

Cromwell Fire District

1 West Street
Cromwell, CT 06416
Telephone 860-635-4420

FIRE DISTRICT OFFICE
WATER DIVISION

FIRE DEPARTMENT
FIRE MARSHAL'S OFFICE

BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS **Special Board of Commissioners' Meeting**

Tuesday, October 1, 2019

6:00 PM

**Coles Road Firehouse
105 Coles Road
Cromwell, CT**

A Special Board of Commissioners' Meeting was held on Tuesday, October 1, 2019, at 6:00 PM, at 105 Coles Road, Cromwell, CT to consider and act upon Special Fire District business.

Commissioners Lee Brow (President), Roger Rukowicz, Jason Hinnners, David Colligan, Allan Spotts, Robert Donohue, Julius Neto, Charles Epstein and Mertie Terry attended. Commissioner Johnathon Hamlin had an excused absence.

CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order at 6:02 PM by President Brow.

PUBLIC COMMENT

There were no public comments to report.

NEW BUSINESS

- A. Decision to Accept or Deny the SAFER Grant. President Brow opened the meeting up to questions or comments from the Commissioners or Executive Director. The Executive Director distributed copies of a couple of different scenarios regarding the expenses associated with accepting the SAFER grant for four firefighters. The second example identifies no staffing changes to the present six staff members on duty and what the impact will be in years 1, 2 and 3. The first example is a worst case scenario which would be if the Board and the Fire Chief decide they are going to put one of the four firefighters to the on-duty roster which will have 3 firefighters continuously around the clock, seven days a week. That would be the most expensive scenario but real simple because a person is added and not taking away some part-time hours. There is more coverage, but no dollars to offset it. For the second example, in the first 3 years there is a positive variance to the budget, to the expenses by \$16,000, assuming that everything is the way it is today. If we go to the other staffing scenario, it changes and expenses go up significantly because no part-time dollars are being offset.

Mr. Neto advised that the Board needs to address a couple of questions. One is what is the anticipated volume of calls going forward. Also, what will the community need in the next 3-5 years. If the assumption is correct based on historical perspective, there is an increase in demand of EMS and fire service. There should be some awareness of these facts to be addressed now or within the next 3-5 years. Should it be addressed with full-time employment or part-time employment. That will be another decision to be made. A full-time firefighter brings predictability but also brings cost. On the average the salary for a full-time firefighter will be \$70,000 without benefits. With all the benefits added in the cost goes to roughly \$101,000. Mr. Neto just wanted to share the reality of the numbers. What is the level of service that the District wants to provide to the town, what is the level of service that is going to be required and what is the strategy to get there.

Mr. Neto added that under the worst case scenario which is the most expensive, at the end of the third year there could possibly be a $\frac{1}{4}$ mil rate increase. That is Mr. Neto's projection based on the current mil rate and assumptions about the grand list. Some assumptions were built into the model. Mr. Alibrio and Mr. Neto looked at the past three years and how the grand list has been growing and assume that it is going to stay the same or a little better with an average of 3% growth. If a third firefighter were added, and with the second ambulance calls that were discussed, that revenue will increase even though there is a challenge. They would be able to capture the second ambulance that they have been missing. The other side of the story is that the District does not need a SAFER grant to do so. They could use part-time staff to get the second call and the revenue associated with it.

He discussed EMS calls going up and the dollars associated with increased calls are decreasing. After the Affordable Healthcare Act, the numbers started going down. Also with Medicare continuously challenging decreasing the percentages of what we can submit for. He repeated that the challenge for the Commission is to determine what will be needed for services and the ability to pay for it. Commissioner Terry asked about future retirements or turnovers within the next 3 years within the Fire Department. The Chief does not anticipate any turnovers or retirements because they have improved conditions as far as scheduling. Commissioner Terry also asked how many ambulance calls are being turned over. The Chief stated that they are averaging 8 per month. He added 12-14 subsequent or second ambulances when the first one is out. The second one averages 12-14 a month. There are approximately 20 subsequent ambulance calls a month. There are approximately 100 calls per year that are not covered, at an average of \$450 per call.

Commissioner Colligan stated that in his opinion, this is a tough grant to get. For a small community like Cromwell to get this, it is a special opportunity. If the District decides they don't want this grant, it will be difficult to get any future grant awards. He feels we need to look at the future. There are volunteers (although fewer), unscheduled pay-per-call, part-time staff and career. Commissioner Colligan discussed a scenario that happened where two staff members were out sick and two were in classes. Commissioner Colligan had to be on the floor. There were not enough people to cover. At the time he was laid off and able to cover. However, he was putting in 3 days a week to cover shifts at the time. Commissioner Colligan stated he is in favor of this.

