

# Cromwell Fire District

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FIRE DISTRICT OFFICE  
WATER DIVISION

FIRE DEPARTMENT  
FIRE MARSHAL'S OFFICE

## **BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS' MEETING ANNUAL BUDGET MEETING**

**Via Conference Call  
Thursday, April 30, 2020  
5:00 PM  
West Street Firehouse  
1 West Street  
Cromwell, CT**

The Annual District Budget Meeting of the Board of Commissioners of the Cromwell Fire District was held via conference call on Thursday, April 30, 2020, at 5:00 PM, at the West Street Firehouse, 1 West Street, Cromwell, CT.

Per the Executive Order No. 7B, Governor Lamont has ordered and directed that in-person open meeting requirements have been suspended. Therefore, the Annual Budget Meeting will be held via conference call. Members of the public may send questions or comments to [jneto@cromwellfd.com](mailto:jneto@cromwellfd.com) on any agenda items.

Commissioners Roger Rukowicz (Acting President), Mertie Terry, David Colligan, Jason Hinnars, John Hamlin, Allan Spotts, Robert Donohue and Charles Epstein all signed in to the call. Also signed in were Julius Neto, Executive Director and Michael Alibrio from BlumShapiro. Acting President Rukowicz had done a roll call of the Commissioners participating. He noted that when necessary Commissioner Rukowicz will ask for feedback from the Commissioners by calling on them alphabetically by last name.

The meeting was called to order at 5:02 PM, by Acting President Rukowicz.

### APPROVAL OF AGENDA

A motion was made by Commissioner Hamlin, seconded by Commissioner Colligan and unanimously approved to accept the Agenda as presented.

### PUBLIC COMMENT

One item for public comment was received by the Executive Director. Mr. Neto submitted the written comments to the Recording Secretary to be included with the minutes. He proceeded to read the comments which were submitted by Andrew Cooke, President of AFSCME Local 1303-475. Mr. Neto stated that he received this document approximately ½ hour ago. In summary, Mr. Cooke's letter stated the importance of the Dispatch center moving forward with its next phase of its improvement which was to have a second dispatcher scheduled with an additional 4 hours per day.

The Acting President asked each Commissioner for their comments. Commissioner Colligan had no comments. Commissioner Epstein commented that he wanted to thank the Acting President for readjusting the meeting schedule to accommodate his work schedule. As an emergency medical dispatch supervisor and instructor, he echoed everything that was included in the letter about the dispatchers. He appreciates the job the staff has done over the years as well as the support the Commission gave for the efforts to improve the Communication Center. He would love to be able to continue to provide more funding, but due to the COVID circumstances, which was not planned, there probably will not be any additional monies to use for the Communication Center. Although he would hope that nothing would be taken away either. He would like to be able to support this, but in lieu of unanticipated expenses, the Board needs to keep an eye on its expenditures and perhaps revisit this issue in six to nine months.

Commissioner Donohue had no comments. Commissioner Hinnners agreed with what Commissioner Epstein had to say. However, he also felt that the issue should be revisited at a later time. Commissioner Hamlin did support the Dispatchers, and he appreciates what they do and the hard work they have put into the Communication Center. However, the Budget is tight especially after hiring four new firefighters as well as trying to replace apparatus this year. He thanked those involved in putting this meeting together this way. Commissioner Terry asked to see Mr. Cooke's document at the Board's next meeting. She agreed that this was important. She is a member of the Executive Committee, and has seen how tight the budget is. She agrees that the Dispatch issue is important and would like to see it revisited in 6 months. Commissioner Spotts agreed with the same comments all the Commissioners had which was that the budget is tight right now, but the issue needs to be revisited. He added that the Executive Committee consisted of himself and Commissioners Terry and Rukowicz. The Committee spent at least 4 to 5 hours going over both sides of the budget with the Executive Director and Mike Alibrio. He is completely comfortable with what the Committee decided for a budget because of the uncertain times ahead financially. He felt the decisions made by the Committee were fair and equitable given the situation we are in. It will allow for the services we have to continue, and agreed with asking that question 3 times regarding "do I need this to do my job."

