

Cromwell Fire District

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FIRE DISTRICT OFFICE
WATER DIVISION
COMMUNICATION CENTER

FIRE DEPARTMENT
FIRE MARSHAL'S OFFICE

BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

Fire and Water Divisions

Tuesday, March 19, 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, March 19, 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, Mertie Terry, Donald Goransen, Steve Wygonowski and John Sokolowski attended. Also attending were Fire Chief Jason Brade, Assistant Fire Chief Richard Driscoll, Fire Marshal Harold Holmes, Finance Manager Michael Lupkas, Water Operations Manager Joseph Palmieri and Town Liaison Brian Bonneau. Commissioner Chip Darius was absent.

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.

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

A motion was made by Commissioner Smith, seconded by Commissioner Epstein and unanimously approved to accept the Agenda as submitted with the following corrections: Item IX, C. will be omitted. That discussion will take place under the Town Liaison's report. Also Item XII. will be omitted. There is no Executive Session this evening. Chief Brade added a discussion item after the Fire Marshal's report under Item VI., as Item C.2. Ambulance Billing Hardship Case.

The President of the Auxiliary Committee from Covenant Living presented Chief Brade with a donation to thank the Fire Department for all they do. This is the second year the Fire Department has received a donation from Covenant Living. The money will be used for a piece of fire equipment as was done last year.

PUBLIC COMMENT

James Rude, 25 Highridge Rd., was disappointed that his public comments were not read at the February 20 meeting and were only authorized to be attached to the minutes. Such actions

whereby the comments are not made available to the Commission and other members of the public at the meeting seems to indicate a lack of interest in comments from the public. The first comment he repeated tonight, welcoming Mr. Hart as the new Executive Director for the Cromwell Fire District. He wished him all the best in his new role and looked forward to efforts to continue to move the District forward on the many matters facing the Commission. The residents of Cromwell hope for his many successes.

Mr. Rude continues to be concerned about the delay in the issuance of the June 30, 2023 audit report (now over 8 ½ months after the Fiscal year end) and the lack of a Volunteer Pension Special Committee meeting since July 5, 2023.

On the matter of minutes, although the minutes of the February 20 meeting note a motion that Mr. Rude's written comments be "...added to the official records and minutes for the meeting," as of tonight the minutes available on the website DO NOT include his comments.

He called attention to the lack of timely publication of minutes of Fire District Commission, Sec. 1-225(a) of the CT Freedom of Information law reads, in part: "...the vote of each member of any public agency upon any issue before such public agency shall be reduced to writing and made available for public inspection **within forty-eight hours** and shall also be recorded in the minutes of the session at which taken. **Not later than seven days** after the date of the session to which such minutes refer (excludes Saturdays, Sundays, Legal holidays per Sec. 1-225(g)), such minutes shall be available for public inspection and posted on such public agency's internet website, if available..." I strongly encourage the Commission to follow the full letter of the law. (law excerpts were attached)

APPROVAL OF THE BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS' MEETING MINUTES OF FEBRUARY 20, 2024

A motion was made by Commissioner Smith, seconded by Commissioner Sokolowski and approved 7 to 0 to accept the minutes of the Board of Commissioners' meeting of February 20, 2024, as submitted. Commissioner Terry abstained.

READING OF COMMUNICATIONS & WRITTEN APPEALS TO THE BOARD

There were no communications or appeals to be read.

REPORTS OF THE STAFF

- A. Executive Director Report. The Executive Director's Report for February had been previously distributed and reviewed. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office. The Executive Director had a personal matter to attend to and unable to attend this meeting. Mr. Neto was also not in attendance. President Rukowicz reviewed a few items.
- The Fire Department has hired three new part-time firefighters. There will be two more starting on March 25.
 - Also the elevator at West St. needed repair. They had to wait one week for the repair.
 - The new Executive Director has toured all three fire houses and met staff. He also toured the Dispatch area. The next tour will be all of the Water Division properties.

