

Cromwell Fire District

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FIRE DISTRICT OFFICE
WATER DIVISION
COMMUNICATIONS CENTER

FIRE DEPARTMENT
FIRE MARSHAL'S OFFICE

BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
Fire and Water Divisions
Tuesday, February 20, 2024, 6:00 PM
Coles Road Firehouse
105 Coles Road
Cromwell, CT

The Commissioners of the Cromwell Fire District held their monthly Board of Commissioners' meeting on Tuesday, February 20, 2024, at 6:00 PM, at the Coles Road Firehouse, 105 Coles Road, Cromwell, CT to discuss and act upon Fire and Water Division business.

Commissioners Roger Rukowicz (President), Donald Smith, Charles Epstein, Robert McIntyre, Chip Darius, John Sokolowski, Donald Goranson and Steve Wygonowski attended. Commissioner Mertie Terry was absent. Also attending were newly-hired Executive Director Roger Hart, Acting Executive Director Julius Neto, Fire Chief Jason Brade, Fire Marshal Harold Holmes, Water Operations Manager Joseph Palmieri, Finance Manager Michael Lupkas, Communications Manager Justin Lonergan and Town Liaison Brian Bonneau.

CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order at 6:00 PM, by President Rukowicz. The Pledge of Allegiance was led by President Rukowicz. The President asked for a moment of silence to acknowledge the first responders that lost their lives over the weekend in Minnesota, Virginia and Florida.

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Sokolowski and unanimously approved to accept the agenda as submitted.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Mr. James Rude, 25 Highridge Rd., was not present but submitted written comments to the Executive Director via email that were forwarded to the Recording Secretary for inclusion with the records for this meeting.

A motion was made by Commissioner Goranson, seconded by Commissioner Sokolowski and unanimously approved to have the public comments submitted by Mr. Rude added to the official records and minutes of the meeting.

APPROVAL OF THE BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS' MEETING MINUTES OF
DECEMBER 19, 2023

The Board of Commissioner's meeting last month had been canceled due to the weather. The December minutes had not been approved.

A motion was made by Commissioner Darius, seconded by Commissioner Sokolowski and unanimously approved to accept the Board of Commissioners' meeting minutes of December 19, 2023, as submitted.

APPROVAL OF THE SPECIAL BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS' MEETING MINUTES OF
JANUARY 18, 2024

It was noted that Commissioner Goranson attended that meeting and was listed as absent. The minutes will need to be corrected. Commissioner Epstein will also be listed as present.

A motion was made by Commissioner Darius, seconded by Commissioner Sokolowski and unanimously approved to accept the Special Board of Commissioners' Meeting minutes of January 18, 2024, with the corrections noted.

APPROVAL OF THE SPECIAL BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS' MEETING MINUTES OF
JANUARY 24, 2024

There was a clarification on Pg. 4, second paragraph, the beginning of the second sentence should read, "In a high liability organization" instead of, "In a higher liability organization."

A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Darius and unanimously approved to accept the Special Board of Commissioners' meeting minutes of January 24, 2024, with the correction noted.

APPROVAL OF THE SPECIAL BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS' MEETING MINUTES OF
FEBRUARY 6, 2024

A motion was made by Commissioner Darius, seconded by Commissioner Goranson and unanimously approved to accept the Special Board of Commissioners' meeting minutes of February 6, 2024, as submitted.

READING OF COMMUNICATIONS & WRITTEN APPEALS TO THE BOARD

There were no communications or appeals to report.

REPORTS OF THE STAFF

- A. Introduction of the New Executive Director. President Rukowicz introduced Mr. Roger Hart to the group. He has been hired as the next Executive Director of the District.
- B. Executive Director's Report from former Executive Director. The Executive Director's report for January had been previously distributed or reviewed. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office. Mr. Neto highlighted the work being done with the District's attorney regarding the FOI request by Channel 30.

This meeting is Mr. Neto's last meeting as an Executive Director. He had a few words to say acknowledging the pleasure it has been to serve with one of the best teams of firefighters, EMT's, Dispatchers and Water Dept. staff there is dealing with some challenging situations in all of those disciplines. He witnessed daily how all of these individuals put their heart and soul into their work. They have always stepped up to the challenges. He appreciated the opportunity, and will always be in touch with the District. The President thanked Mr. Neto for all his service to the District.

C. Financial Report. The Financial Report for January had been previously distributed and reviewed. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office. Mr. Lupkas was present and reviewed the report.

