

REGULAR MEETING of the ROSS TOWN COUNCIL

THURSDAY, JANUARY 8, 2026

Held In-Person at the Marin Art and Garden Center and Teleconference via Zoom

1. 6:02 p.m. Commencement.

Mayor Julie McMillan; Mayor Pro Tem Elizabeth Robbins; Council Members Teri Dowling; Bill Kircher, Jr., Mathew Salter; Town Manager Christa Johnson; Town Attorney Ben Stock.

2. Posting of agenda/changes to agenda.

Town Manager Johnson confirmed the agenda was posted according to government requirements.

3. Disclosure of Ex Parte Communications on Items on this Agenda

None.

4. Open Time for Public Expression.

Ross Asselstine from San Anselmo addressed flood control, reviewing the Flood District's history since 1961. He noted that Ross residents have been taxed for levies and dredging for 60 years, yet little has been spent on actual levy maintenance. He also mentioned speaking to the Board of Supervisors in December about recent major flooding and urged the Advisory Board to allocate funds for levy improvements.

5. Mayor's Report

I want to update residents about what's happening at Ross Recreation. The Ross Rec team continues to offer many wonderful recreational programs to residents of all ages, with a very positive response from our community.

Thriving Youth Programs: Winter Youth Basketball started this week with more than 250 kids from grades K-4, focusing on team development and skill-building. Kids Club is experiencing a resurgence, now serving 15-25 afterschool participants daily, providing families with flexible afterschool care. The youngest residents have many options: Wilderness Cubs brings outdoor exploration to Natalie Coffin Greene Park; Ross Rec has partnered with MAGC's Garden School to launch Happy Hive, an afterschool program for ages 2-4; and morning toddler and parent programs are currently being developed for new and young families. Based on parent feedback, Ross Rec is continuing to host Day Camps when Ross School is not in session.

Offering Programs Throughout Ross: Ross Rec is collaborating with community partners to offer programs at MAGC and the Ross Town Hall. Youth can enjoy afterschool 23 Elephants mini-musicals, Art Explorations, and Little Green Thumbs gardening. Adults can access a Weekly Age-Friendly Social Tea, Mah Jongg, Tai Chi, Modern Bridge, and Senior Strength Training.

Age-Friendly Ross's New Digital Home: Ross Rec will be launching a new website, www.agefriendlyross.org, to make it easier to find events, programs, volunteer opportunities, and helpful resources.

Coming Soon: Ross Rec is organizing many other wonderful events for our community: the third annual Age-Friendly Valentine's Luncheon on Thursday, February 12 (with former Ross Mayor Beach Kuhl serving as MC); the second annual Mother-Child Pickleball Tournament (in April at the Ross pickleball courts); and new family programs such as Tuesday Rec Night at the Ross School Gym, Adult Flag Football, and Adult Volleyball. And although it seems like winter may never end, Summer Camp Registration is just around the corner.

To learn more about Ross Recreation and its many programs, please visit <https://www.rossrecreation.org>.

6. Council Committee & Liaison Reports

None.

7. Staff & Community Reports

a. Ross Property Owners Association

None.

b. Town Manager

Town Manager Johnson gave the following report:

- She thanked staff and the Executive Director and Board of the Marin Art and Garden Center for allowing the Town to use this lovely facility. The Town made it through these recent stormy days fairly unscathed. They did have some trees down on private property, but otherwise, the Town fared well. She thanked the Public Works staff for helping prepare the Town for potential flooding and to public safety folks for helping out during the event and, most importantly, thanked members of the community because there is a lot of work private property owners do to prepare their property for potential flooding events.

8. Consent Agenda

The following items will be considered in a single motion, unless removed from the Consent Agenda. There were no requests to remove an item or public comments.

Mayor Pro Tem Robbins moved, and Council Member Dowling seconded, to approve Consent Agenda Item a. Motion carried unanimously (5-0).

a. Minutes:

Special Meeting Closed Session, December 11, 2025

Regular Meeting, December 11, 2025

End of Consent Agenda.

There are no Public Hearings on Planning Projects – Part 1.

Administrative Agenda.

9. Discussion regarding Ross Fire Station and Public Safety Protection Initiative:

- **Presentation by Friends of the Ross Firehouse (FORF) of materials supporting proposed initiative.**

Mayor McMillan briefly outlined the presentation and speaking protocols for the item.

Stephanie DeMarco, representing Friends of the Ross Firehouse (FORF), presented an overview of the organization's work since 2020, focusing on opposition to the Town's plan to demolish the Ross Firehouse and eliminate a local fire station. She outlined FORF's concerns regarding public safety, emergency response times, and cost assumptions underlying the Town's civic center proposal, and presented an alternative vision that retains and rehabilitates the existing firehouse.

Ms. DeMarco then described FORF's engagement with recognized experts in fire protection, emergency services, architecture, construction, and real estate, as well as its pursuit of a ballot initiative to allow Ross residents to vote on the issue. She highlighted the qualifications of the FORF team, including consultants from Jensen Hughes, BRW Architects, and experienced local professionals in construction, real estate, and business operations.

Mike Stanley, Senior Fire and Emergency Services Consultant at Jensen Hughes and former Fire Chief, discussed fire service operations, cost-sharing among the Joint Powers Authority partners, staffing impacts, and incident volume in Ross. He stated that Ross currently bears approximately 21% of the overall operating budget, which FORF considers disproportionate given its relative call volume. He also reviewed National Fire Protection Association standards related to response times, staffing levels, and emergency medical services, and recommended evaluating Ross's community risk profile and response reliability, noting that the closest responding unit is based in San Anselmo.

