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THERE WERE 30 residents in attendance for the Braidwood Fire Prevent District's Planning Workshop held Thursday, at Reed-Custer Elementary School. Additional public workshops are scheduled for March 26, April 29 and May 20 from 6 to 8 p.m. at Reed-Custer Elementary School, 162 S. School St., Braidwood. The BFPD is asking that residents complete a survey about the district at [firedistrictsurvey.com](http://firedistrictsurvey.com).

## Mounting costs, staffing gaps among topics at Braidwood Fire Pro. District

BY ROSE PANIERI  
 STAFF WRITER

As financial pressures intensify and operational demands grow, a newly formed community advisory committee is taking a

comprehensive look at the future of the Braidwood Fire Protection District.

Approximately 30 residents attended the committee's first public workshop last Thursday, launching a series of discussions

focused on rising equipment costs, staffing shortages and infrastructure concerns.

Three additional workshops are scheduled as the committee works toward formal recommendations

for the district's board. Thomas "TJ" Sforza, a certified public accountant and Reed Township trustee, serves as co-chair alongside Angie Antos. Sforza said his financial background immediately

framed how he approached the district's challenges.

"Immediately my CPA brain kind of went to, 'OK, how much is this going to cost?'" Sforza said. "The best thing I got from that first interaction is that there's not a number right now that's just been thought about, because they're really focused on relying on our community to come up with what they think is feasible and necessary."

The advisory committee began meeting in the fall amid growing concerns about the district's long-term finances, staffing levels and aging equipment.

### Rising Costs, Aging Equipment

One of the most pressing issues is the escalating cost of fire apparatus. Sforza noted that a new fire engine that cost approximately \$700,000 in 2016 now carries a price tag between \$1 million and \$2 million.

Several of the district's engines have exceeded the recommended 15-year frontline service life, raising concerns about reliability and the need for long-term replacement planning.

### Water Access and Response Challenges

Water supply remains a significant obstacle across the district's 38-square-mile service area. Large portions of Custer Park, Godley and parts of Braidwood lack fire hydrants, requiring firefighters to transport water to emergency scenes.

"The biggest thing besides our costs is proba-

bly the water scarcity in certain areas," Sforza said. "Our district covers 38 square miles and there are significant portions of Braidwood, Custer Park and Godley that do not have access to a fire hydrant."

The district serves residential neighborhoods, multi-family housing and commercial properties, as well as a nuclear power plant and cooling lake. Its coverage area also includes portions of Diamond, Interstate 55 and commercial and freight rail lines.

Although the district operates a pumper engine equipped with a permanently mounted fire pump capable of delivering at least 750 gallons per minute, that capacity may not be sufficient for larger or more complex incidents.

In some cases, firefighters must shuttle water from the Kankakee River — a time-consuming process that can delay suppression efforts and increase safety risks during active fires.

The district's expansion has also created logistical challenges. Since assuming responsibility for the Custer Park station, BFPD has worked to integrate operations and maintain staffing levels. Frequent train blockages in the area can further complicate response times.

### Staffing Shortages

Staffing remains a crit-

SEE BFPD PAGE 2



Photo by Kelly Van Dwyne

REED-CUSTER SENIOR Dominic Alaimo powers his opponent to the mat at 215 pounds during the state finals. Alaimo opened with a 3:57 fall before suffering a pair of setbacks. Turn to page 2 for more photos and a story.



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# COMET SPORTS



Photo by Amy Walker

COMET CHASE ISAAC fights off a Coal City opponent for control over the ball during last week's game. Reed-Custer lost 59-49.



Photo by Amy Walker

REED-CUSTER'S Colton Waldvogel puts up a shot during their last regular season game against Coal City.

## Comets drop fifth straight but finish regular season .500

The Reed-Custer boys basketball team closed out the regular season Tuesday with a 59-49 loss to Coal City, marking the Comets' fifth consecutive defeat heading into postseason play.

Despite the late skid, Reed-Custer still reached one of its key benchmarks, finishing the regular season at 15-15 overall and 8-6 in the Illinois Central Eight Conference — good for a spot in the upper half of the league standings.

"Extremely proud of our young group achieving our goal of going 15-15 in the regular season," Comets coach Tyler Schoonover said. "We also ended up in the upper half of the conference finishing 8-6."

Coal City used a steady offensive effort to pull away down the stretch Tuesday, handing the Comets a loss that capped a challenging final stretch after

what had been a strong midseason run.

Even with the recent setbacks, Reed-Custer's body of work this winter reflects growth from a relatively young roster that showed the ability to compete consistently in conference play.

Now, the Comets turn their attention to the postseason.

Reed-Custer earned the No. 8 seed in the Class 2A Herscher Regional and opened play Monday at home against No. 10 Herscher. The Comets lost that contest 56-51 to close out the season 15-16 overall.

Reed-Custer had only two seniors on their 12-man roster. Graduating will be Colton Waldvogel and center Vinny Bollino who both were contributors on a mostly young roster.

## Comets fall in regional opener

The Reed-Custer girls basketball team saw its season come to a close last week with a 60-36 loss to Bishop McNamara in the opening round of the Class 2A regional.

The Comets struggled to find offensive rhythm early and never fully recovered, finishing the season with a 14-15 overall record and a 7-7 mark in Illinois Central Eight Conference play.