Commissioner Epstein began by saying he is in favor of the grant because people in his age group are living longer than their parents lived, and their parents lived longer than their parents. The town has a growing elderly population with new housing coming in for the elderly. The two highways that run through Cromwell are becoming more congested with more accidents happening. Cromwell has reduced its call time from call to scene by 1

minute. That minute is significant. He thinks that is a plus. He asked if instead of raising the mil rate by $\frac{1}{4}$, would it be better to do a gradual increase of perhaps $\frac{1}{16}$ of a mil for the next couple of years. He believes that this grant is what the District needs and is the way to go based on current statistics. He thinks the District will get its money's worth out of it. Mr. Neto responded that the taxing authority in Town cannot tax based on future expenses. Taxes can only be raised based on expenses associated with the current fiscal year. He added that mil rates cannot be raised based on a specific line item. There was a lengthy discussion about expenses and services.

Commissioner Hinnners stated that he is leaning towards being in favor for all the reasons mentioned. The Town is not getting any smaller. He at first wondered if we were taking on a white elephant where it looks really good in the beginning and then saddled with something on the back end. A lot of his concerns have been addressed in listening to input from the other Commissioners. At the moment he is inclined to lean towards a favorable vote.

Commissioner Rukowicz repeated what Commissioner Colligan stated that a lot of work and time was put into the grant application process. In his opinion if the grant is not accepted and turned back over to the government, it will be a very long time before we get another grant award. He agreed that the Town is growing and there are other needs within the Fire Department. The Board needs to plan accordingly. He thinks we should use the money or we are going to bear the cost 100% down the road.

Commissioner Donohue is in favor of the grant for all the right reasons. He has concerns because there is a lot going on in terms of other needs. He had a list of five items that should also be addressed. He feels that if the mil rate needs to be raised, it will have to. He asked how capital projects are financed. If the Town votes tonight in favor of the \$85,000 to replace the boiler at Coles Road, it will be coming from the General fund fund balance. That does not put pressure on this budget. Mr. Neto explained how everything is factored into the budget. Capital dollars are always looked at when trying to reduce expenses or layoffs will occur. Those are the two items that can be effected.

Commissioner Spotts also has been thinking about this issue. He stated that there are other factors that play into this. One is the new minimum wage which will be \$15 an hour by the time this model is in effect. Today the rate went up to \$11. It is not a regular schedule of increases. They are not going to be done annually but at different time periods. There will also be increases in wages for staff that are already in the District payroll. The other concern is paid family medical leave. Money coming to the Fire District and the Town of Cromwell is coming from the same group of people. Part of it is the unpredictability of the Government side of revenue from the State of CT. It is a real problem. It is not getting any better in terms of taxes. All the additional taxes or increase in taxes prevents the same people from looking at mil rate increases. Commissioner Spotts asked if the second grant, \$267,000, can be used to offset some of this expense. It was noted that the money can be used for radios only. Mr. Neto added that both grants are target specific. Commissioner Spotts sees the mil rate going up sooner than 4 years from now. Commissioner Colligan added that the minimum wage issue will not play into the SAFER grant. The model distributed focuses on the SAFER grant. The minimum wage will have a negative impact on the budget at some point because as it is going up, and part-time wages will need to be increased. The full time wages are not as bad, they have been figures into the CBA. The big pressure will be on part-time wages.

A motion was made by Commissioner Spotts, seconded by Commissioner Hinners and unanimously approved to suspend this meeting at this time, 6:35 PM, in order to conduct the 6:30 PM Special District meeting on time.

A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Spotts and unanimously approved to reconvene the meeting at 6:45 PM.

Commissioner Colligan continued the discussion regarding minimum wages by stating that the District has a Collective Bargaining Agreement which gives the District control of what they have and what they will be paying for wages. Commissioner Colligan did agree with Commissioner Spotts, but checked with the Executive Director in terms of the District planning for the minimum wage law. Mr. Neto explained the strategy for planning the hourly rate structure for this year. This issue will need to be addressed every year until the dust settles and details are ironed out which will be 2023.

Commissioner Rukowicz commented on raising the mil rate. He noted that two years ago it was raised $\frac{1}{4}$ of a mil without people getting too upset. He doesn't think raising another $\frac{1}{4}$ will be that upsetting to people in comparison to cable, electricity and other living expenses. If it is handled correctly, there should not be any problems.

Commissioner Epstein commented that he knows no one at the table wants to spend more money for the taxpayers. But the bottom line is when someone calls 9-1-1, we have an obligation to come. The District has seen over the last year or so what happens when the staff cannot perform because they do not have the personnel. He does not think we can be left in that situation any more. The District knows expenses are going to go up. It knows we have to recharis ambulances and buy new ones. The Fire Department also needs new fire trucks and work done on some of the firehouses. Each year will need to be planned. This is what this industry is all about. The District has an obligation to go to the State and negotiate a percentage and show them why they need it. With the Dept. of Health, the District needs to provide coverage at least 80% of the time. When it is not done, it is the District's liability. He does feel that the District is making progress.