Ms. DeMarco referenced a 2020 Town flyer presenting residents with a choice between rebuilding a fire station or constructing a civic center without one, and asserted that the assumptions regarding cost and response times were flawed. She emphasized the frequency of medical emergencies in Ross, concerns about extended response times, the strain on regional ambulance services, and broader community impacts of reduced emergency services, including insurance availability and property values.

Ed Dong, a real estate and construction professional with over 50 years of experience, presented FORF's building analysis. He stated that a rehabilitated public safety building, including a fire station, could have been constructed for significantly less than the Town's estimates and outlined FORF's efforts to assemble an expert team to inspect the building, assess seismic conditions, and develop a feasible rehabilitation plan. He noted that the firehouse is a historic resource and may qualify for a CEQA exemption.

Chris Ford, Principal at BRW Architects, discussed the architectural feasibility of rehabilitating and modernizing the existing structure to house fire, police, and paramedic services within the current footprint. He described proposed improvements, including seismic upgrades, flood mitigation measures, reconfigured apparatus bays, shared public safety spaces, and an upper-level expansion for living quarters, while preserving the building's exterior and historic character.

Ed Dong and Bob Herbst who is a Marin County real estate and development professional, presented cost and schedule estimates developed with Alten Construction. They stated that the rehabilitated public safety building could be delivered for approximately \$11–11.2 million, with a projected 14-month construction timeline. They emphasized that the project would retain much of the existing structure, including the exterior stucco and roof, while fully upgrading interior systems and seismic performance.

Mr. Herbst then addressed operational costs, stating that Ross currently pays approximately \$2.7 million annually for regional fire services. He cited analyses suggesting that reopening a local fire station with appropriate staffing could be achievable within comparable annual costs and questioned the scale and expense of the Town's proposed civic center campus, particularly given Ross's size and staffing levels.

In closing, Ms. DeMarco stated that FORF's proposal represents a credible, cost-effective, and phased alternative to the Town's current plan. She urged the Council to consider the proposal as a timely and solvable opportunity to preserve local emergency services, warning that failure to act could permanently eliminate Ross's ability to maintain a local fire station and control its emergency response.

Mayor McMillan called for questions from Council Members.

Mayor Pro Tem Robbins asked and confirmed that FORF's plan includes all program elements in the master plan except the lobby and fitness area are being combined.

Council Member Dowling requested and received clarification on the legal and technical CEQA basis for FORF's CEQA position relating to rehabilitation of historic structures retaining the existing footprint and exterior façade. In contrast, Mr. Ford said the civic center plan would require significant environmental mitigation.

Mayor McMillan asked about FORF's proposed flood mitigation measures. Mr. Ford explained that while they haven't been used at other fire stations, he has applied similar strategies in commercial and industrial floodplain buildings. The plan includes flood gates, pre-deploying equipment, and moving engines to higher ground to minimize downtime, focusing on keeping mud and debris out so the station can return to service quickly.

On seismic standards, Mr. Ford clarified that the fire and paramedic facility would meet ESA (Essential Service Act) requirements, meaning 50% stronger laterally than standard, but not fully earthquake-proof—ensuring the building remains usable after an event. He confirmed that the Alten Construction bid includes all seismic upgrades, noting prior experience on similar projects like the Belvedere-Tiburon Library and Southern Marin Station 4. Mayor McMillan confirmed FORF can provide the Alten Construction report referenced.

Council Member Kircher asked about contingencies, cost escalation, CEQA, and secure parking. Mr. Ford responded that Alten Construction carries a 10% contingency, considers the project exempt from CEQA, and assumes a 4% annual escalation after current 2026 pricing. He explained Concept B also addresses relocating public works and administrative offices without triggering CEQA, and that the existing public works footprint aligns with affordable housing plans. On police vehicle parking, he noted no current secure area exists but believes the Chief can manage without one.

Council Member Dowling asked about funding for capital and ongoing operations. Mr. Ford said the Town's \$12 million CIP balance is sufficient to cover the \$11.2 million renovation. For operations, Ross currently pays \$2.7 million to RVFD and would need to renegotiate a new agreement to reopen the firehouse. Ms. DeMarco noted that capital and staffing are separate issues. Mr. Ford added that the fire portion could be left in "open stud" condition while negotiations occur; if unsuccessful, the space could be converted to public works use.

Mayor Pro Tem Robbins asked whether the Town could use its \$12 million savings and potential \$1 million annual surplus to staff a fire engine in the future. Mr. Ford acknowledged the Town's strong fiscal management and agreed that these funds could be applied to enhance safety.

Council Member Salter commented that FORF deserves a Citizen of the Year award and thanked them, given he has heard various negative comments over time about the group. He thinks the quality of material and the team assembled is great and wished the Council had listened to this group in 2020. He referred to Slide 13 and questioned what the response times for NFPA of 8 minutes versus current times of 11 and 14 minutes.

Mr. Stanley spoke of NFPA's established best practice of an 8-minute response time and anything past this expands a fire, minimizes the chance of search and rescue making the intermedia intervention, as well as response for cardiac arrest. It is a matter of whether a community will tolerate these response times.

Council Member Salter said he has heard about Marin County moving towards a different dispatch model where the closest fire engine would respond and asked for comment.

