

Cromwell Fire District

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FIRE DISTRICT OFFICE
WATER DIVISION

FIRE DEPARTMENT
FIRE MARSHAL'S OFFICE

BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

Fire and Water Divisions

Tuesday, September 21, 2021

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, September 21, 2021, 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 Jason Hinners (Vice President), Charles Epstein, David Colligan, Robert Donohue, Allan Spotts, Robert McIntyre and Mertie Terry attended. Also attending were Executive Director Julius Neto, Fire Chief Jason Balletto, Assistant Fire Chief Jason Brade, Water Operations Manager Joseph Palmieri, Communications Manager Justin Lonergan, Controller Mike Alibrio and Covenant Village Liaison Don Smith. Commissioners Lee Brow (President) and Roger Rukowicz were absent.

CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order at 6:00 PM, by Vice President Hinners. The Pledge of Allegiance was led by Vice President Hinners.

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

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

The Executive Director had an addition to the agenda which was to add Mr. Dan Jock who is from the Pension company and came to speak about the volunteer pension plan. A motion was made by Commissioner Colligan, seconded by Commissioner Spotts and unanimously approved to rescind the previous motion.

A motion was made by Commissioner Colligan, seconded by Commissioner Spotts and unanimously approved to add Mr. Dan Jock to the beginning of this agenda under Item V. to explain the volunteer pension plan and its options.

PUBLIC COMMENT

There were no public comments to report.

APPROVAL OF THE BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS' MEETING MINUTES OF
AUGUST 17, 2021

The minutes of the August 17, 2021, Board of Commissioners' Meeting had been previously distributed and reviewed. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office. A motion was made by Commissioner Donohue, seconded by Commissioner Colligan and unanimously approved to accept the Board of Commissioners' Meeting minutes of August 17, 2021, as submitted.

APPROVAL OF THE SPECIAL BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS MEETING MINUTES OF
AUGUST 31, 2021

The minutes of the Special Board of Commissioners' Meeting of August 31, 2021, were not available. A motion was made by Commissioner Colligan, seconded by Commissioner Epstein and unanimously approved to table this item until the next meeting.

READING OF COMMUNICATIONS & WRITTEN APPEALS TO THE BOARD

Commissioner Epstein had two communications to report. The first was from Bill and Tracy McKnight. They sent a thank-you card for the flowers that were sent to them from the District for the passing of Lt. McKnight's father.

The second communication was from Rodney Bitgood, Chairperson of the Cromwell Children's Coalition, thanking the Fire Department for their participation in the Memorial Day Car Show and their support in community events. Chief Balletto gave credit to Ass't Chief Brade and Capt. Roberts for their work on the show.

Commissioner Colligan introduced Mr. Dan Jock who works for the company that manages the Cromwell Fire District's volunteer pension fund. Mr. Jock recently met with the Pension Committee to explain next steps with the volunteer pension which has been frozen since 2019. Commissioner Colligan who is the Chairman of the Pension Committee, thought it would be beneficial for Mr. Jock to address the full Board of Commissioners so everyone has an understanding of what the pension options are.

Mr. Jock explained the same information he had at the Pension Committee meeting. The volunteer pension funds were frozen in 2019 which means that no one's funds are growing. Whatever has been calculated as a monthly benefit will remain at that monthly amount. There is anywhere between \$100 and \$400 a month that people will be receiving.

The plan had been designed so that a person had to be moved to life member status at retirement age in order to receive a pension. With the pension benefit no longer growing, if someone continues to volunteer and reaches retirement age, they cannot start collecting their benefit until they move to life member status or stop volunteering. This was discussed by the Committee, and it was realized that this would penalize the people who were volunteering and might actually make those individuals stop volunteering. The Committee and Board decided to amend that provision of the plan. Amendments can be made to the plan, but a formal action by the Board of Commissioners needs to be made in order to make any changes to the plan.

The other point for discussion is the plan is frozen, and benefits will not be growing any further. There is enough money in the Trust Fund to cover the pensions. Eventually after a plan is frozen, administrators decide to terminate the plan. This means that eventually everyone that is active is

offered to either wait and take their pension when they turn retirement age or calculate a present value to that pension and cash those people out. That would be the same for terminated people who haven't retired. Rather than pay people out of the pension trust fund, they can opt to purchase an annuity. For those people not cashing out, those pension funds can be transferred to an insurance company to manage. The insurance company will pay all the pensioners until the last one passes away. The Cromwell Fire District does not want to manage the Pension Plan until the last retiree is dead. That would be 40 or 50 years from now including the cost to manage the funds. Once the pension funds dwindle to the point where there are only a few pensioners left, a plan termination could go into effect where the remaining pension funds would be turned over to an insurance company to pay them out.

