

Cromwell Fire District

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FIRE DISTRICT OFFICE
WATER DIVISION
COMMUNICATION CENTER

FIRE DEPARTMENT
FIRE MARSHAL'S OFFICE

BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
Special Board of Commissioners' Meeting
Thursday, April 11, 2024, 5:30 PM
Coles Road Firehouse
105 Coles Road
Cromwell, CT

A Special Board of Commissioners' meeting was held on Thursday, April 11, 2024, at 5:30 PM, at the Coles Road Firehouse, 105 Coles Road, Cromwell, CT, to discuss and act upon special Fire District business.

Commissioners Roger Rukowicz (President), Donald Smith, Charles Epstein, Mertie Terry, John Sokolowski, Steve Wygonowski and Chip Darius (via skype) attended. Also attending were Executive Director Roger Hart, Finance Manager Mike Lupkas, Communications Manager Justin Lonergan, Water Operations Manager Joe Palmieri, Fire Marshal Harold Holmes, Fire Chief Jason Brade, Assistant Fire Chief Richard Driscoll, Firefighter Union President Alan Dominy and firefighter union members. Commissioners Donald Goranson and Robert McIntyre were absent.

- I. Call to Order. The meeting was called to order at 5:30 PM by President Rukowicz. There was a moment of silence for Commissioner Goranson's son (David) who passed away a couple of days ago.
- II. Approval of Agenda. A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Smith and unanimously approved to accept the agenda as submitted.
- III. Public Comment. James Rude, 25 Highridge Rd., submitted comments via email and requested they be read into the record of this meeting. They are as follows: Newsletter: Thank you for putting the dates for a public information session and the budget vote into the newsletter. Communication can only help improve the Commission's relationship with Cromwell residents. Unfortunately by the time the newsletter arrives at homes and businesses in Cromwell there will likely be very little time before the scheduled public information session.

Fire District Tax Increase: I am hearing that the Commission is considering a tax increase for the coming 2024-2025 year to 3.36 mils from current level of 3.0 mils or 12%. This follows last year's (2023-2024) tax increase of 25 – 30% based upon the property revaluation and the 2021-2022 tax increase from 2.5 mils to 3.0 mils or 20%. Cumulatively, pushing a 60% increase since 2021. Staggering! I truly hope the Commission can adequately explain the need for another double digit increase to the taxpayers. Is it based upon factual data and

studies, or is it an emotional reaction to recent changes made by the Cromwell Police Department and/or other factors that may or may not have a significant impact on EMS activity. I trust the presentation at the public information session will be able to convince Town taxpayers that another significant tax increase is warranted (if that is the result of tonight's special meeting vote). Thank you.

Alan Dominy, President of Local 4662, read a prepared statement from the Union. The statement thanked the Board for their support of the Fire Department and gave the Board their full support of the 2024-2025 budget being proposed. The budget is a responsible and logical step forward for the Fire Department and the citizens of Cromwell. There have been significant changes in the Fire Department in the last five years. The objective is always adequate fire and medical response, 24/7. The changes in the Fire Department are the same changes that other departments are experiencing throughout CT and the US. Call volume continues to increase. The past year was a 15% increase in call volume. The Cromwell population continues to grow. Volunteers are not as available as they once were. This has led to other ways to meet the call demand such as full-time career and part-time firefighters. Mutual Aid EMS partners no longer have readily available resources to send to Cromwell when Cromwell's crews are tied up with other calls. That situation has become more frequent over the last few years. A responsible option is not waiting up to 20 min. for an ambulance out of Hartford. What is unique to Cromwell is the Board's approach to solving the problem. The proposed budget will allow the Fire Department to continue to move forward and provide the best services. There is a neighboring department with similar staffing plans but without providing medical services and is a higher cost to its citizens. This budget supports the full operation of the Fire Department including the Chief's office, training, equipment and operations for fire and EMS. The members of Local 4662 wanted to thank the Board for their support of this proposed budget.

IV. New Business

A. Discussion on Fiscal Year 2024/2025 Fire/Water District Operating Budget/Equipment Reserve Funds. Mr. Hart gave a powerpoint presentation of the Fire District 2024/2025 proposed budget starting with Fire and IT/Communications. A copy is available in the Fire District Office. Mr. Hart worked on this budget with the Department heads and Budget & Oversight Committee. He presented a modified version based on the changes made by the Budget & Oversight Committee.

- Fire District revenue was discussed first. There was a slight increase in revenue of 7.12% which also will have a transfer of funds from the Tower Fund and Fund balance. The Tournament Players Championship account was split out from the Miscellaneous Revenue account. Taking the Tournament Players Championship out will allow tracking its cost so it can be budgeted moving forward.
- Expenses were reviewed under Commission/Computer Operations/Administration. There were nominal increases in computer operations, savings in utilities and overall a slight savings. Adjustments in administration payroll were explained.
- The Fire Chief's office payroll had increases due to employment agreements and CBA's. Also increasing the Ass't Chief's hours from 30 to 40 hrs./wk. in January.
- For Fire & EMS Operations, overtime was split out so they can better track it. It was factored into payroll to increase staffing by 2 people per squad and there are 4 squads. There were increases in payroll due to CBA's. This was an increase of 34.66% in that account. There was a decrease in part-time firefighter staff which

allowed for the extra funds to be used to staff one more person totaling 9 people per squad.