Mr. Stanley said such a system is AVL (Automatic Vehicle Location) dispatching or closest units responding. It is much like the Uber technology matching the closest available unit to respond. However, only the highest level of calls would be used such as a confirmed structure fire or a person in cardiac arrest.

Council Member Kircher questioned discrepancies in reported response times—fire engine at 10:56 and ambulance at 9:52 versus a slide showing 14:02. Mr. Stanley clarified that 14:02 reflects paramedic ambulance response since the firehouse closure, based on Chief Mahoney's report. The data covers only July 1–October 31, and Kircher noted such a short period is not statistically significant. Mr. Herbst noted that the 2019 Citygate report predicted at least a 2-minute increase in fire response if the Ross Firehouse were closed. Mr. Stanley emphasized that faster response is critical for cardiac arrest, and bystander CPR also affects outcomes.

Council Member Salter asked about the number of firefighters that can show up and the loss of the station affecting the overall size of the force. Mr. Stanley said NFPA 17-10 speaks to an effective response force which relates to responding fast with trained, equipped people to do the task. He then gave examples of staffing 17 firefighters for a house fire whereas now RVFD has an effective response force of 9 firefighters. If a station were added back in with 12 firefighters the Town would have more apparatus and personnel arriving in a shorter timeframe, with the balance being made up from mutual aid agencies.

Mayor McMillan questioned where FORF is locating the public works corporation yard on the map. Mr. Dong said they followed the Town master plan block locations and believe they could find a yard in the rear that works.

Mayor McMillan said the Town Master Plan has public works shifted much more internally. The associated public works yard is shown attached to the public works building closer to the internal area. Also on the diagram, there is only a left-hand turn off of Sir Francis Drake into the driveway. She asked if a San Anselmo fire truck could make that right-hand turn into the driveway. Mr. Stanley said the plan would be designed so a Type 1 engine could make that turn based on turn templates.

Mayor McMillan referred to the 15 parking spaces shown on the map, noting there are currently 25 or 30 spaces, and the facilities master plan includes about 40 spaces. She asked if this number would be adequate given the number of functions occurring on the site. Mr. Herbst said they looked at a minimum impact of the site per the topographic file from the town and everything that is there now would not change. Mr. Stanley clarified that their primary goal was to save and rehabilitate the fire station and their secondary task was whether they could develop the Town campus which would include more site review, parking and circulation.

Council Member Dowling asked if sleeping facilities are adequate for the number of firefighters and paramedics and whether the plan would account for both men and women. Mr. Stanley said it is much more common now to have gender neutral, ADA accessible elements. There is a single sleeping room on the second floor or further back could serve as individual bedrooms, two people per room with a divider wall. He said they are confident they could work with Fire Department representatives to come up with their needs.

Council Member Salter asked if FORF developed this plan without assistance from the Town. Mr. Herbst stated they walked the police side with the Chief and went off of the numbers in the master plan. Council Member Salter said he hoped the Council could support FORF's plan, work together with FORF, and develop a plan to accommodate firefighters and paramedics.

Mr. Herbst stated in conclusion, their offer is to form a working group of real estate professionals of himself and Mr. Dong, Jeff Koblick and Rich Hall from Magna Real Estate, and work together with Town staff and Town Council on moving the plan forward as quickly as possible.

BREAK

Mayor McMillan called for a break at 7:46 p.m. and, thereafter, resumed the meeting at 7:55 p.m.

Mayor McMillan announced the next portion is to provide a report on the Elections Code Section 9212 Report.

- **Presentation by Town staff and consultants regarding the Elections Code Section 9212 Report; and Town Council to consider adoption of Resolution No. 2544 receiving the Elections Code Section 9212 Report.**

Town Manager Christa Johnson said the item is a recommendation to adopt Resolution No. 2544 receiving the Elections Code Section 9212 Report. The report was prepared by Susie Kim of RSG, Inc. who served as the lead analyst and project manager, Stewart Gary from Citygate Associates which is the technical lead for fire staffing and operation modeling, Architect Mary McGrath participating on Zoom who provided estimated costs related to building a new fire station, the KPA Group, a structural and architectural design firm who provided a facility analysis and cost assumptions. KPA Group also prepared the Facilities Master Plan the Council adopted in 2023. Paul Powers and Matt Evans from KPA Group are present.

Also participating in the team were Project Manager David Kelley, Public Works Director Rich Simonitch, Planning and Building Director Roberta Feliciano, Police Chief Pata, Fire Chief Mahoney, and Town Attorney Stock.

Town Manager Johnson provided a background on the closure of the Ross Fire Station, FORF's submittal of a ballot initiative to maintain an operational fire station within Ross, and adoption of Resolution No. 2542 ordering the preparation of a report pursuant to California Elections Code 9212. She spoke about reasons leading to the decision to close the fire station, displayed photographs of station flooding, damage, and deterioration.

Susie Kim, Director, RSG, Inc., provided an overview of RSG, background and actions relating to FORF's ballot initiative, and assessment and rehabilitation of the fire station to comply with current public safety facility requirements. The intent of the 9212 Elections Code report is to understand various impacts of the initiative to the Town, the report's due date, and she presented major findings from the report.

Stewart Gary, Public Safety Principal at Citygate Associates, explained that the report is limited to the scope of an Elections Code Report which does not constitute a comprehensive fire services master plan or a broad evaluation of alternatives. His presentation addressed analyses of staffing models, apparatus staffing needs, headquarters space requirements, detailed cost estimates, and two service options. Option 1 relies on a single-engine crew with multi-unit support and backup, while Option 2 involves establishing an independent fire station at a higher cost. He also reviewed fire service response times and costs and noted that renegotiating a different multi-unit support agreement with the Town's current fire services provider is not feasible.