The Fire District plan is fully funded, 110%. There is enough money to cash out the people that are active and purchase an annuity from an insurance company to take care of the retirees. This will reduce the administrative burden and would not cost the District anything. That is why there was a discussion about terminating the plan. It is an administrative step to getting everyone paid out.

The pension trust fund has approximately \$2 million in it as of June 30. If active people get cashed out and retired people get annuitized the amount would be \$1.880 million. Mr. Jock compared his findings with colleagues who also shop for annuities and they gave similar results as Mr. Jock. If the total cost is \$1.880 million, and there is \$2 million in the fund, there is extra money there which would revert back to the District.

Mr. Jock explained the public option vs. the private option. Before and after the pension froze, people needed 10 years to vest in their benefit. If someone started accruing pension but left before 10 years, they were not able to collect anything. When the plan was frozen, if someone did not have 10 years, they would still be entitled to whatever benefit was frozen, but they would need to continue their service to 10 years to become vested. When a plan terminates in the private sector, everyone is automatically vested. In the public sector, everyone is not automatically vested, it is not required. The consensus from the Pension Committee was to vest people and there is enough money to do that. It had also been voted on by the Pension Committee.

There was another question that had come up whether or not everyone can just be cashed out whether they like it or not. The answer is no, you have to offer people a pension. They would be able to cash out or wait until retirement age to collect that benefit. He suggested not offering retirees a cash out option because the District will pay more for the pensioners that remain when you try to move them to an insurance company to take over the liability.

Some of the tax implications are that with retirees, nothing would change for them. They have withholding from their annuity check. Active people will be given a choice to cash out. The amounts range from \$5,000 to \$40,000. An example is someone will receive a letter in the mail advising them they can wait and take their pension payment or cash out. If cashing out, they can receive a check with a 20% mandatory withholding. That amount will be credited for their tax return or it can be rolled over to an IRA in which case there would not be any taxes paid. If there are people with less than a \$5,000 benefit, they do not have to be offered the annuity option.

Mr. Jock had recommended a couple of companies that could take over and handle the annuities and pay outs. There are insurance companies that buy annuities. There are different types of annuities so the District will need to know what specific insurance companies they could use. He

recommended Detrick as the insurance company to take over the annuities. This would be the right company for the District's needs.

The second company is called Penchecks which will help administer the active people that opt to cash out. This company will complete the proper paperwork and make the proper payments and withholding. They charge \$35 per person. They make their money by floating the money for a month before it is paid out.

The Executive Director noted that the Pension Committee has given Dan direction to write the resolution to cash out the Pension fund by either offering people a cash out option or roll over to another insurance company to manage their funds. This will be placed on next month's agenda. If Commissioners have any questions before then, they were advised to reach out to the Executive Director or Mike Alibrio.

REPORTS OF THE STAFF

- A. Executive Director. The Executive Director's Report for August had been previously distributed and reviewed. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office. Mr. Neto highlighted a few items. Management has been working with the Firefighter's Union on their contract. They submitted final language to the District's attorney for clarification. The Union should get the final draft by the end of the week. Management will plan to meet with the Union within the next week or so.

The communications project is one step closer to being completed. Mr. Neto forwarded copies of the recent testing results. The test came in at 184 points after being tested all over Town.

The Executive Director along with Mr. Palmieri are continuing their work with Environmental Partners on some studies and the interconnection project. They met with Middletown and Berlin successfully in terms of forming a good working relationship.

This Thursday, Sept. 23, 2021, Commissioner Spotts and Executive Director Neto will be evaluating with the Town opportunities for funding under the American Rescue Plan. The Town Council has approved a plan to recognize individuals who worked during COVID at the height of the pandemic. The Cromwell Fire District kept operating during that time despite other communities that were not. The American Rescue Plan funds were given to the Town. They need to be approved by the Board of Finance. If there are no issues, there will be some Fire District employees that are eligible.