- \$3.5 million was collected in taxes. That brings the District to 64% of the levy.
- \$2 million plus was received last week. That will bring the District up to 98% of the levy. This means that by year end, the District will be in a good financial position.
- EMS calls for January were 166 with a total year-to-date of 1,157 vs. 1,024 at the same time in January last year.
- Cash receipts were about 21.5% higher than last year at this time.
- Water production has been right on the average for the last several years. It still remains about 68 million gallons less than last year.
- Pg. 5 of the report had the "over \$1,000 in collections" data. There are two more accounts than last month. 62% of the 120-day number has collection efforts.
- The net position report has been updated with FY '23 actual ending numbers. It will be published shortly.
- Pg. 18 shows the STIF account, which is the Short Term Investment Fund operated through the State. Fiscal year-to-date would be \$61,000. Last month Mr. Lupkas used their early number for interest that came from their website which were the numbers that had been discussed previously. That total was \$10,000 less than originally quoted. That is why the numbers look lower than expected.
- The audit is finalized. Mr. Lupkas has the final draft. He will review it, and it will be sent to the printers. The District should have it in a week to 10 days. It will be discussed at the next Board meeting. On the General Fund side, the unrestricted net position is now at \$1.245 million which was an increase of \$173,000. That is basically the surplus for the year on the General Fund. The collection rate in taxes was 99.2%. Regarding Water, the unrestricted net position was \$3.7 million. Under Gap accounting there was a \$153,000 surplus in the operating budget. The overall surplus is more than that.
- Regarding Pension, there is \$1.7 million in assets. It is funded at 96.38%. Last year there was an 8.99% investment return from an actuary basis. That exceeds the target on all the calculations. There was a net gain on investment return.
- The last couple pages of the report cover the year-end projection that was recently added to the packets.
- The General Fund forecast is to be approximately \$240,000 over a favorable variance at year end. Water revenues are under by \$275,000. Expenditures are under by \$200,000.

A motion was made by Commissioner Smith, seconded by Commissioner Darius and unanimously approved to accept the Financial Report for January as submitted.

D. Fire Department Chief. The Chief's Report for January had been previously distributed and reviewed. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office. The Chief touched on some of the highlights in his report.

- The Department worked with the Boy Scouts and gave lectures on fire service.
- The Girl Scouts will also be scheduled for the same program.
- Part-time interviews were held. They hired five people to help fill some of the vacancies on shifts.
- Two part-time firefighters were promoted to career. One that was promoted to career is most likely leaving to go to another Department.
- The Department plans on running another part-time test.
- Regarding training, the Department recently conducted their gear inspections for the year.
- FIT testing was also completed. Some people were taken off line that have not completed their requirements which are mandatory.
- Rescue Task Force training was done. It is a 3 part program. The first two parts have been completed. The third part will be conducted with the State Police.
- All 3 of the old Fire Department vehicles have been sold and relocated. Tack 4 has gone to Kentucky, old Ambulance 4A was shipped to Guatemala and Truck 1 is sold and is going to Nova Scotia, Canada.
- A big project they are working on is a Medicare project, requiring locating data over the previous year 2022 – 2023. Information gathered fuel consumption, payroll, etc. They are about 27% of the way completed. They have received an extension until May to complete the project.
- There is an orientation tomorrow for the new firefighters hired.
- The Chief is working on completing his budget proposal.
- They are working with the Communication Center on a couple of projects.
- There is a career expo at the high school coming up. The Fire Department will be involved in that along with the Fire Marshal's Office.
- They continue to have increasing amounts of calls.

President Rukowicz thanked Chief Brade for his work along with the ED and Chief Driscoll on planning the sale of the Fire Department vehicles.

A motion was made by Commissioner Goranson, seconded by Commissioner Darius and unanimously approved to accept the Fire Chief's Report for January as submitted.

1. Fire Marshal's Office. The Fire Marshal's Report for January had been previously distributed and reviewed. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office. Mr. Holmes noted that the report has been reduced in size. Chief Brade and Mr. Holmes were publishing duplicate information, so his report was edited to not duplicate information from the Chief. He added that he signed off on the Texas Roadhouse project. The Town will be scheduled for their review. The scheduled opening is March 18, 2024. March 12 and 14 the restaurant is going to provide 20 meals to the on-duty crews at around 6:00 PM. They are having a Franklin family day on March 17. Anyone being involved with the project will be getting invitations. Mr. Holmes gave a brief update on the golf tournament. Crews are scheduled to start work putting up bleachers, etc. for the first week of April. There are operational meetings already scheduled with the TPC and Fire Department.

A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Smith and unanimously approved to accept the Fire Marshal's Report for January as submitted.

E. Water Operations. The Water Operations Report for January had been previously submitted and reviewed. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office. Mr. Palmieri touched on a few things.