Mr. Gary further stated that contracting with another fire district is unlikely due to LAFCO statutory authority. Any change involving separation of fire services, employment impacts, or transfer of ownership requires LAFCO approval, rather than action solely by the local Council or Board of Supervisors, in order to prevent fiscal destabilization. As a result, the Town's options are limited to re-employing personnel within the existing Fire Department or forming an independent department.

He concluded with a review of required departmental staffing, fire service costs, salaries, operating expenses, and the existing JPA payment, resulting in estimated first-year annual operating costs of \$7.7 million. He compared the cost differences between the shared services model and an independent single-station department and presented 10-year cost projections, noting that fire service costs in California historically increase at approximately twice the general rate of inflation.

Mary McGrath of Mary McGrath Architects reported that her firm worked with Citygate Associates to define facility space requirements consistent with proposed staffing models and to evaluate the two fire service options. A one-story fire station would require approximately 7,602 square feet to support six personnel, including overnight accommodations for a Battalion Chief, while a two-story station would require about 10,145 square feet. Cost models were prepared for each alternative. She reiterated that renovation of the existing facility is not cost-effective due to the need for structural repairs, mold remediation, and seismic upgrades, and because it would still fail to meet police and fire operational needs. Additional cost and operational impacts are associated with the site's location in a flood zone, making development outside the flood zone preferable.

Ms. McGrath also presented comparative cost data from recent and planned fire station projects based on bid results from 2016 to 2023, including work by Alten Construction. She referenced the San Geronimo Station project in Marin County, currently in design, which estimates building construction costs of approximately \$1,309 per square foot.

Mr. Powers of KPA Group reported that keeping a fire station at the civic center conflicts with the Town's Facilities Master Plan because there isn't enough space for a compliant facility—relocating police, public works, or administrative offices would be necessary. The site is constrained by creek setbacks, limited buildable area, restricted access, drainage/utility issues, emergency circulation, and planned housing that cannot be moved. Alternative sites, like the Post Office, are infeasible.

KPA's relocation scenarios estimate gross costs between \$2.8 million and \$9.1 million, mainly from land acquisition (\$894,000–\$6 million) and construction (\$1.9–\$4.4 million). Net costs are mostly land-related. Off-market acquisitions could raise costs and trigger State-mandated relocation benefits.

Ms. Kim projected that initiative approval could lead to one-time costs of \$25.6–\$37.5 million, including fire station construction (\$21.7–\$28.3 million), startup (\$2.2–\$2.3 million), and Year 1 operating costs (\$3.4–\$5 million), with 10-year total costs between \$43.3–\$62.8 million. While the initiative aligns with the General Plan, it conflicts with the Facilities Master Plan and would require amendments.

Funding would likely require public debt (COPs, bonds, Mello Roos), with existing reserves covering only a small portion. Operations would need a significant public safety tax increase, possibly exceeding taxpayer tolerance. Estimates are sensitive to market fluctuations, financing adds costs, and changing current fire service agreements requires negotiation with partner agencies.

Mayor McMillan called for the FORF team to ask the Town and its consultants any questions.

Mr. Herbst questioned Ms. McGrath about her familiarity with BRW Architects and Alten Construction. She confirmed extensive experience with their leadership, expressed respect for their qualifications, and noted her firm's recent completion of multiple public safety facilities, but stated she disagrees with their proposed approach.

In response to questions about why renovation was deemed infeasible, Ms. McGrath said that despite addressing wiring, mold, and seismic issues, spending approximately \$11 million would still fail to meet essential fire operational requirements. While acknowledging testimony that the facility could be brought into code compliance, she maintained that the proposal would not adequately meet programmatic needs.

Regarding floodproofing, Ms. McGrath stated that although floodproofing the apparatus bay is technically possible, it is undesirable due to significant maintenance demands and complex FEMA requirements. Mr. Herbst countered that the station has operated since 1995, including through two 100-year flood events, without apparent impacts to public safety.

Mr. Herbst thanked Stewart Gary for the Citygate report, noting they clarified the public safety impacts of closing the firehouse, and asked about Mr. Gary's involvement in prior reports. Mr. Gary explained his role in earlier work dating back to 2018, when options for the firehouse were first discussed, but noted limited involvement in more recent reports.

Mr. Herbst asked about Mr. Gary's familiarity with Jensen Hughes, to which Mr. Gary replied that he knew the firm by reputation only and considered it well qualified. The discussion then turned to LAFCO requirements. Mr. Gary stated that changes in fire service arrangements generally require LAFCO approval to prevent fiscal destabilization, though such changes are technically possible with LAFCO and governing body approval. Mr. Herbst cited Government Code Section 56134 to suggest a possible exemption if less than 25 percent of service territory is affected, while Mr. Gary responded that this provision applies to independent fire districts, not joint powers authorities like RVFD, and advised that legal counsel confirm.

The exchange concluded with questions about the fairness of Ross's cost share in the RVFD agreement. Mr. Gary said he had not studied the specific allocation but explained that cost-sharing formulas typically account for baseline service capacity, staffing, population, and calls for service, making fairness a negotiated policy matter without clear legal standards. He recommended revisiting the allocation to assess its equity. Finally, Mr. Gary emphasized that the Town is obligated to provide fire services and that service levels are a local policy choice for voters, as there are no state or federal minimum requirements.