- Fire Operating expenses tend to go up every year because most of them are service agreements.
- The Fire Marshal's Office also had increases due to collective bargaining agreements. It amounted to 6.23%. A 4.87% increase in that budget overall.
- Communications/Building & Grounds, there were no large increases. Overtime was split so it could be tracked. There were step increases and CBA agreements that resulted in the increase in payroll.
- Insurance and Debt services showed an increase due to an increase in personnel.
- Regarding Apparatus and Equipment, there were only nominal increases.
- In the Equipment Reserve Fund the Executive Director recommended combining similar lines to fund needed projects and consolidate/close out lines, fund lines that are in the red from the holding account and over-funded lines, clean up for audits and include new Department head requests.
- Fire Equipment Reserve fund was reviewed. The Chief had put in for some new equipment. Some long standing projects are getting funding to complete. Much needed equipment will also be purchased. The objective will be to use old money and new money.
- IT Equipment Reserve Fund will have money from the Water, Tower and District to fund the Milestone Camera System.

Mr. Hart reviewed the Revenue vs. Expenditures. Commissioner Wygonowski discussed not waiting until January to give the Assistant Chiefs a 40 hour week as suggested in the proposed budget based on the increase in fire staff being proposed. This was the original request by Chief Brade, however, the Chief wanted to be as fiscally responsible as possible. The Chief originally thought that based on new standards from OSHA and other requirements, it would be better to implement the increase in July 2024 instead of waiting until January. It would be an additional \$20,000 to the proposed budget.

A motion was made by Commissioner Wygonowski, seconded by Commissioner Epstein and unanimously approved to increase payroll line 01110-5105 to fully fund 2 Assistant Chiefs to 40 hrs. a week for the full fiscal year 2024-2025.

Mr. Hart continued with the proposed Water Division budget for FY 2024-2025.

- Regarding Revenue, there will be no water rate increases this year. They will be transferring \$175,000 from the Fund Balance. The STIF account was discussed. The interest is doing very well.
- Water Expenses, Payroll & Power and Pumping was reviewed. Payroll was increased due to salary increases and adding another Maintainer to the staff. Power and Pumping decreased as a utility expense.
- Water Expenses, Transmission & Distribution, Other Operating Expenses, extra money was added for parts to the SCADA system. There was a slight increase in the uniforms account to accommodate the new Maintainer that is hired.
- Truck and Garage expenses continue to rise so that account increased by 12.50%.
- The Water Capital fund was reviewed along with the requests for FY 24-25.
- Operating expenses total \$2,439,724.

Mr. Lupkas reviewed the numbers on the revenue side to increase the 2 Assistant Fire Chiefs' work week by 10 hrs. each to 40 hrs./wk. The numbers reflect the increase of 10 hrs./wk. per Ass't Chief. Account 014100 would become \$6,364,894. The other account 01110-5105 would be \$381,641. The mil rate would go to 3.40 mils with a .40 increase.

With the above changes the bottom number would be \$8,136,542, for both the Fire and Water Division budgets.

A motion was made by Commissioner Sokolowski, seconded by Commissioner Darius and unanimously approved to accept the revised Fire and IT/Communication proposed budget for FY 24-25.

A motion was made by Commissioner Sokolowski, seconded by Commissioner Epstein and unanimously approved to accept the Water Division proposed budget for FY 24-25.

The revised figure for the General Fund Equipment Reserve fund is \$510,400.

A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Smith and unanimously approved to accept the revised General Fund Equipment Reserve fund amount as \$510,400.

A motion was made by Commissioner Wygonowski, seconded by Commissioner Smith and unanimously approved to accept the revised figure of the Water Capital Fund as \$487,900.

B. Discussion and Decision of the Tax Levy for the Fiscal Year Commencing July 1, 2024.

A motion was made by Commissioner Sokolowski, seconded by Commissioner Darius and unanimously approved that with the approval of the proposed FY 2024-2025 Fire District budget, there will be a mil rate increase of .40 making the mil rate 3.40.

- V. Commissioners' Comments. Commissioner Sokolowski thanked the Departments heads, Executive Director and Mr. Neto for their time and effort to bring forward a budget to the Budget & Oversight Committee that was reasonable. They asked for a budget that set priorities of what is needed to move forward. There has been a lot of progress over the last year and a half. This budget is a reflection of that. He thanked everyone for their consideration of the increases requested, especially staffing of the Fire Department. It is important to get ahead of the curve in terms of anticipated new OSHA standards.

Commissioner Epstein asked that people get the word out about the budget and inform the community asking them to attend the informational session to understand the needs of the Fire District.

Commissioner Terry discussed making a donation in memory of Commissioner Goranson's son David. President Rukowicz plans to take care of making a donation, and he will split a donation between two organizations.

President Rukowicz thanked the Executive Director, former Executive Director, Department heads, the President of Local 4662 and the firefighters that came out to show support for the Board and the budget. This budget represents the hard work of all. He noted that the Public hearing will be Wednesday, April 17, 2024, to present the proposed budget to the Town. The

Town vote should be scheduled for May 14, 2024. They are trying to do everything possible to make the information available to the tax payers so that they can understand the needs of the District.

Commissioner Darius congratulated the Commission and the Department heads for the professional and responsible budget being brought forward to the Town. It is forward looking and positioning the District well. It is up to the Commissioners to educate the taxpayers so they understand the District needs that are necessary and appropriate.

A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Sokolowski and unanimously approved to establish that the new mil rate, if the budget is accepted, will go into effective at the beginning of the Fiscal Year, July 1, 2024.

- VI. 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 6:30 PM.

ATTEST:

Charles R. Epstein, Secretary

Nancy Deegan
Recording Secretary

