

Cromwell Fire District

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FIRE DISTRICT OFFICE
WATER DIVISION

FIRE DEPARTMENT
FIRE MARSHAL'S OFFICE

BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS **ANNUAL DISTRICT BUDGET MEETING**

Tuesday, May 21, 2019

6:00 PM

Coles Road Firehouse

105 Coles Road

Cromwell, CT

The Annual District Budget Meeting of electors and citizens qualified to vote in meetings of the Cromwell Fire District, Cromwell, Connecticut was held at the Coles Road Firehouse, 105 Coles Road, in the Town of Cromwell, Connecticut on Tuesday, May 21, 2019, at 6:00 PM.

The meeting was called to order by President Lee Brow at 6:05 PM. The President acted as District Clerk, and confirmed there was a quorum of legal voters and citizens of the Cromwell Fire District present. There were 26 qualified voters in attendance. The District Clerk read the Call of the Meeting. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office. Copies of budget information related to the meeting agenda were available to attendees for review prior to the meeting being called to order and also available on the District's website.

The Executive Director began the meeting by giving a brief overview of the Cromwell Fire District 2019/2020 budget. After his presentation the meeting will be open to the public for questions and comments. Mr. Neto began by stating that this year was different than other budget years because the District engaged all the District personnel who are stakeholders in expenditures and/or modifying the operation. It was a total of 12 individuals working with the Executive Director, the Fire Chief and the former Water Operations Director to look at every point of expenditure on every single line item. It is a balanced budget without a tax increase.

Mr. Neto then discussed the General Fund which includes the Fire Department, Fire Marshal's Office and Communications. The fund was formerly at \$4,507,018. Those are the expenses required to run the District portion of the Fire Department next year. Between tax and EMS billing, the District anticipates the 2.50 mil rate that is on the books today to receive sufficient revenue to meet the expenditures of approximately \$4.5 million. Some highlights he mentioned were the salary increases of 2%. The health benefits increase was 12.7% year over year. The history behind benefits is that the District had been partnered with the Town to be under the same medical coverage including dental and vision. At that time the District paid their share. At the beginning of this year, the District was asked by the Town to separate from them for employee medical coverage. After much research, the District has come up with coverage, however, it is going to cost the District an increase of 12.7% year over year. If the District had stayed with the Town and Board of Education using Connecticare the increase would have been 29% for the same medical coverage. He asked if there were any questions from the public.

Bill Clare, 2 Rosewood Lane, recognized and appreciated the amount of work done by many people to prepare this year's budget. He asked if consideration was given to the fact that a large portion of revenue projected would come from property tax. At this point it is unknown what the Governor will do in terms of taking that tax revenue away from the towns. He added that revenue is a large piece of this budget. The Executive Director agreed there are a lot of unknowns. Mr. Neto noted that he has been keeping track of what is going on at the Capital, and it seems like the tax proposal before the legislature is slowly dying. However, if it passes, there will not be sufficient revenue coming in. The amount is estimated to be between \$260,000 - \$270,000. There will be two options should the bill pass. One would be to readjust the budget for the amount it is deficient. In order to do that with that amount of money, there would need to be layoffs. Services and coverage would suffer. The other option would be to have a supplemental tax bill with an explanation as to why there is a supplemental tax bill. Mr. Clare repeated what was said by Mr. Neto. If the Governor's tax bill passes, and the revenue from property taxes shifts from the District to the State, the District will be "screwed." The District cannot control what will happen and where the revenues will go.

Tara Azer, 82 Willowbrook Rd., had a question about the budget. She thought that the budget had been finalized before the restructuring of the volunteers. She wondered how the money is going to be distributed once the new volunteer program is in place. Mr. Neto confirmed that the Commissioners have approved a new staffing model for the volunteers that will be effective July 1. The volunteers have not been eliminated, and the District has always compensated volunteers. Those dollars which were for stipends and pay-per-call will now be re-allocated for part-time wages. In the budget under EMS/Fire Operations there are things such as payroll, shift coverage, volunteer point system and volunteer stipend. All of those (approximately \$417,000/\$427,000) will be rolled into part-time wages. The relationship between those members and the District will become an employer/employee relationship. That is how staff will be compensated. They will no longer be classified as volunteers because there are some issues with that terminology. The District has learned the law is very clear that volunteers should not be receiving compensation. There will be a volunteer component to the new staffing model, but a true volunteer does not get compensated. However, free training remains available. Training costs can range from \$3,000 to \$5,700 to certify a person that can provide a public safety role in either fire ground or medical assistance.