President Brow commented that there are some budget issues that the District should worry about. Tax increases are not a popular thing, but that is where things are headed because of the way times have changed. In comparison to other Fire Districts, Cromwell has kept the rates low. The District is at a point where it is going to have to raise rates. The District is at a point where they are recovering from expenses that will cease very shortly. They are also about to be moved from a Class 3 ISO rating to a Class 2 ISO rating. ISO rating effects the cost of what people pay for insurance on their house and property. The lower the number, the better the rate. The staffing change is what made the Fire Department eligible for the rating change as well as being considered for the SAFER grant. He also noted if the District turns the grant down, it will not get it back. Commissioner Terry added that the addition of the call statistics being published on the electronic signs is a testimony to the Department's accomplishments. President Brow added that Mr. Alvarado is working on a Facebook page for the District to advertise its accomplishments. It will also be connected to a Twitter account. There was discussion regarding the new model and more flexibility.

Mr. Jim Bellamo as a former Fire Chief, Commissioner and part of the public at this meeting, was allowed to comment. He stated that the staffing pattern being developed now has been discussed for years. It is not something new. When evening coverage was low, it was discussed to pay staff to be in the firehouse after the day staff left. The new model seems to

be working pretty well. If everyone can be happy with the changes, he felt it would not be a good idea to change things more than they already have been. It is a necessity. He likes that there is some flexibility with the new model. He added that the Fire Department has never gotten push back from the community when it comes to raising rates. That is because they do their jobs, and they are there when needed.

Commissioner Hinnners asked for some feedback from Chief Terenzio. The Chief stated the points brought out are all valid points. He was waiting for some questions. When he started in Cromwell he was able to look at the situation objectively and took into account the historical perspective of what the staffing was. He is able to have a fresh view. He also sees things that pass through the Fire Marshal's office, and noted that the Town is growing by leaps and bounds. The Department must be ready to meet that challenge. He identified almost one year ago the challenge with how staffing was done. Since that time it has been vetted and discussed. It has been challenged and people have been attacked by it. But the Department stayed the course, and the Chief backed up the decisions made by applying for the SAFER grant. The reason why Cromwell got the grant was because they demonstrated to the Federal Government that they are serious about meeting the acronyms that govern them when they respond to calls. They were so effective in their application, they beat out another Town in CT that also applied. That town was told by the Federal Government that they were awarding the grant to another town more in need of it in the center of the State. He appreciates and is gratified by the level of support he has received. He has always felt that Cromwell needs the protection. The dedication is there, but Cromwell needs a predictable level of response. The Chief added that when he first came to Cromwell he was approached by volunteers both EMS and Fire that they were getting burnt out. He was also getting reports from those responding at night. There were not enough people, and other Fire Departments had to be called in. It was noted on Facebook that other Fire Departments are in Cromwell because no one is in Cromwell. It reflects the Chief representing the Fire District administration. He applied for the grant to help the coverage issues. The Chief stated it is his job to protect the town. This grant will help with this process. They will still have the ability to have volunteers and unscheduled members. The current level of six on a shift is comfortable for the Chief. It is a predictable level.

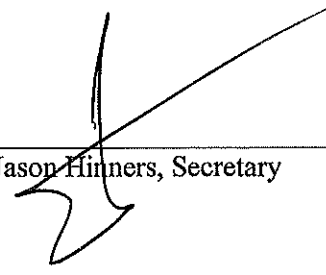
A motion was made by Commissioner Colligan, seconded by Commissioner Hinnners and unanimously approved to accept the SAFER grant as presented. The Chief will be discussing the recruiting options with the Executive Director. He will be vetting through the Personnel Committee. There is a new list of people that were interested in the one position that was available. Whether that number needs to be increased or not needs to be discussed with the Executive Director. It was noted there are ten names on that list. The funding period begins March 20. However, the Chief has a contact at FEMA who he can request an amendment of the funding period to start sooner if the Department is ready. The Chief will also be contacting Jeff Morrisette at the Fire Academy to see if any of our candidates need to be filtered through them.

The Executive Director gave a quick overview of his meeting today with CONN OSHA. He and the Chief met with them and it was a very positive meeting. All items identified were taken care of. He posted the modified payment. The total penalty was \$425. They discussed on-line training as well.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business, a motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Hinnners and unanimously approved to adjourn the meeting at 7:12 PM.

ATTEST:



Jason Hinnners, Secretary

Nancy Deegan
Recording Secretary
10-15-19