

Cromwell Fire District

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FIRE DISTRICT OFFICE
WATER DIVISION

FIRE DEPARTMENT
FIRE MARSHAL'S OFFICE

BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS **Special District Operations Committee Meeting**

Friday, January 15, 2021

4:30 PM

West Street Firehouse

**1 West Street
Cromwell, CT**

Present: Commissioners Lee Brow (President), Jason Hinnars (Vice President) and Charles Epstein (Secretary). The Executive Director Julius Neto was also in attendance. Commissioner Rukowicz had called into the meeting.

Per Executive Order No. 7B, Governor Lamont has ordered and directed that in-person open meeting requirements be suspended. Therefore, the Special District Operations Committee meeting will be held via conference call. Members of the public may send questions or comments to meetings@cromwellfd.com on any agenda items.

- I. Call to Order. The meeting was called to order at 4:30 PM, by President Brow.
- II. Approval of Agenda. A motion was made by Commissioner Hinnars, seconded by Commissioner Epstein and unanimously approved to accept the agenda as submitted.
- III. Public Comment. There were no public comments received by the Executive Director.
- IV. New Business
 - A. District-wide Goals for Fiscal Year 2021-2022 –Fire and Water Divisions.
Commissioner Epstein discussed the needs of the Water Division. He knows they need a truck so that when they go out on a repair, they have everything they need in one place. They are short staffed so staffing needs to be looked at. Also worth mentioning are the two labor agreements the District has with the Firefighters and Dispatch. Commissioner Epstein noted that the District is in the middle of one agreement, and he is not sure when the other is due to be renegotiated. He thinks the District may be looking at a mil rate increase this year, but they need to assess the situation to determine what is feasible. It would also NOT be a good idea to raise the mil rate every year.

President Brow discussed his thoughts for the Division heads. He stated the Board will need input from the Division heads in terms of budget requests. The Executive Committee will need to take a close look at what is being requested so everything can be reviewed realistically. The President discussed his thoughts on budget requests for the Water Division. He thought the focus would be on infrastructure, certification and

training and the financing associated with that. Also to be considered is hooking up water for both the north and south sides of Town and the opportunity of selling water to surrounding communities. That would be a huge opportunity for the Water Division as a public utility. Any profits can be used by the Water Division for their financial stability.

Regarding the Fire side of the District, Dispatch would be included as part of the Fire Division. Those budget requests should cover infrastructure, training, equipment, growth and retention. Although volunteering is becoming a thing of the past, there are potentially people out there that are willing to do it. The President feels that the Fire Department should still offer that opportunity. That will become a responsibility of the new Fire Chief. Staffing is also a big component which is tied to funding.

Dispatch has a new radio system in process. The President thought there might be opportunities for the Communication Center to Dispatch for other communities? Mr. Neto noted that Cromwell is Berlin's back up including any major incidents. The Communication Center over the last couple of years with the cooperation of staff, have built serious, robust staffing with EMD/EFD. It is fully operational. They are getting some great feedback from the local surrounding towns. Some towns have approached Mr. Lonergan on an informal basis with "what if" scenarios. Mr. Lonergan is looking into the opportunities. Through the budget process, the District may want to consider building on that with a full-time supervisor with additional part-time hours. The District is considering approaching Berlin, Rocky Hill and Newington because there is a group of surrounding towns that is not satisfied with central dispatching because they are not getting the service that they need especially with major incidents. They did not have any concerns with Police dispatching services, but a centralized dispatching communication center is usually geared for PD. EMS and Fire become secondary. Cromwell is presenting a different side where they are the experts on EMS dispatching through EFD. These factors need to be exploited in a positive way. There should be some budget numbers associated with that vision. There will be some tough choices to make because there will be competing budget priorities.

The Executive Director explained some of the priorities going into a budget cycle. Historically the vision of any budget could be expense control, expansion of services or status quo. Status quo would be in two areas, Water and the Communication Center. This should not be the District's strategy. There should be some thought and planning on growing those two divisions. Regarding the Fire Department, the District may grow it based on the service requirements of the District. There has been discussion regarding a secondary ambulance 24 hours a day, 7 days a week or based on a specific time line. That would be a growth. Mr. Neto also thinks that stabilizing staffing should be a priority, and from what he has heard there are a lot of similar visions and expectations.

Also to consider is facilities and grounds. There has been some discussion about solar. Is this something the District wants to get into? Mr. Neto does not feel the District has the local expertise. The question would be should the District allocate funds to do a study that can be reimbursed by receiving reduced rates. The District should not use the same strategy as the local homeowners because as a municipality, the District needs to have the data to support their position. There would need to be a formal process to decide which company to use and also decide if the District should lease or buy.

Interconnection was also discussed. At the next Water Operations meeting they will present the work done by Environmental Partners for cyber security and physical

security. A meeting with Environmental Partners was held yesterday where a walk-about was done at the water facilities. Environmental Partners is working with the State regarding interconnection to see if the District can acquire a grant or loan for \$1.5 million. It is hopeful that the District could be able to receive some funding. Chuck Adelsberger from Environmental Partners has a great relationship with some of those individuals with the State. The State is mandating to some degree to have backup systems. The District is positioned to be what the State's vision is to get more communities connecting to one another. Mr. Neto explained that the District has appropriated through the last budget cycle three major studies that will be completed between now and June 21. The outcomes will give the District a good basis with which to make decisions.