Mayor McMillan asked for Council questions to staff.

Council Member Dowling asked about space requirements for Options 1 and 2 of the rebuilt firehouse. Mary McGrath explained that a small, two-company, single-story station would total 7,602 sq. ft., including: Apparatus and support spaces: bays, turnout storage, workshops, medical cleanup/storage, janitor rooms; administrative/public areas: firefighter offices, lobby, public restroom, station office; living quarters: sleeping accommodations, restrooms, kitchen, dining, day rooms, laundry; and utilities/structure: communication rooms, mechanical/electrical spaces, plus circulation. She confirmed the square footage follows fire station standards, including at least 18 turnout lockers with extra for staffing flexibility, and detailed drawings are available as backup.

Council Member Salter asked whether the square footage plan was just an Excel exercise, if there was a construction bid, and whether it was based on the existing building or rehabilitation. Mary McGrath clarified that it was none of these—it simply reflects the square footage needed for staffing options related to the ballot measure.

Council Member Salter said up until July, the Town was using the building for police, fire and paramedics and they were all operating in it. Town Manager Johnson confirmed this is correct.

Council Member Salter clarified that the numbers reflect an analysis, not the existing building, and all costs are based on that analysis. Mary McGrath explained she did not obtain construction bids, noting that “napkin-based” estimates are risky. Her figures are grounded in actual construction costs, including escalation predicted by cost estimators, and account for soft and owner costs. She emphasized that the budget excludes costs like internet, response-alerting systems, and police functions, and noted that rehabbing the building alone wouldn't cover all civic center site needs.

Council Member Salter asked if Ms. McGrath's 2020 estimates put the cost at \$14 million. She replied she wasn't sure about those numbers, noting their 2020 work was for a new station and that construction costs per square foot have risen significantly since then.

Mayor McMillan asked Mr. Gary about the LAFCO process timeline. He estimated four to six months, noting it requires a standard application, fiscal calculations of parent agencies, and typically contiguous partners.

Mayor McMillan reviewed prior facility studies (early 2000s, 2010, 2016, 2020, and more recent) and confirmed Ms. McGrath's familiarity with them. She then asked if anything discussed tonight would change her view on rehabbing the existing facility. Ms. McGrath said no; she believes the proposal doesn't meet current fire or police programmatic needs. She cited issues like a proposed lobby that cannot be staffed and noted costs could escalate due to ADA upgrades and other requirements.

When asked if the square footage was based on the Facilities Master Plan for police, fire, and paramedics, Ms. McGrath explained it was not; the 2020 program for a new fire station served as the basis, adjusted for the staffing plan presented by Mr. Gary.

Mayor Pro Tem Robbins asked whether the facility can be renovated or must be rebuilt. Ms. McGrath explained that a rebuild is needed to meet ADA requirements, accommodate additional turnout and personnel lockers, and resolve inefficiencies—especially for the police program.

She noted that FORF's renovation plan addresses some ADA requirements but leaves others unmet, such as non-compliant second-floor stairs and inaccessible routes from the apparatus bay to living quarters. She stressed involving the Chief Building Official and the Police Department to determine full code compliance.

Mayor Pro Tem Robbins suggested a compromise: a smaller renovation could meet operational needs without the scale of a full rebuild. Ms. McGrath emphasized that understanding the cost to meet code is a critical next step.

Mayor McMillan asked Chief Pata to address police station issues, noting staff also had comments on FORF's recent submissions. Council Member Salter argued this was outside the scope of the Elections Report, but Mayor McMillan pointed out that Ms. McGrath's report allocates roughly 1,000 more square feet for the police department than FORF's plan, and requested a brief update from Chief Pata on his concerns.

Police Chief Pata, a 42-year law enforcement veteran, emphasized serious deficiencies in the FORF plan for the shared fire/police facility. Drawing on his experience with major police station renovations, he noted that past renovations often failed to resolve operational problems.

He highlighted critical missing elements at the Ross station:

- Security: No secure areas for prisoners, interviews, or police vehicles; officers must sometimes transport detainees elsewhere.
- Evidence handling: Inadequate space for processing, storing, fingerprinting, photographing, and testing evidence, including controlled substances like Fentanyl.
- Safety: No proper armory or secure storage for hazardous or explosive materials.
- Facilities: Insufficient bathrooms and workspace; shared lobby risks exposing victims and suspects to each other.

Chief Pata stressed that officers are currently forced to use makeshift solutions, such as modified closets for equipment storage, creating safety and operational risks. Chief Pata concluded that while the FORF plan has merit, it needs substantial work to meet law enforcement operational requirements and ensure officer and public safety. He disagreed with Mr. Herbst's assertion that the police department did not need secure parking, stating it was essential. He agreed with the acknowledgment from the FORF team that they had not concentrated on the needs of the police department, as no one from the FORF team met with Chief Pata about the needs of the police department.

Mayor Pro Tem Robbins thanked Chief Pata for his helpful comments, but likened it to a prepared presentation, and she thinks FORF should have time for questions and make comments.

Chris Ford, BRW Architects, said they began with the program from the Facilities Master Plan, put them in spaces, did not address secure parking, said he has colleagues out of his Dallas office that do nothing other than police facilities and he focuses on fire facilities, so they defaulted back to what was in the program and would love the opportunity to dig into the details and get it right and get there.

Town Attorney Stock said for the purposes of the public who have not had a chance to speak, he suggested the Council pose questions to staff and when done, the Council can move onto public comment.