The other issue to report is that the Executive Director is working with Mr. Palmieri, the Fire Chief's office, DOT, TPC officials and ONG to deal with the sink hole by the river. This is going to be a massive undertaking. The Chief explained that for the last couple of weeks they have been working with the Town and DOT preparing their plan for the excavation of the hole, and putting it back to where it originally has to go. There was a meeting last week to discuss the rescue plan. Also last week Acting Ass't Chief Petrucelli and Eric Roberts went on Marine 11 by the shoreline to see if there is access into the hole if someone falls into it. They discovered there is no access so they are creating a rescue plan to assist in any way possible from the shore to the inside. Tomorrow the Chief has a meeting with Middletown's and Meriden's Tech and Rescue teams and the CT Urban Search and Rescue Team Task Force to do a rescue clinic for the Fire Department at the TPC. Their responsibilities are to

do all the high angling and trench work that has to be done on top of the hole because the Fire Department cannot do it. They will be working with the rescue teams.

The Fire Department also needs to come up with a rescue plan because they plan on putting a barge into the river to assist with any excavation work that has to be done on the inside. The Fire Department is thinking about putting some vehicles up there throughout the process because they are looking at a 4-month process. They also plan on transferring some gear in case they have to transport any victims.

There will be a need for ONG and the State to create a roadway to get to the site from the District's easement area. The roadway will be constructed within the next few days. Mr. Palmieri added that they located their water mains. There are 2 16-inch water mains that go underneath the road. They have located all the valves. DOT is doing some studies to determine the depth. They will protect their valves with road plates. Their communication and power lines have been identified. The road may have to be re-engineered, but they are not going to start working until they are sure they are not going to damage the water mains. A lot of the equipment has been brought on site in case they need to access it quickly. Mr. Palmieri and Mr. Neto explained their plan of operation.

Commissioner Colligan wanted it in the minutes that this situation at the TPC shows how important it is that the water study and interconnection project be completed to hook up to Middletown, Rocky Hill or Berlin as a backup. If the current situation at the TPC had a water line that broke, Cromwell would be out of luck for a water supply.

- B. Financial Report. The Financial Report for August had been previously distributed and reviewed. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office. Mr. Alibrio reported that the financials are pretty straight forward. It is the second month of the new fiscal year, and the District has started to receive sizeable tax checks from July; almost \$2 million. The same accounts such as Repairs and Maintenance are higher than they should be for this time of year.
- C. Fire Department Chief. The Chief's Report for August had been previously distributed and reviewed. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office. The Chief reported there has been no changes to his report. He asked if anyone had any questions. The Department has been very busy over the last two months. They are starting fire prevention this month. Commissioner Epstein asked if an EMS billing company has been chosen. The Chief reported that the issue has been tabled because the Chief and the Executive Director are still in the process of getting feedback from clients.
- D. Water Operations. The Operations Report for August had been previously distributed and reviewed. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office. Mr. Palmieri added that the Town of Cromwell fall paving projects are starting next week. It is added work for the Water Department because they have to make sure that valves are not painted over, and they need to protect the water mains. The sidewalks on Main St. began yesterday.
- E. Communication Center. The Communication Center report for August had been previously distributed and reviewed. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office. Mr. Lonergan reported that the usual things are ongoing. They hired two part-time Dispatchers. One has almost completed training, the other just started training today. He started looking into the Hydrant Management data base. It had a lot of outdated information. He will be working on that during the next couple of weeks and incorporating the Water

Division. It is an all-inclusive water management system so they can track maintenance and services, flow pressures, etc. so when first responders pull up to a hydrant they know possibly how much water they can get out of the hydrant.

A MOTION WAS MADE BY COMMISSIONER DONOHUE, SECONDED BY COMMISSIONER TERRY AND UNANIMOUSLY APPROVED TO ACCEPT THE REPORTS OF THE STAFF AS PRESENTED.

REPORTS OF THE STANDING COMMITTEES

- A. District Operations. There was no District Operations meeting. There was a discrepancy in the minutes from the July 28, 2021, meeting minutes from the August Board meeting so the minutes were tabled. There was a question about what time the meeting was held. The agenda had the meeting listed as 5:00 PM. The meeting minutes had the time listed as 5:30 PM. The recording secretary was asked to look into the discrepancy. A statement is attached to explain the discrepancy. The meeting was called to order after 5 PM and before 5:30 PM because the meeting time was 5 PM, and the Chair arrived around 5:16 PM.

