge to review the hose and hydrant matters with help from their attorney and the KUSD, when and if necessary.