
NEW MEXICO PUBLIC REGULATION COMMISSION

FROM THE OFFICE OF DISTRICT 3 COMMISSIONER VALERIE ESPINOZA

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NEWS RELEASE

Commissioner Espinoza Calls Attention to Urgent Need of Firefighters in Velarde

SANTA FE – The community of Velarde is located in the heart of the New Mexico Public Regulation Commission’s (NMPRC) District 3 in northern New Mexico. It could also be said that the small community in the Rio Grande Valley is a place close to Commissioner Valerie Espinoza’s heart as well, as she grew up in Española and has served the area first as a county clerk, and the NMPRC for the last five years.

There is a general need for firefighters throughout northern New Mexico, however, Velarde is in dire need of volunteer firefighters.

On behalf of Commissioner Espinoza, five key personnel representing the NMPRC and the State Fire Marshal’s Office (SFMO) attended a community meeting held Tuesday evening, May 9. The purpose of the meeting was to address issues surrounding the lack of firefighters in the Velarde Fire District. Currently, Velarde has two active members, a district chief and assistant chief.

NMPRC and SFMO personnel were there to offer any help and information the public or county officials might have in relation to resolving this long-standing problem.

Over the course of a couple of hours, many obstacles were identified, and a few solutions were proposed.

“I am hopeful that all involved are able to overcome the obstacles before them, and tackle the issue of firefighter recruitment as a team,” Commissioner Espinoza stated. “It appears that long-held animosities need to be put aside in order to move forward with the goal of providing quality public safety. Perhaps the county’s bylaws can be revisited. In the past, variances have been granted by the Commission for other fire departments. After all, this is first and foremost a public safety issue. When it comes to structure fires, vehicle collisions and medical emergencies, a few minutes – a few seconds sometimes – can be the difference between patients making a full or partial recovery, and at times it can even be the factor between life and death.”

“There’s no better feeling than helping one another, especially during a time of crisis,” Espinoza stated. “In the early 1980s, New Mexico’s Public Employee Retirement Association (PERA) developed incentives as a true recruitment and retention effort.”

PERA allows volunteer firefighters to draw from their retirement as early as 10 years into their volunteer service, per the Volunteer Firefighters Retirement Act. In fact, with 10 years of service, qualified volunteer firefighters who are age 55 or older receive \$125 per month. With 25 years of

service, the amount doubles to \$250 per month. Two-thirds of a deceased firefighter's pension is paid out to surviving spouses or a dependent child.

“New Mexico is one of the few states with incentives available after 10 years,” Espinoza stated. “The bottom line is that the business of emergency response is measured by the loss of life, property damage, and pain and suffering that firefighters and emergency medical responders have prevented or reduced. They are prepared and trained for one reason, and the priority should always be to provide service to the people of their communities in a time of an emergency.”

In conclusion, Commissioner Espinoza stated, “If you feel you have what it takes to meet the challenges, please contact the Velarde Fire Department at (505) 852-4715, acting Fire Chief Carlos Esquibel at (505) 747-6367 or Rio Arriba Deputy County Manager David Trujillo at (505) 753-2992.”

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