Justin Lonergan was on the call and discussed the letter from the Dispatchers' Union. He apologized for not getting the information to the Executive Committee during their budget meetings. He had assumed that the issue was a done deal after getting his budget proposal back from the Executive Director. He knows how challenging working with a large budget can be. He discussed this with Mr. Neto, who advised if Justin thought it was important to the Communications Center, that he should address it at this meeting. The union also had a position on the subject as well. He brought up a couple of points. He knows this was discussed and that money is tight, there are a lot of things on the table and this is an unknown time. Last year at the beginning of the budget process there were lengthy presentations and meetings about the Communications Center and the need for additional staffing levels for the EMD and EFD process. EFD is a new system this year that is helping to facilitate the dictated responses for the Fire Department to lessen the number of people needed for specific incidents. They are trying to meet the ISO and National Academy Standards of two dispatchers while EMD is being produced or proceeded in a center. He thinks it is important to add additional staffing. He knows the challenges of the budget and uncertain times, but he thinks it is something that is needed. Even if it is 6 months or a year from now, it is something that is important and should be kept on the table for further discussion. It was presented to the Executive Director, and Mr. Neto did his due diligence and made some cuts to keep their numbers down to make sure the budget wasn't increasing expedientially year over year. Mr. Lonergan did want to discuss this at this meeting to remind everyone what he believes is needed and something that needs to be monitored. He would like to have it revisited in 6 months or a year to move forward to continue to provide better

service to the community and better ability for the dispatchers to process calls and get appropriate responses out to the people who need it.

Commissioner Colligan asked what amount of funds would be needed in 6 months or a year, and what would it cost to have that extra person for those extra hours. Mr. Lonergan stated that he had proposed to the Executive Director an additional 4 hours a day. The plan would have two dispatchers in the center 12 hours a day. The cost was approximately \$27,000 annually. Mr. Neto added that it does not include fringe benefits. The cost could be approximately \$35,000. Conceptually the Commissioners support it, but the financial aspect of it is the unknown. Mr. Neto added that the Fire Department budget was cut as well. He reported he met with each department head and reviewed budgets and came back with final numbers. There was a 15.5% increase year over year in both the Fire Department and Dispatch center. The Commissioners would never accept a 15% increase year over year. Mr. Neto worked with Mr. Alibrio reviewing the numbers. He explained there were three items from the Communication Center that were affected, the EMD/EFD process was one, and the others were training and overtime. With those taken out, there was no reduction in staff year over year, and it was a 6.2% increase. They are not taking serious money away from the budget, and there is no decrease in service for this year. Commissioner Epstein repeated his comments from earlier saying that the Board supports everything the Communication Center is doing, but due to the uncertainty of COVID they must proceed with caution. Commissioner Spotts added that this budget has no increase to the mil rate. Acting President Rukowicz wanted the minutes to reflect that the Dispatch issue will be revisited in six months.

#### NEW BUSINESS

- A. 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, 2020. A copy of said budget as recommended by the Board of Commissioners will be placed on file and available for public inspection at cromwellfd.com. Acting President Rukowicz discussed the process this year with the Executive Committee. The Committee reviewed the water and fire budgets separately. Each item was reviewed line by line. The final drafts were distributed to the Commissioners one week before this meeting for review.

Discussions began with the Water Division budget. Commissioner Colligan thought the Executive Committee did a good job going over the budget. He also thanked Joe Palmieri and the Executive Director for all the work they put into it. Commissioner Epstein appreciated all the hard work done by the Water Department, and he supported the Executive Committee's review and final revisions to the budget. Commissioner Epstein noted that there will be some challenging issues going forward in the Water Division including revisions to the tank. Future plans are being reflected in their budget. Commissioner Donohue had no additional comments to make. He thought the budget looked good. Commissioner Hinnars agreed that everything looked good, and appreciated all the hard work the Committee put into it. Commissioner Hamlin had reviewed the budget and agreed that everything looked good and also thanked the Executive Committee for their hard work. Commissioner Terry thanked the Committee members for their hard work. She is on this Committee and explained how they reviewed the budget line by line. Every expenditure was justified. The Water Division worked with the Committee and discussed reductions. In the end, they reduced their side of the budget by \$35,000. Commissioner Spotts agreed with Commissioner Terry. Acting President Rukowicz thanked his fellow Executive Committee members for their hard work as well as the Executive Director and

Mr. Palmieri. The budget talks went very well. They did go through the budget line by line. Total expenses for the capital fund including debt services is \$2,555,611.

A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Hamlin and unanimously approved to accept the 2020/2021 Budget for the Water Division as proposed.