James Demetriades, 272 Skyview Dr., clarified that the new staffing model that has just been adopted has a pay structure for "volunteers" which has been reclassified to part-time wages. The budget presented at this meeting is dated April 16, 2019. He asked if the vote was for pre-adopted changes or post-adopted changes. The changes are the same in terms of dollar amounts. Mr. Demetriades asked if the budget should be republished with the new categories. Mr. Neto responded that the line items are there, and the account numbers have not changed. It is only the names on some of the accounts that are different. The dollars are not moving from one account to another. Mr. Demetriades asked if the volunteers becoming part-time employees will see any changes in their terms and conditions of employment and benefits. He asked how the relationship is changing between the volunteers, the District and the Fire Department. The changes will be that those staff members will be assigned a work schedule. They will have the opportunity to be available to be scheduled for part-time work, unscheduled part-time work or volunteer. The first two categories will be compensated on an hourly rate established by the Commission. The last category will not be compensated.

Mr. Demetriades had another question regarding the radio systems upgrade from last fiscal year. He asked where the District is with that project. The Executive Director stated that the purpose of

the meeting following this meeting will be to get approval from the Town for the District to go out for bonding for this project.

Ms. Azer spoke again and stated that different components of the staffing model have different requirements for those that choose to be part-time vs. the current volunteer system. There could be someone who has volunteered for many years, but now does not meet the requirements for a part-time position so a lateral move is not possible with some of the members that Cromwell has invested in education and training. They do not have the same opportunities they had in the past. Mr. Neto responded that one of the first requirements for a 911 call is predictable response with the amount of people that are in the firehouse. Different incidents require different staffing levels. The District is trying to provide the level of service that the community needs. In order to do that, the District has created a staffing model to meet those needs and comply with all Federal, State and local labor laws as well as compliance with OSHA and NFPA.

Ann Kaiser, 7 Bow Lane, had a comment regarding the volunteers stating if there are volunteers currently classified as volunteers who wanted to go into the part-time program, but found the monetary compensation is not enough to meet their household financial obligations and they have a full-time job, would it be possible for those individuals to go full time to concentrate on becoming a full-time firefighter and quitting their regular full-time job. Mr. Neto explained that there is always that possibility if there is an opening for a full-time person. The system is designed to be a stepping stone process if that is what people want to do. There are various certifications that must be met. However, Mr. Neto does not feel that Cromwell can afford full-time firefighting, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. He agreed that part-timers may not get as many hours as they are used to, but what needs to be considered is the way the system is operating today. Currently the volunteers decide when they are going to respond, when they are going to be scheduled and when they are going to engage. The community's emergency needs cannot be counted on by a volunteer's decision to participate as a volunteer. It is the District's responsibility to protect the public 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Predictable response is a basic requirement they will be focusing on. It is unfortunate that not everyone will have the opportunity, but it is for the greater good. He added they are not making widgets, this is life safety.

Samantha Slade, Nooks Hill Road, commented that it would be helpful if information presented at the meetings could be made publically available prior to the meetings. She had no issues with the budget per say, but rather just the way the public is notified. She added to Mr. Clare's comments about the budget not being more prepared for a possible loss of tax revenue. She felt that the unpredictability with the Governor's tax proposal seems almost like smoke and mirrors as far as what is being presented tonight. Mr. Neto noted that there has been discussion with the tax proposal, and the Bill has not passed the House. It has not gone to the Senate. It is a proposal. Mr. Neto has no insight that this pending legislation is coming. It is not to say that the legislation is not possible. The Executive Director does not believe that this will pass this year. This doesn't make the issue any less on the budget. They have tried very hard with those involved in the budget to come up with a lean budget. The Town will face the same issues should the Governor's proposal move forward. As a Councilwoman, Ms. Slade will have to deal with a \$2.4 million shortfall. He added that the District's budget is realistic and does not include layoffs. It meets the service requirements that the District anticipates to provide to the citizens and taxpayers to keep everyone safe.

Someone that did not identify themselves also agreed with Ms. Slade's comments regarding communication. She had a question regarding the Office of the Fire Chief and Fire Marshal. She wanted to know how many people are on the payroll in those offices. Mr. Neto responded that in

the Fire Marshal's office there is the Fire Marshal and three inspectors. In the Fire Chief's office there is the Fire Chief, one administrative assistant, one Deputy Fire Chief and one Assistant Chief. They are paid a stipend rather than an hourly rate. However, that will be changing as the District moves forward.

Nicole LaTerra, 13 Hicksville Rd., asked if there were absentee ballots for this type of voting because she had a class to attend for the Fire Department. She also commented that although the Executive Director said it is a balanced budget for this year, there are large ticket items going forward such as employing new additional career fire staff, part-time fire/EMS staff, adding personnel to the Dispatch Center, radio system, rechas is an ambulance, possibly purchasing new apparatus. How will this budget stay balanced in the future. Mr. Neto stated that there is no new additional career fire staff being hired. The President added that the budget reflects 8 career staff for this year and next year. That is not changing. If an ambulance needs to be rechas is, it will occur this year. If the situation regarding taxes resurfaces next year, the District will plan to deal with a \$268,000 shortfall. Mr. Neto stated that if the District needs to reduce next year's budget by a 1/4 of a million dollars, the only way to accomplish that will be to remove people from payroll. It will be a massive issue to deal with should that happen.