Mayor McMillan noted that the FORF plan provides about 1,000 square feet less than the Facilities Master Plan and asked Chief Pata if this would meet the Police Department's needs.

Chief Pata responded that with a fully staffed department for the first time in a decade, officers are crowded and lacking essential separations. He highlighted needs such as proper ventilation, secure weapon storage, and other safety measures, concluding that the Town requires a larger space to allow officers to perform their duties effectively and safely.

Council Member Salter compared Ross's proposed fire station square footage to nearby remodels, noting San Anselmo is expanding from 3,500 to 4,300 sq. ft. and Fairfax's station is about 3,000 sq. ft.—both well below Ms. McGrath's recommended 5,848 sq. ft. for Ross. He argued that these stations operate effectively with far less space.

Town Manager Johnson noted that neither station houses paramedics, and Ms. McGrath said she is not familiar with their functional requirements. Council Member Salter maintained that, aside from paramedics, the operational requirements would be similar, highlighting that Ross's proposed size is significantly larger than nearby comparable stations.

Ms. McGrath asked what services are provided at those stations. Council Member Salter said they are a 3-man fire station. Ms. McGrath said Ross is not planning for a 3-man fire crew but planning for a one-story, 3-person crew plus paramedics.

Town Manager Johnson said the Elections Code Report is the economic and land use impacts of the ballot initiative. That ballot initiative states that preferably, the existing footprint of the fire station be reused. The existing fire station, until last July, housed 2 paramedics and 1 trainee and 2 firefighters. This is what the report is about, so the numbers shown for the square footage is based upon 6 people, whereas the Fairfax and San Anselmo stations do not have 6 people there. She asked Fire Chief Mahoney who has been involved with these stations to comment.

Council Member Salter said his understanding was that paramedics are not included in the fire station. Therefore, they need a totally separate analysis and the report also does not include police which FORF's proposal also includes, and this is comparing apples and oranges.

Town Attorney Stock reminded the Council this is a time for questions and he suggested taking public comments.

Town Manager Johnson asked Chief Mahoney to explain how paramedic services and fire services are provided in the Ross Valley which is different from other jurisdictions.

Mayor Pro Tem Robbins asked if this is part of the Elections Report. Town Manager Johnson suggested having subject matter experts respond. Mayor McMillan suggesting take questions only regarding the Elections Report right now.

Council Member Dowling referred to the slide that talks about the public safety tax. She asked if the Town pays for at least Option 1. She asked what it will cost citizens of Ross for this.

Susie Kim from RSG, Inc. said it would need to go to the voters and determine whether they are willing to pay the increase in the parcel tax. Also, to issue debt, two of the bonds require 2/3 voter approval. So, this Elections Report focused on identifying what costs are and she recommended a second step to dig into looking at all of the financing options to finance the cost, as well as looking at the revenue-generating capacity of the Town in order to have a fuller picture of the Town's ability to pay.

Council Member Dowling said all things considered, she confirmed taxpayers are looking at a parcel tax for the on-going cost of staffing around \$5,400 more than what they are already paying.

Town Manager Johnson explained that while the Town has historically generated healthy surpluses—mainly from property taxes—projections show these shrinking to \$76,000 this year and \$7,000 by 2030. She emphasized that Ross lacks additional revenue sources like sales or utility taxes, meaning the Town cannot sustainably fund a new fire station at current revenue levels.

She noted the current public safety parcel tax is \$1,201.50 per parcel, generating about \$1 million. To operate a fire station under Option 1, the tax would need to increase roughly 3.5 times to \$5,400 per parcel; Option 2 would require about \$7,201 per parcel—figures covering only operating costs, not construction debt. She added that staff received FORF's information last week and can provide further comments, leaving it to the Council to decide if or when to review them.

Council Member Salter noted that Mr. Gary's calculation of ongoing staffing costs for Option 1—\$2.7 million—is very close to the Jensen Hughes estimate, meaning the \$3 million Ross currently pays into the RVFD JPA roughly matches the cost to staff a local station. He framed this as a negotiation: If Ross left the JPA, it would lose that \$3 million, which could instead fund reopening the station. He suggested a middle ground could be reached where some costs benefit all partners.

Mr. Gary agreed, explaining the \$2.7 million is a “worst-case” estimate for extra staffing, and any increase beyond current levels could be negotiated to share costs with other towns. He emphasized that faster, heavier staffing is critical for effective fire response—4 on scene is the minimum for life safety in a house fire, while modern standards for even light-risk homes now call for 15–20 firefighters. Ross's department is fragile and must respond quickly to prevent small fires from becoming disasters.

Council Member Salter acknowledged the point and recommended continued collaboration. Mr. Gary noted that staffing has been consolidated to 2–3 rigs with cross-trained firefighter-paramedics, with the ambulance strategically located in the west end of Ross Valley for optimal EMS response. He concluded that maintaining the ambulance in Ross supports timely emergency services while balancing costs among the JPA partners.

Mayor McMillan opened the public comment period.

Dan Winey, Gensler Architects and former Architectural Review Board member, stated that a pro bono study he led 25 years ago reached the same conclusions as current analyses: renovation is possible but would cost more than rebuilding and still fall short of long-term needs. As a preservation architect, he does not favor demolition lightly, but believes the facility's deteriorated condition, safety considerations, and substantial police needs warrant full reconstruction to provide a durable, functional building consistent with the Town's character.