The other portion of the Fire District budget was Fire, EMS, Dispatch and IT. Acting President Rukowicz went around and asked each Commissioner for their feedback. Commissioner Colligan stated that a lot of hard work was put into the budget by everyone. He stated that the next couple of years will be very tough financially. There are things that will be needed that are expensive such as apparatus. There are some new ways to do things to help the cause such as combining two types of apparatus into one and eliminating response. Commissioner Epstein agreed with what Commissioner Colligan had said. He added that the District needs to watch every penny it spends right now. Due to the uncertainty of the future with the pandemic for now we just need to stay the course. Commissioner Donohue appreciated everyone's input and liked everything as presented in the budget proposals. Commissioner Hinnners also agreed with everything that was said. This is a tough budget year with challenging decisions. The focus is to provide services which is the top priority. Commissioner Hinnners has reviewed it and supports it. Commissioner Hamlin stated he was in full support of this budget. Commissioner Terry stated that the Executive Committee put a lot of work into reviewing this budget line by line. Some tough decisions were made, but she stands by the decisions that were made. Commissioner Spotts stated that this was reviewed line by line, and they did save \$27,000 on two particular line items. Most of the items are needed and can be afforded now. It is a bare bones budget with the ability to revisit certain items in 6 to 9 months. They can maintain the services they have now. It is hopeful that things will be better in the future after the pandemic.

Chief Terenzio was gratified for all the support from the Board regarding the financial planning in the Fire Department. He added they are following the directive set by Mr. Neto on spending. He doesn't think it will be too difficult. They are doing well in terms of service to the community. The Chief discussed the incident that happened on I-91 yesterday. He added that the crews that responded, other than the on-duty staff, were almost double than those in response to this call. That was gratifying since the Department has been trying to get participation increased. He received an email from the neighboring Fire Department expressing their gratitude for the professionalism and the way the Cromwell Fire personnel responded. Commissioner Spotts thanked the Executive Director for all the time and effort he has put into the budget process. Without his efforts, the Fire District would not be where they are. The Acting President thanked the Chief and his staff for all their input to the Executive Committee to prepare this budget proposal. The Acting President stated that he represented the whole Commission in thanking Fire and EMS and how the Board really appreciates what they do on a daily basis. These are uncharted waters, and no one knows what to expect. The Chief thanked the Commission for all their support. Acting President Rukowicz also thanked the Executive Director for all his assistance and support in working on the Fire Department budget as well as the Water Division budget. He pointed out that in the Fire Department budget for the last two years the Board has put \$75,000 aside for apparatus. This year they increased that amount to \$100,000. This will put a total of \$200,000 for the truck fund. The Executive Director added that the General Fund has a total of \$4,918,751.

A motion was made by Commissioner Spotts, seconded by Commissioner Hamlin and unanimously approved to accept the Fire Department budget with the General Fund total of \$4,918,751.

- B. 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, 2020. Acting President Rukowicz read the Tax Rate Bill as submitted to the Town. The bill indicates that the mil rate will remain the same at 2.5 mils.

A motion was made by Commissioners Spotts, seconded by Commissioner Epstein and unanimously approved to accept the Tax Rate Bill as submitted to the Town of Cromwell Tax Collector to lay a tax of 2.5 mils for the Cromwell Fire District with no increase in the mil rate for fiscal year 2020/2021.

#### COMMISSIONERS' COMMENTS

Commissioner Colligan began by thanking everyone that worked so hard on this year's budget. He asked if the District had set a date as to when this was going to come before the Town for a vote. The Executive Director explained that under the Executive Order from Governor Lamont regarding no public meetings, this virtual meeting tonight is THE Annual Budget meeting. This is the first occurrence of having an annual budget meeting without the public. Commissioner Colligan also thanked those responsible to set up this virtual meeting. Without coming up with solutions to social distancing protocol, the District would not be able to move forward during this pandemic. He also expressed interest in moving forward with the Fire Operations Committee. There is a lot of Fire Dept. issues that need to be discussed as well as the Communications Project. He asked that Commissioner Hamlin as Chair schedule a meeting soon.

Commissioner Epstein just asked that everyone stay safe. Commissioner Donohue had the same advice. Commissioner Hamlin also advised that everyone stay safe as well as taking care of their families. He appreciated the effort to put this virtual meeting together. Commissioner Terry thanked everyone and the way in which this community has come together. Commissioner Spotts thanked everyone for their hard work and input. Acting President Rukowicz also thanked everyone for their support and input. A lot of hard work went into the budget this year. Commissioner Hinnners also commented on the hard work done by all. He was glad there was no mil rate increase.

#### 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 5:54 PM.

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Jason Hinnners, Secretary

Nancy Deegan  
Recording Secretary  
5-27-20