- The President expressed his thoughts on the new Executive Director. President Rukowicz has been very impressed and pleased with Mr. Hart's job performance over the last 5 weeks.
- Copies of the Audit summary were distributed for the Commissioners' review.
- Also mentioned was the rate increase in the Water Department to cover costs of water equipment and meters. Installation costs will increase from \$300 to \$500 for the 5/8 in. meters.

B. Financial Report. The Financial Report for February had been previously distributed and reviewed. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office. Mr. Lupkas reported:

- The majority of funds have been received for tax collections for the year. The District is at \$5.5 million which is 101% of what was expected. Anything collected at this point is over what was budgeted and will give an additional favorable position. Revenues overall are at 98.6%. That includes the use of fund balance.
- There were 138 EMS calls for the month. Just under 1,300 for year to date. There were 1,200 in the prior year. Regarding EMS receipts, they are 121% of last year's number.
- Water produced was what the average has been over the years. This year is approximately 66 million gallons less than year to date last year. The next water billing process has begun for the April billing.
- The collections report is the same as last month. There has been a lot of activity with liens being activated and then released.
- Short term investment fund interest update is \$86,000 year to date. Projections for year end, General Fund will have \$272,000 surplus. That number includes all the revenue received from the sale of apparatus.
- Water is showing a \$22,000 deficit taking into account the debt service payment principle.
- The audit has been completed, filed with the State and will be posted on the District's website. The Commissioners received electronic copies.

C. Fire Department Chief. The Chief's Report for February had been previously distributed and reviewed. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office.

- There were 239 calls this month. There were 4 mutual aid calls as well.
- The Department hosted an EMS refresher class.
- They participated in the St. Patrick's Day parade.
- A couple of car seat installations were conducted.
- A group of the girl scouts came to the firehouse for a tour and to learn about fire service.
- The Department visited the high school today for Career Day. There was a lot of interest with the students.
- The Chief noted that the two additional part-time staff that are coming next week will exhaust the hiring list. That leaves a huge deficit on the part-time side. They also lost a few career members to larger departments. The common obstacle for retention is salary and the preference to work more fire calls than medical.
- The Fire Department started a hiring process in anticipation of the vacancies. They are doing their best to keep staff.
- Regarding health & safety
 - They purchased new bedframes for the firehouse. They started shopping for mattresses.
 - They are also getting quotes on bird remediation.

- They also got a quote on the ramp at West St. which will be included in the Chief's budget.
- They sold a couple of pieces of apparatus which will be discussed later in the meeting.
- Chief Driscoll is working on a Medicare project.
- PD had 571 medical calls last month.

President Rukowicz discussed the structure fire at 681 Main St. that occurred, and acknowledged the excellent work done by Lt. McKnight working on Squad #1. Mutual Aid was also activated. It was an outstanding job by all and no one got hurt. Chief Brade acknowledged the outstanding job done by Lt. McKnight.

A motion was made by Commissioner Sokolowski, seconded by Commissioner Smith and unanimously approved to accept the Fire Chief's Report for February as submitted.

1. Fire Marshal's Office. The Fire Marshal distributed his report at the meeting. He had returned from vacation, and would be emailing his report to the Commissioners in the morning. He noted that Texas Roadhouse opened yesterday. The Fuego Mexican Grill will be opening in the 99 Restaurant space. They plan to be open sometime after May 5. Mr. Holmes will be investigating the Main St. fire. It seems it could have been something electrical in the basement of the property.

A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Sokolowski and unanimously approved to accept the Fire Marshal's Report for February as presented.

2. Ambulance Billing – Hardship Case. Chief Brade received a hardship case where the party was looking for the Fire District to forgive the balance of the ambulance bill after insurance. The ambulance ride occurred in September of 2023. The insurance company paid their portion of the invoice. The balance was \$265.27. A copy of the death certificate was received by Shared Response who is the billing company for the District. According to Fire District policy, the party billed would need to produce a death certificate and/or hardship letter in order to have the ambulance bill written off. There was much discussion about the billing for forgiveness. It was agreed to address the language of the policy for hardship cases at the next Board meeting. President Rukowicz will be discussing the policy issue with both Mr. Hart and Mr. Neto tomorrow. He will be asking the new Executive Director if a policy revision is in order.