- The alarm system at Chemfeed has been redone. It was in last year's Capital budget. Everything was tested and labeled correctly. They worked with Mr. Lonergan on the project.
- The gate opener on the new fence at Chemfeed has also been installed. Codes were supplied. This has deterred the public from accessing the property.
- The butterfly valve at the Berlin interconnection has been installed. This was also a Capital project from last year. Now they just need the SCADA system hooked up to it.
- The Water Division is hosting training tomorrow and next Wednesday, 2-21-24 & 2-28-24, at the Coles Road firehouse. There is also one training session planned for March.
- Mr. Palmieri will be starting to prepare his Consumer Confidence Report for 2023. It gets reviewed by Environmental Partners and DPH.
- He also submitted budget numbers to Mr. Lupkas to start the budgetary process.

Commissioner Darius brought up the topic of ordinances that cover trespassing on District property. Acting Director Neto advised that the District would need to go through the Town to apply for an ordinance to address the trespassing issue. Mr. Palmieri offered to post signage for no trespassing on all of the Water Dept. properties.

A motion was made by Commissioner Darius, seconded by Commissioner Sokolowski and unanimously approved to accept the Water Operations Report for January as submitted.

F. Communication Center Report. The Communication Center report for January had been distributed for review. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office. Mr. Lonergan added:

- They have hired a couple of staff, and they are in training. That is going well.
- One of the projects he has been focusing on is the new phone system. Cromwell is waiting for Frontier to complete some projects on their end before they can proceed with the phone project with Cromwell.
- He has some meetings scheduled with Total Communications to discuss programming, reworking programs and making sure there are no loose ends to take care of. He has been told that installation of their equipment will occur sometime in April.
- Mr. Lonergan has been working on alarm systems and trying to get more familiar with the systems in place. The next budget cycle will address the issues at the firehouses that will tie into access controls and camera systems.
- Mr. Lonergan gave an update on his contact with solar companies. He has been advised that the District would be a sizeable project. One of the vendors is supposed to be getting back to Mr. Lonergan once their schedule frees up
- Mr. Lonergan and the Fire Chief discussed the new policies taking place regarding the Police Department not being the first answering point to emergency calls. This new regulation requires the Communication Center to be the first to receive the call. This requires Cromwell to be the first responder to every medical in addition to the ambulance. Middlesex is the Department's sponsor hospital. They have been working with the Fire Department to train them on what is required. The Fire Department follows national protocol.

A motion was made by Commissioner Smith, seconded by Commissioner Darius and unanimously approved to accept the Communication Center Report for January as submitted.

REPORTS OF THE STANDING COMMITTEES

- A. Executive Committee. A meeting was held on January 3, 2024, to discuss committee assignments. Committee memberships were adjusted, and the amount of committees went from 12 to 6. Commissioners were given copies of the new committee assignments.

A motion was made by Commissioner Smith, seconded by Commissioner Epstein and unanimously approved to accept the Executive Committee meeting minutes of January 3, 2024, as submitted.

- B. Water Operations. There was no meeting.
- C. Public Safety Tower. There was no meeting, but the Chairman will be contacting the Police Chief about agenda items for a meeting to be scheduled soon.

BOARD APPOINTMENTS

There were no appointments to report.

CONSIDERATION OF OLD BUSINESS

- A. Report of the Town Council Liaison. Councilman Brian Bonneau was present. The Little League water bill was brought up again at the last Town Council meeting. The issue was tabled. The Town Manager is not in favor of paying the water bill. Mr. Bonneau is in the process of drawing up a proposal. He does not feel the water bill for the Little League is the responsibility of the Fire District. Water has always been the responsibility of the property owner. In this case the Town is the property owner. Mr. Bonneau's proposal is to allow youth programs in Town to have an allowance to cover minimum expenses for Town services. He will try to resolve this issue at the next Town Council meeting.

Regarding ordinances for trespassing, Mr. Bonneau will plan to add that to the agenda for the next Council meeting.

The new Sports Complex proposal was pushed through Planning and Zoning on a technicality. 65 days had expired due to a cancelation of the last Planning and Zoning meeting. It was rubber stamped. Mr. Bonneau asked the Town Manager to give back his approval and resubmit the application so it gets proper review. He advised the District to take a good look at the plans in terms of access for first responders. There will also be water services that the Water Division will need to review. The plans will be coming in the next couple of months. He was giving the District a heads up.

Commissioner Darius asked Mr. Bonneau to see if he could get property information for the Town property in front of the Court Street firehouse. There is a small parcel in the front that is owned by the Town. There was also a discussion about traffic light programming for emergency apparatus.