A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Donohue and unanimously approved to accept the District Operations Committee meeting minutes of July 28, 2021, as explained with discrepancy.

- B. Executive Committee. There was no meeting.
- C. Fire Operations Committee. A meeting was held on September 20, 2021. Minutes had been previously distributed and reviewed. A copy is attached to the minute on file in the Fire District Office. A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Donohue and unanimously approved to accept the Fire Operations, Communications and Apparatus committee reports as presented.
1. Communications Committee. Commissioner Colligan reported that a report had been done by Norcom and Motorola. The system passed at 100% which is somewhat unusual. The Committee asked the Executive Director to sign off on the report. The Committee will be scheduling a meeting soon to go over the report. They are working with the Clerk of the Works and Communication Manager regarding the issues with the Fire Ground channel. They will be looking into cost for the solution to the problem.
 2. Apparatus Committee. Commissioner Hinnners who is the Chairman of the Committee, reported that Chief Balletto has been working very hard to get all the information the Committee needs to make some decisions about apparatus. This would be for Rescue 1 and Tack 4. The Chief has also provided the Committee with an inventory list of what is wanted and needed and cost. The Committee hopes to be making some recommendations very soon.
- D. Pension Committee. Mr. Dan Jock was present at this Board of Commissioners' meeting and explained the Pension Plan options to the Board.
- E. Personnel Committee. A meeting was held on August 10, 2021. The minutes had been tabled from the previous month. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office.

A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Donohue and unanimously approved to accept the Personnel Committee Meeting minutes from August 10, 2021, as submitted.

- F. Water Operations Committee. A meeting was held on August 10, 2021. The minutes had been tabled from last month. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office.

A motion was made by Commissioner Donohue, seconded by Commissioner Epstein and unanimously approved to accept the Water Operations Committee report from August 10, 2021, as submitted.

BOARD APPOINTMENTS

There were no appointments to report.

CONSIDERATION OF OLD BUSINESS

- A. Report of the Town Council Liaison. As a Council member, Mrs. Donohue was proud of the Town of Cromwell as they dealt with COVID. She was happy to sign the American Rescue Plan. She is hoping the Board of Finance will also support it. She has been working with the Fire Chief on the Town's Emergency Management Team. There were a lot of positive things that came out of the last meeting. She thanked those that participated in the 9/11 Memorial. She mentioned that she visited the Firefighters' Memorial in Colorado Springs. She did see Todd Gagnon's name on the memorial. It was impressive and emotional.

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

- B. Reports of the Special Committees

1. Public Safety Tower Committee. There has been no meeting.
2. Health & Safety/Building Committee. A meeting was held on August 5, 2021. The minutes had been tabled from last month. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office.

A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Spotts and unanimously approved to accept the Health & Safety/Building Committee meeting minutes of August 5, 2021, as presented.

3. Bylaws Committee. There has been no meeting. The next meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, October 12, 2021, at 6:30 PM, at the Coles Road Firehouse.

NEW BUSINESS

- A. Commissioners' Comments. Commissioner Terry announced that the Cromwell Children's Coalition is asking for the Fire District's support when looking to the community for food donations in November for families in need. They would appreciate the Fire Department loaning them one of the bays at one of the firehouses to use as a collection location. They will have a truck coming by to pick up the donations. The Coalition will advise on the time

period they are looking for. Chief Balletto noted that the Fire Department will assist in any way they can.

Also, on October 23, 2021, the Children's Coalition will be having pumpkins in the park. They would love to have the Fire Department bring some pumpkins or carved pumpkins on fire apparatus maybe. The rain date is October 30. Anything the Fire District can do will be appreciated. The Chief will touch base with Commissioner Terry next week.

Commissioner Spotts noted that this meeting is his last full Commission meeting. He thanked the Commission and stated that it has been a pleasure working with everyone. They have not always agreed on everything, but were still able to communicate with each other. He is running for Mayor, and if he is successful enough to win the election, he will become the new Town liaison for the Board instead of the Deputy Mayor. He stated that the District is lucky to have the managers and personnel they have. He complimented the Fire Department on the apparatus they had on display for the 9/11 ceremony.