Bishop McNamara set the tone from the outset, holding Reed-Custer to just one point in the first quarter while building a 12-1 lead. The Comets managed just six points in the second quarter as the deficit grew to 25-7 at halftime.

Junior Alyssa Wollenzien led the Comets with 24 points, accounting for two-thirds of the team's scoring output. She also contributed 11 rebounds and five steals. Atiana Hood added five points, while Avah Thompson chipped in three. Skylar Wilkins and Harlie Liebermann each finished with two points.

As a team, Reed-Custer shot just 10-for-48 (21 percent) from the field and 1-for-16 from three-point range, making it difficult to keep pace. The Comets did find some success at the free throw line, converting 15-of-20 attempts.

The defeat ends the careers of the Comet seniors Morgan Toler, Anastasia Smith and Skylar Wilkins, who helped guide the program to a competitive .500 conference finish this season.

REED-CUSTER SENIOR Morgan Toler will be missed next year for her constant pursuit of the ball.

Photo by Amy Walker

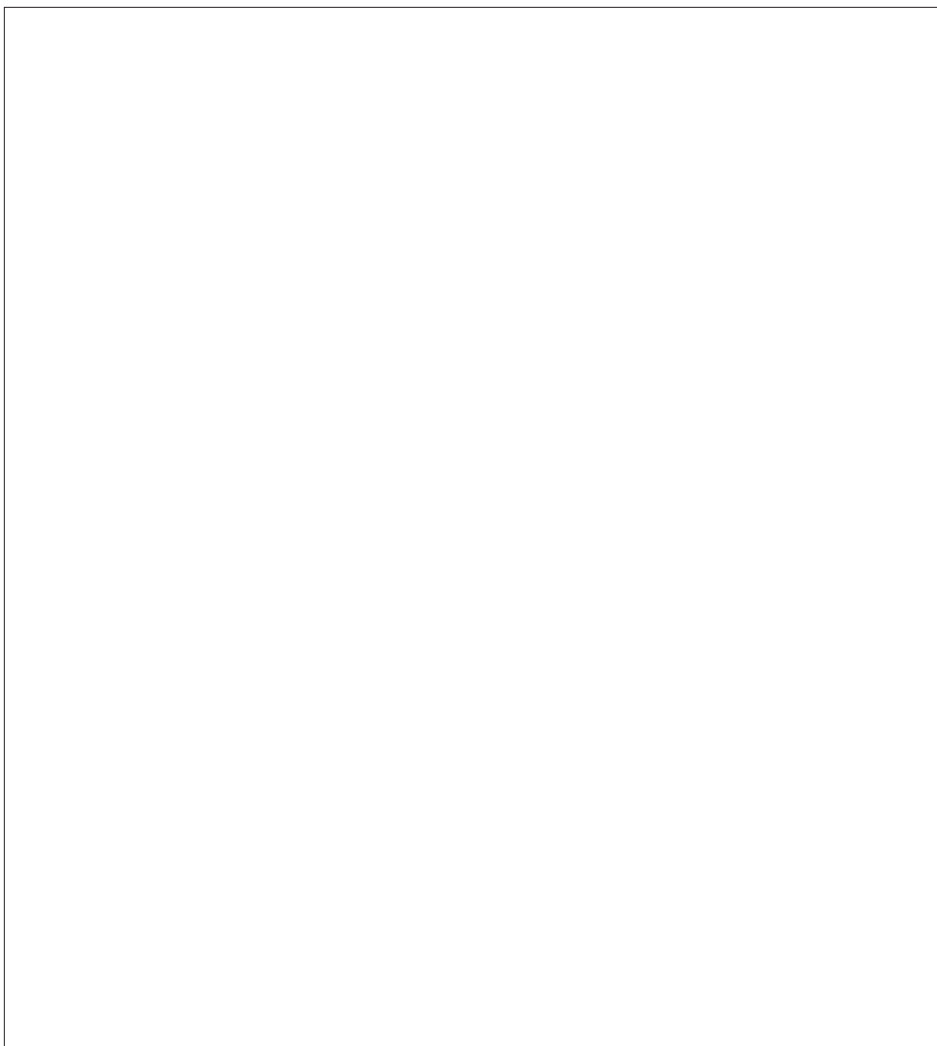


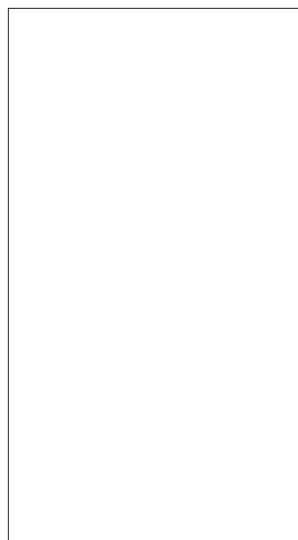
Photo by Amy Walker

COMET MATT KUBAN drives the lane during last weeks game against Coal City.

## All Conference Cheerleaders



KAMRYN MARSCHNER  
All Conference Cheerleader



CAYSIE ESPARZA  
All Conference Cheerleader



DIONNA WALKER  
All Conference Cheerleader

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Photo by Amy Walker

LADY COMET Kamryn Wilkey drives the baseline during a recent game at home.