B. Reports of the Special Committees

1. Health, Safety & Facilities Committee. A meeting was held February 14, 2024. Minutes were not available for review. The Chairman is Commissioner Darius. He commented that they had an outstanding first meeting. Very good participation. He had a long list of items at that meeting that was meant to touch base on each one to make the Committee aware of what needs attention. The draft minutes will be reviewed and then posted. Staff have been compliant in the various areas of health and safety. He was also encouraged by the support of the Executive Director.
2. Volunteer Pension Committee. There was no meeting.
3. Budget and Oversight Committee. The new Executive Director and the Acting Executive Director will be scheduling talks with the Department Heads within the next couple of weeks. The Committee will schedule a meeting once that process is completed to review the information to present to the full Board. There was discussion about the role of the Acting Executive Director.

- C. Discussion and Possible Decision on Little League Water Billing. The Town Council Liaison had discussed this issue earlier in the meeting. Mr. Bonneau has outlined his plan for water billing for youth organizations.

A motion was made by Commissioner McIntyre, seconded by Commissioner Epstein and unanimously approved to table this issue until next month when a follow up discussion will be held on this topic.

NEW BUSINESS

- A. Commissioners' Comments. Commissioner Wygonowski thanked the President for showing support for the Boy Scouts. In terms of the Committees, he asked if schedules would be set for when those committees will meet. It is the responsibility of the Committee chairs to set schedules for their meetings. They will need to contact the Executive Director for assistance in getting the schedules published.

Commissioner Darius discussed the workers comp. procedures for first report of injury with Mr. Neto. Mr. Neto explained the process that has been followed for many years.

Commissioner McIntyre welcomed the new Executive Director and conveyed to the acting Executive Director best wishes for a well-deserved retirement.

Commissioner Goranson asked for clarity on the purchase of another ambulance. Both the President and Fire Chief have agreed that it is on the list of things to do. The Chief plans to put more money into the apparatus replacement fund in this next budget cycle. It will take 2 years upon ordering that the ambulance would be received.

Commissioner Sokolowski discussed a Strategic Plan. The District should have one for the Department heads to use as a reference. He challenged the Executive Director and the Department heads to look at some type of Strategic Plan for the District. Things such as apparatus replacement, health & wellness for employees, facility planning. As the District continues to grow, they should be proactive in their planning rather than reactive.

President Rukowicz will be asking the new Executive Director to use his grant writing skills to help with getting funding for projects.

Commissioner Darius supported all the comments about strategic planning.

- B. Budgetary Adjustments. There were no adjustments to report.
- C. Approval of Contracts/Contractors. There were no contracts or contractors to report.
- D. Discussion and Possible Decision on Modifying the Non-Union Employees' Personal Time Accrual Policy from Earning 2 Hours Per Month to 3 Days Awarded on January 1 Annually. The present District policy as noted in the Employees' Handbook, is to accrue 2 hrs. per month of personal time. There was also a practice where employees received 3 Personal days on January 1. At some point the practice of awarding 3 days at the beginning of the year ceased, and the policy of 2 hrs. per month was implemented. It has always been the practice that if an employee has a need to use personal time before it is accrued, it has not been denied.

Russ Johnson, 8 Lancaster Rd., Cromwell, addressed the Board. He began his employment with the District in 1997. For the first 24 yrs. of his employment, they received their 3 personal days up front in January. He believes that past practice should prevail. The policy in the employee handbook was not being following until a few years ago. That policy states earning an accrual rate of 2 hrs. per month. He suggested a modified policy for employees who are just starting their employment with the District. Employees having seniority should be allowed to have their personal time at the beginning of the year. New employees could have a prorated rate.

Chris Logan, 45 Field Brook Rd., Middletown, commented there have been employees who received time off when they were new to the District and had not yet earned the time. Yet a senior employee cannot get his personal time given to him up front. He doesn't understand the difference.

The Department heads all spoke in support of the policy to grant personal time to senior employees at the beginning of the year. There was a lengthy discussion regarding time off accruals and past practice. All the Commissioners present were in agreement to grant 3 personal days to non-bargaining unit employees at the beginning of the year. It was also noted that the current policy should be modified to reflect what is being practiced.

A motion was made by Commissioner Darius, seconded by Commissioner Sokolowski and unanimously approved to change the current written policy in the employee handbook so that employees receive 3 days of personal time on the first payroll in January of every year to use at their discretion during the calendar year. If employees are hired later in the year, their time will be prorated.

PUBLIC COMMENT

There was no public comment to report.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

There was no executive session scheduled.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business, a motion was made by Commissioner McIntyre, seconded by Commissioner Darius and unanimously approved to adjourn the meeting at 8:07 PM.

ATTEST:

Charles R. Epstein, Secretary

Nancy Deegan
Recording Sec'ty