- B. Budgetary Adjustments. There were no adjustments to report.
- C. Approval of Contracts/Contractors. There were no contracts or contractors to be approved.
- D. Application for Relief of Water Bill – Brian Grogan. It was noted that this item had been tabled from last month because the supporting documentation had not been available for the Commissioners to review. The person looking for relief is Brian Grogan, 2 Gatesville Lane, Cromwell, CT. The financial and account information had been distributed to the Commissioners for review. Mr. Grogan's situation had been discussed at previous meetings. He is looking for financial relief from his outstanding balance. There was some discussion about establishing a payment plan. It was noted that the customer has an irrigation system which contributed to the water bills being higher. His application for relief was provided which included his other debt information. The Commissioners did not feel that the customer had made any efforts to negotiate a reasonable payment plan. The recommendation from the Water Operations Committee was to not provide relief to the customer but rather make reasonable payment plan arrangements. Commissioner Colligan reminded everyone that the Water Department now has an Administrative Assistant who is enforcing delinquent water account procedures with warning letters, liens and eventually having water shut off for nonpayment of accounts.

A motion was made by Commissioner McIntyre, seconded by Commissioner Terry and unanimously approved to accept the Water Operations Committee recommendation to instruct the Water Division to not provide financial relief to Mr. Grogan but rather make reasonable payment plan arrangements.

- E. Discussion and Possible Decision on Resolution to Terminate Volunteer Pensions with Appropriate Payouts to Eligible Members. Mr. Dan Jock was present at the beginning of the meeting to explain to the Commissioners their options now that the plan has been frozen. A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Donohue and unanimously approved to table this item.
- F. Discussion and Possible Decision on Policy Eliminating Any EMS Outstanding Invoices for the Former Volunteer Fire Department. The Executive Director explained that from time to time volunteer fire department members have asked for financial relief for an EMS transport. This would be for an outstanding medical invoice in which there is a balance because the

insurance company did not pay the whole amount. Mr. Neto explained the payment process. The policy for relief has been on an individual basis in the past. The President of the Board put this on the agenda to see if the policy could be changed to automatically include a member. Commissioner Colligan noted that in the past the Fire Department has always forgiven a transport bill either for the member or one of their immediate family members. He feels we should continue to take care of the members. Commissioners did feel that people that are volunteering their time should be able to get some relief on their EMS bills. Commissioner Epstein suggested a workshop to discuss all the different issues associated with this. He will schedule a workshop to discuss this issue more thoroughly.

A motion was made by Commissioner McIntyre, seconded by Commissioner Donohue and unanimously approved to table this issue until a workshop can be held to thoroughly evaluate the policy.

- G. Discussion and Possible Decision on Approval for Out of State Travel. The Executive Director explained that this is part of the work the Apparatus and Fire Operations Committee has done. There was discussion at the Apparatus and Fire Operations Committee meetings to send the Fire Chief and the District's mechanic to Greensboro, NC to view a Pierce demo fire/rescue pumper to see if it meets the needs of the Fire Department. The Committees had decided that the cost of this trip would not exceed \$3,000, and it would only be a one-night stay. The Committees feel that a demo is the way to go. If an apparatus has to be ordered, the wait could be a year or more.

A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Colligan and unanimously approved to send the Fire Chief and the Mechanic to Greensboro, NC to evaluate a Pierce rescue/pumper to see if it meets the needs of the Fire Department. The trip is not to exceed \$3,000.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Mr. Jim Rude, Highridge Road thanked the Board for posting the minutes of June 7, 2021. He was not able to locate them on the website prior to his request. He thinks the Commission needs to think about reducing the detail in the minutes of the committees as well as Commission meetings. He feels that there should be more detail included in public comments. Regarding financial reports, he had a question on receivables and aging reports. It would show the detail and the dollar value in accounts receivable when talking about delinquent water accounts being collected. He had questions about the receivables and thought it would be a good report to start reviewing. He wanted to know the status of including a newsletter in the quarterly water bills. Vice President Hanners responded that a committee has been formed, but he did not know the progress of their work. Mr. Rude feels that no communication to the public continues to be problematic. Commissioner Terry asked for feedback from Mr. Rude on what he thinks they should be communicating to the public about. Mr. Rude gave his thoughts.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

There was no Executive Session items for this meeting.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business, a motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Donohue and unanimously approved to adjourn the meeting at 7:45 PM.

Charles R. Epstein, Secretary

Nancy Deegan
Recording Secretary

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