Bill Poland said the discussion was informative and, drawing on his 50 years of experience as a commercial real estate developer specializing in rehabilitating historic buildings, agreed that the facilities should be rebuilt from the ground up while preserving their character. He noted that FORF did not address the site's Housing Element aspects, suggesting the inclusion of nine housing units sought by the State as part of the overall plan would be needed and wonderful.

Steve Burdo, Mayor of San Anselmo and current President of the RVFD Board of Directors, said he is also a member of the Ross Valley Paramedic Authority and member of Marin LAFCO, stressed the need to base decisions on accurate facts, noting Ross isn't exempt from LAFCO rules because it is a JPA. He reported no new response-time data since Station 18's closure—current times are about 9½ minutes for engines and paramedics—and highlighted San Anselmo's significant 41% share of RVFD funding. He affirmed RVFD's ongoing commitment to serve Ross while it remains a member.

Thomas Finn, member of the Board of Directors for Sleepy Hollow Fire Protection District and Chair of the RVPA Board of Directors, explained that Sleepy Hollow is an unincorporated special district without its own fire station, a key reason it joined the RVFD JPA and shaped its cost-sharing terms. He noted the cost share has changed over time to 12.8% and urged the Council to consider these factors when assessing Ross's role in the Fire JPA.

Jim Harlene said the firehouse is structurally sound and should be fully evaluated for renovation, which he argued would be far more cost-effective than a costly rebuild. He urged separating building decisions from RVFD funding concerns, collaborating with FORF, and forming a committee to plan renovation and future use of the historic building.

Billie Buck emphasized that rapid emergency response saves lives, citing personal experiences where quick Fire Department arrival prevented tragedy. She urged the Town to prioritize centrally located fire and medical services to ensure the fastest, most reliable protection for the community.

A board-certified emergency physician warned that Ross's emergency response has been weakened by the loss of local first responders and stressed that rapid intervention—especially for cardiac arrest—is critical. She questioned why the existing fire station is not being renovated to restore response capacity at lower cost and urged the Council to prioritize options that meet County public safety standards.

Diane Rudden criticized the plan for overlooking Town administrative staff, emphasizing the need to care for all employees. She also raised concerns about residents' ability to afford a major parcel tax increase and the risk it could force people to leave the community.

Bruce Suffrage, a longtime Ross Fire Department veteran, stressed the importance of stationing a fire engine in Ross, especially during floods that can isolate the town. He warned that relying on San Anselmo is insufficient during emergencies and urged the Council to ensure local fire coverage and appropriate emergency vehicles. He also suggested posting a clear sign that the station is closed, and urged the Council to ensure a fire engine remains stationed in Ross.

Paul Restler spoke on behalf of Ross's schoolchildren, noting that several schools and preschools are near the former firehouse and deserve fast emergency and EMS response. He emphasized the importance of protecting children who have no voice in the decision-making process.

Mike Rosenbaum opposed the FORF initiative, questioning its financial sustainability, funding transparency, and procurement approach. He warned that the proposed parcel tax could be unacceptably high, doubted FORF's ability to raise sufficient funds, and urged safeguards to prevent a small group from imposing long-term taxes, including placing all contributions in escrow before any vote.

Tom Allen, a Ross resident and commercial architect, warned that renovating the fire station could be more complex, costly, and restrictive than building new. He noted higher contingencies and frequent change orders are typical for renovations and urged caution in relying on preliminary budget estimates.

Laura Conrow urged the Council to remain flexible and consider new information, praising FORF's plan as well-researched, cost-effective, and capable of keeping the fire station in Ross. She noted it avoids demolition, CEQA delays, and litigation, whereas a Town-led rebuild would be costlier and require 2/3 voter approval, and encouraged collaboration with FORF.

Lauren Lyon shared a personal story showing the lifesaving importance of local emergency services, noting firefighters responded quickly when an ambulance was unavailable. She emphasized Ross's collaborative spirit and expressed hope the Council can keep a fire engine in town within budget limits.

Jeff Koblick recommended a cautious, step-by-step approach prioritizing health, highlighting that renovating the firehouse is cheaper and feasible, keeping options open for future use, and emphasizing the importance of fast emergency response.

Tony Curtis, a Ross resident and former Council member, said he had supported keeping the firehouse but finds the current proposal unaffordable for residents. He emphasized the Town should avoid taking on debt, raised concerns about emergency preparedness (e.g., earthquakes), and echoed Mike Rosenbaum's financial concerns. What should have been done is the creation of an endowment and then the Town would have a real fund to move forward.

Mike McWilliams, a Ross resident, stated that many residents oppose the Town's current Facilities Master Plan, which excludes a firehouse. He urged the Town to collaborate with residents to create a new plan that addresses the needs of fire, police, paramedics, and Town staff, and to give residents the ability to vote in deciding the importance of maintaining a local firehouse for community safety.

Joey Buckingham, a Ross resident and ADR Group member, said she learned from both the FORF and Town proposals and believes collaboration is possible to bring the firehouse back. She emphasized the importance of maintaining fast response times, recognized the effort volunteers put in, and stressed there should be no animosity, encouraging a cooperative approach to developing a plan.

Alyssa Taubman, a Ross resident, emphasized the critical need for a local fire truck and paramedics, citing her family's experience after the 1991 Oakland fire. She noted Ross's heavy vegetation increases fire risk and stressed that resident fire services are essential to protect life, safety, and homes. She argued that maintaining these services—through renovation or rebuilding—is feasible if planned reasonably and becomes even more important as the town's population ages.