Deb Clare, 2 Rosewood Lane, has been following the restructuring of the Fire Department. If a current EMT who signs up for shifts and does calls wants to be put on a schedule, they need to have Firefighter I training. She asked if this was the correct information. Mr. Neto stated that is part of the plan. She asked if it was a requirement. Mr. Neto stated that it will not be a requirement at the beginning of the process. There is no way that today Cromwell has enough people at a minimum of 5 but more like 6 people to respond to a call. The goal is to have a blend of part-time and career 24 hrs. a day, 7 days a week. The goal for a response is one truck, one ambulance. Ideally everyone should be cross-trained so that any task can be performed that the emergency requires. That is what the career firefighters are capable of doing. He added that the Department does a great job but they cannot predict the amount of people that will respond to a 911 call at 3:00 AM. Predictability is a requirement that is supported by the Board of Commissioners, the Executive Director and the Fire Chief. It is all about public safety, community service and doing the right thing for the public. The citizens in the Town of Cromwell deserve it and will get it with the support of the Fire District.

Ann Kaizer asked for the breakout of the various shifts. Currently there are 12 hour shifts for the career firefighters. They work 6 AM to 6 PM. That needs to be re-vamped, however, the career firefighters work in compliance with a collective bargaining agreement which needs to be negotiated. If the schedule is revamped, there may be 2 career staff, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week with 4 part-time people scheduled or unscheduled. The other scheduling option is that the career staff will remain the same, 6 AM to 6 PM with a part-time workforce that resides in the firehouse with an option of 2, 6 hour shifts, 1 12 hour shift or if the career staff go to 7 days a week the options would be 4, 6 hour shifts, 3 8 hours shifts or 2, 12 hours shifts that equals 24 hours. There are enough resources and software to make this happen.

James Demitriotis (Councilman), 272 Skyview Dr., agreed with Ms. Slade's comments about getting the word out. The Executive Director discussed the fact that the District is not on Facebook and the reasons why. He will be working on a way for the District to utilize Facebook but without the option of posting due to cost and issues with posting. He will be following up with the Town Manager to learn how the District can utilize Facebook since it is working for the Town.

Commissioner Charles Epstein commented on the turnovers the Fire Department has had this year which is one reason why the District is looking to revamp coverage. There have been 36 calls that were turned over this year. That means there were 36 calls that came through the 911 center and there was no staff available. It could have been because they were out on a call or it was a second call or there was no one at the firehouse at that time. He is hoping that the change will provide more availability.

Ann Kaiser asked if the calls are more medical issues or fire issues. Commissioner Epstein stated that they do approximately 2,000 ambulance calls per year, and 800 fire calls per year. He stated it is about providing availability.

Ashlyn Cooke, 12 Grove Rd., has been in the EMS service for 7 years. She supported what Commissioner Epstein said about having coverage for a 911 call. She has seen a lack of staff here, and it is getting worse as time goes on. She thanked Commissioner Epstein for bringing up the coverage issue.

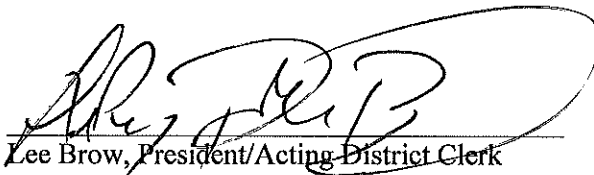
Roger Thompson, 16A Country Squire Dr., has been in the Department for 13 years. He stated as a side note, in the beginning of 2019, 19 applications for membership were submitted and frozen. Also, the top responder for EMS was put on administrative leave.

A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Rukowicz and approved 15 in favor and 11 nay votes to consider and act upon a resolution to approve the budget for the Cromwell Fire District and its related funds, including but not limited to the Water Division, for the fiscal year commencing July 1, 2019.

A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Rukowicz and unanimously approved to consider and act upon a resolution to lay a tax on the taxable Grand List of the Cromwell Fire District and fix the tax rate of the District to meet the expenses of the District for the fiscal year commencing July 1, 2019. It was noted that the tax rate laid will be 2.50 mils.

There being no further business, a motion was made by Commissioner Colligan, seconded by Commissioner Epstein and unanimously approved to adjourn the Annual District Budget meeting at 6:50 PM.

ATTEST:



Lee Brow, President/Acting District Clerk

Nancy Deegan
Recording Secretary
5-30-19