A motion was made by Commissioner Terry, seconded by Commissioner Sokolowski and unanimously approved to forgive the balance of \$265.27 for the ambulance bill presented to the Board for consideration by Chief Brade.

- D. Water Operations. The Operations Report for February had been previously distributed and reviewed. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office.
 - Mr. Palmieri added that they had a good month with meter upgrades. There were 56 that were done. Some replacements and some new.
 - There was one water leak that was repaired at 20 Oakwood Manor. They replaced 30 ft. of pipe.
 - They will continue with the meter upgrade program after they finish reading meters for the April billing. The new equipment recently purchased has made the whole reading process quicker.

- They are still working on the GIS data base needs assessment with Environmental Partners.
- The Interconnection Project is going well. They were going to put the fourth interconnection in for StanChem. StanChem was unable to fund it, so they were removed from the project at this time.
- Alarm system upgrades are going well.
- The Consumer Confidence Report is complete. Mr. Palmieri sent it for review to DPH today. He should be receiving them by next week.
- He has been working with Mr. Lupkas on the budget.
- The new fence and gate opener is complete at Chemfeed. One manual gate was added in case there is a failure of the new gate.
- They have also been doing repairs to the fence at the Tower.
- They installed the new butterfly valve at the Berlin Interconnection. The work was done inhouse and saved between \$3,000 - \$4,000. It is hooked up to the SCATA system and just needs to be tested.
- Mr. Palmieri discussed the new rate increase for installing meters. He will have the website updated as well as the paperwork in the office changed to reflect new rates.
- The Water Department has been utilizing the conference room at the Coles Road firehouse for water training. Three classes have been held with more scheduled.
- The Water Dept. is waiting for a hazbuilt to sign off on the full CO for Texas Roadhouse.

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

- E. Communication Center. Mr. Lonergan was not present. The President had some discussion points submitted by Mr. Lonergan.
- Frontier has begun installing the new phone service ahead of schedule. System training will begin at the beginning of April. Date of final installation is late April.
 - Two new Dispatchers were hired in the Communication Center. One has been cleared for training and is currently in the observation phase of training. The other is in training and should be in observation training by the end of the month.
 - Mr. Lonergan is still waiting for a refresher quote for the camera access system.
 - There has been discussions about a solar farm on Coles Road that will service all firehouses and District properties. A representative from a solar company will be scheduled to provide an estimate.

REPORTS OF THE STANDING COMMITTEES

- A. Executive. There were no meetings.
- B. Water Operations. A quarterly meeting was held on February 27, 2024.
- C. Public Safety Tower. A quarterly meeting is scheduled for Friday, March 22, 2024, at 10:00 AM, at the Cromwell Police Department conference room.

BOARD APPOINTMENTS

There were no appointments to report.

CONSIDERATION OF OLD BUSINESS

- A. Report of the Town Council Liaison. Mr. Brian Bonneau was present to give a report. He noted that the Little League water bill will be paid by the Town of Cromwell. Mr. Bonneau is drafting a policy for the Town to determine what criteria should be met for forgiving water bills. He also brought before Council a discussion on the piece of property in front of the Court Street firehouse owned by the Town. The District would like to purchase the parcel. He had a discussion with the Town Manager who will follow up with Mr. Bonneau once he looked into it. Price will also be a factor. It will also need to be researched to make sure it has no other purpose and can be sold. The Town budget has not been finalized. It should be available by the second week of April.

A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Smith and unanimously approved to accept the Town Council Liaison report as presented.