Erica Bell, speaking for many parents following via Zoom, emphasized the community's desire to have the firehouse back. She shared a personal experience in 2020 when her 4-year-old son was injured, highlighting the importance of rapid first responder access. She expressed confidence that the Council and FORF can collaborate to restore the firehouse.

Katie Hoertkorn, a Ross resident, expressed agreement with Mike Rosenbaum, Tony Curtis, and the Gensler architect, emphasizing that the main concern is cost. She warned that the FORF proposal could increase property taxes by \$5,000–\$7,000 per year—not just \$1,000—and noted there are no concrete numbers from FORF. She questioned residents' willingness to fund such increases, highlighting that suggestions like a volunteer fire department would not satisfy community needs.

Mayor McMillan closed the public comment period and called for deliberation.

Mayor Pro Tem Robbins said the Elections Code Report contained useful information but had two major issues: first, it inaccurately claimed most medical calls wouldn't be affected by reopening the fire station, ignoring that Medic 18's response times have increased from the Town's prior 7 minutes, 55 seconds; second, the report focused on the cost of a new facility rather than FORF's renovation proposal, despite expectations it would analyze renovation costs.

Council Member Salter criticized the Elections Code Report as highly flawed, saying it failed to analyze the actual impacts or costs of the ballot initiative. He noted the report dismissed rehabilitation as impossible, included paramedics (which the initiative doesn't address), and presented largely irrelevant numbers. He called the \$85,000 report a waste of resources and said the Council cannot rely on it, opposing its acceptance because it does not accurately reflect the FORF proposal or the ballot's intent.

Mayor McMillan disagreed with Council Member Salter, stating that the Elections Code Report is valuable for identifying and analyzing the initiative proposal. She noted the Town only recently received FORF's detailed information and emphasized that the report provides transparency and objectivity, so the Council should officially receive it.

Mayor Pro Tem Robbins clarified that her objection to the Elections Code Report was based on its \$85,000 cost. She emphasized that her vote against proceeding with it was not due to a lack of interest in the estimates, but because she believed the Town and FORF should collaborate directly rather than spend a large sum on the report.

Council Member Dowling moved, and Mayor McMillan seconded, to adopt Resolution No. 2544 receiving the Election Code Section 9212 Report. Motion carried by the following vote: 3-2; (Robbins and Salter voting no).

Mayor McMillan proposed discussing future direction with the experts present to inform the Council's deliberations on the FORF proposal. Council Member Salter objected, noting it was not on the agenda and asking for a legal opinion. Town Attorney Stock clarified that under the Brown Act, the only agenda item is whether to receive the Elections Code Report; discussion of next steps or broader policy direction would be outside the scope of the agenda. Mayor McMillan acknowledged this, but suggested that a conversation about the information received and public input could still be beneficial.

Mayor Pro Tem Robbins described the way the item would be run and said these items are together as one agenda item. It states in the Council's email that after the presentation there would be public comment and then Council deliberation. Town Attorney Stock said the Council can talk about what was said tonight and could continue that discussion now, but the Council cannot deliberate and take action on things not on the agenda. The only item on the agenda was the Elections Code 9212 Report. The FORF proposal was a presentation with no action so there is nothing to deliberate on. However, comments can be voiced on what Council Members heard.

Mayor McMillan asked for deliberation.

Council Members discussed the limitations of the Elections Code 9212 Report, noting it did not address the feasibility of rehabilitating the existing fire station because the Council lacked detailed information at the time. Several members expressed support for forming a committee to evaluate the FORF proposal and explore potential solutions collaboratively, while acknowledging that such discussions were not on the current agenda.

Council Members emphasized the importance of community input, fiscal responsibility, and realistic cost assessments. They highlighted that response times for fire and ambulance services have increased since the closure of the Ross Firehouse, reinforcing concerns about public safety. Members recognized the complexity of funding, the potential need for a tax increase, and the legal and operational constraints tied to the Ross Valley Fire Department joint powers agreement.

Several members acknowledged the FORF proposal's potential but noted that trade-offs and limitations exist, including space constraints and rehabilitation costs. They stressed that any committee work would need clearly defined scope, including operational and funding considerations, not just facility planning.

Mayor Pro Tem Robbins pointed out that emergency response times are longer now. Before the fire station was closed, the response time was 7:55, but the 2024 Citygate study showed the ambulance response time at 9:52, and data since the fire station closed showed the ambulance time at 14 minutes.

Mayor McMillan cautioned that discussions must consider long-term operational costs, contractual obligations with the Paramedic Authority, and the feasibility of sustaining a fire

station without significantly altering current agreements or incurring substantial new expenses. She emphasized accuracy in data, including response times, and the need to understand financial and logistical realities before committing to facility planning.

Council Members expressed a shared desire to listen to the entire community, balance safety needs with fiscal constraints, and explore practical solutions to restore fire and paramedic services in Ross. The conversation underscored the importance of informed, collaborative decision-making and the role of a potential working committee in advancing the issue.

End of Administrative Agenda.

There are no Public Hearings on Planning Projects – Part 2.

15. No Action Items: (Mayor)

- a. Council correspondence
- b. Future Council items
- c. Council Member participation at the communication table at the Ross Post Office on the next Council meeting day

None due to early adjournment.

16. Meeting Evaluation.

None due to early adjournment.

17. Adjournment.

The meeting adjourned at 11:15 p.m.



Julie McMillan, Mayor

ATTEST:



Cyndie Martel, Town Clerk