B. Reports of the Special Committees

1. Health, Safety & Facilities Committee. The quarterly meeting was held on February 14, 2024.
2. Volunteer Pension Committee. There were no meetings.
3. Budget & Oversight Committee. Commissioner Sokolowski stated that meetings should be scheduled next week provided he receives a draft copy of the budget to review. Hopefully there will be time for review. President Rukowicz would like to see the first meeting next Monday, at 10:00 AM, at the Coles Road firehouse. The President explained the budget process for those who were not familiar with it.

NEW BUSINESS

- A. Commissioners' Comments. Commissioner Wygonowski was interested in reviewing the Volunteer Pension Committee's work on the volunteer pension fund. Chairman McIntyre will schedule a meeting. There was discussion about the status of the fund.

Commissioner Epstein commented on helping the Fire Department to recruit and retain fire fighters to be adjusting to the increase in call volume. Their needs to be some strategizing about this issue. Commissioner McIntyre expressed his thoughts on doing more public relations to educate the residents about the Fire Department operations. Most people do not understand mutual aid unless they are in the fire service.

- B. Financial Audit. Mr. Lupkas distributed copies of the abridged version for review of the Financial Statements and auditor's report. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office. He reported it is online and was filed on January 31, 2024. He will check with the Executive Director to make sure the electronic copies have been sent to all the Commissioners. He asked that the Commissioners review the documents and forward any questions or concerns to Mr. Lupkas to address or discuss at the next Board meeting.

The first 3 pages are the only thing in the financial statement that is the auditors'. They give their opinion that this presents the District's numbers fairly as given to them as of June 30. It does take time to prepare this document. It is usually due by December 31 with the possible request for extensions with the State which the District did have.

Page 4 is a section for management discussion and analysis. This shows the highlights of the finances for the year both positive and negative. The next page is the Balance Sheet for the District for the General Fund. Total Fund Balance is \$1.7 million with the increase for the year. \$1.5 million is unassigned. \$125,000 that was assigned was in the 2024 budget. \$1,554 is left in the “rainy day” fund. The next page is the Revenue and Expense statement for the General Fund. He explained the items on each page. More detailed information can be found on the complete audit document. Any questions or concerns can be addressed at the next Board meeting. The last page of the documents was information about tax collection. He noted that the collection rate was 99.22%.

- C. Budget Adjustments. There was a resolution presented approving Budget modifications for the sale of District assets. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office. Those assets were: Tack 4 (\$16,200), Aerial truck (\$173,953) and an ambulance (\$18,000). \$50,000 was replaced from those sales to the equipment reserve fund. Car 3 of the Chief’s vehicles is being replaced. That cost is \$11,800 higher than the original quote. The extra funds to purchase came from the sale of assets.

A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Smith and unanimously approved to vote on the resolution in 3 sections. The first vote would be the funds used from the sale of assets, the second vote would be the replacement of funds into the equipment fund and third vote being the market value increase for the vehicle in the Chief’s fleet.

A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Gorenson and unanimously approved to accept items 1 – 3 of the resolution transferring funds from the sale of assets as noted above to the Equipment Fund.

A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Smith and unanimously approved to accept item 4 of the resolution to replace \$50,000 into the Equipment Replacement fund.

A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Smith and unanimously approved to accept item 5 of the resolution to provide an additional \$11,800 for the purchase of one of the Fire Chief’s vehicles in his fleet.

- D. Approval of Contracts/Contractors. The Fire Chief proposed adding American Embroidery to their list of vendors for uniforms. He distributed business information about the company.

A motion was made by Commissioner Sokolowski, seconded by Commissioner Smith and unanimously approved to add American Embroidery to the Fire Department’s list of vendors for uniforms.

PUBLIC COMMENT

There were no public comments to report.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

There were no items scheduled under Executive Session.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business, a motion was made by Commissioner Sokolowski, seconded by Commissioner Smith and unanimously approved to adjourn the meeting at 7:38 PM.

ATTEST:

Charles R. Epstein, Secretary

Nancy Deegan
Recording Secretary