During the walkabout there was discussion about securing the well fields. Environmental Partners were comfortable with the facilities themselves. It was noted there may be some vulnerability with the river. There isn't any way to protect anything coming from the river. One of the studies will give some feedback on that. There was a concern about a trail in Rocky Hill that abuts Cromwell. There have been ATV's, motorcycles and bicycles coming onto Cromwell property there. The other concern is the railroad that runs through that property. Any type of derailment could cause some type of contamination. There is a jet fuel line there that goes up to the airport. This could cause concern especially if there is heavy duty equipment traveling under the railroad trestle. The District does not own the land that abuts it. Last year Mr. Neto thought about trying to obtain some dollars to put up 6 ft. barriers so that any vehicle that hits that would have to stop. Mr. Palmieri noted that there has been scraping of the pipe there which is considered contact with a pipe that is full of jet fuel. If that scrape were one more inch higher, there could have been a disaster. Mr. Neto will be challenging Environmental Partners to work with the pipe company or corporation. The District needs to learn from other towns how to mitigate a potential crisis. The studies and empirical data will support the findings even if it requires serious funding. President Brow would like to share this information with the Executive Committee when they are working on the budget process.

The President discussed the fact that no one wants the mil rate to go up or taxes to go up. He felt that the District is past the point of having that discussion. There are funds to operate but things are getting tight. This would be an opportunity for the Executive Committee and Executive Director to pull up data on taxing districts in this state. He would like to find out what services they provide and how much they are charging. They will have to justify any increases as much as possible. Commissioner Epstein discussed the same points as the President.

The Executive Director discussed Building & Grounds. The District struggles with this because they have not invested a lot of money in those areas. The President stated that his two top bullet points under Water and Fire is infrastructure. He agreed with the Executive Director. There needs to be some serious investigation and contemplation done on that. There is aging equipment and buildings. Chip Darius will be going around to the different facilities and documenting OSHA/Health & Safety issues. Once they are documented issues, they will become an OSHA concern to be rectified.

Commissioner Hinnners stated that one thing that was discussed 6 months to a year ago that was a priority at the time was security. There were discussions about upgrading locks, the key system and the telephone system so all buildings could be integrated. He

asked the Executive Director about the status of that. Mr. Neto reported that they have a cord for the phone system. This turned out to be a \$75,000 item. Mr. Neto thought that there may be \$75,000 left over from the Communication Project to be used for the phone system. He added that they have quotes and they know what is needed. When the time comes to finalize the 21/22 budget, the District will know exactly where they are on the Communication Project. If there are no dollars there, or if there are partial dollars, they will repurpose those funds. He stated the phones are critical. Security is also critical. They have done a couple of things already. They received 2 quotes, and done lots of work to determine the expense. Everything is expensive, and they are looking at \$125,000 for access codes to do all the doors. They would also need to pay for wiring. The vendors are recommending new wiring if we are putting in new mechanisms.

Mr. Neto explained the need for better security at West St. so that the public does not have any access to any part of West St. other than the lobby. This will make the building accessible only to the District's employees so the level of security can be lessened. It was thought to put the Water Division on the left side of the lobby and the Fire Marshal on the right side of the lobby. The expense may only be \$15,000 because the building access for the public is almost eliminated. The question is should the District address the security component at West St., or do they do a total West Street renovation for security and reallocating the space the way it was just explained. Mr. Neto estimated for example, \$60,000 may need to be allocated for the entire project, \$20,000 would be for security, and \$40,000 would be for all the other aspects of the project to realign.

Mr. Neto added that right now the District does not have a Fire Chief. The Court Street station was never designed for sleeping quarters. The question is should there be some discussion about moving the Chief into the West Street environment, leaving the Assistant Chiefs at Court St., and repurposing some of that space to make it more conducive to a 24 hrs/day, 7 days/wk operation. They need to think in terms of expending some dollars today, but it needs to be tied into what we envision in the future. He noted that the Communication Center needs to be looked at too if there are plans for them to expand.

The Executive Director would like to challenge the District to come up with a 5 year strategic plan that gets worked on every year. A strategic plan keeps everyone focused. He explained the District is large enough for the need, but small in terms of how we are built today to accomplish a lot of the objectives. The President suggested that maybe some of this could be addressed if it is specific to and could be added to the Joint Study that the District has partnered with the Town going forward once COVID has been addressed. When the vendor is already going to be looking at the Town and the District combined. There might be additional information from that study. The Executive Director has followed up on the status of the study with the Town Manager. The person that was lined up has since left CCM and gone back to his former position. The person that has taken over the project has tripled the cost. There needs to be a reset on that because the Town Manager is in agreement with the District in terms of the cost. The District had agreed and voted on a \$7,500 cost. The new cost is a lot of money. If there is a cost of \$20,000 for example, the District should plan on doing their own internal study. It can still look at possible joint operations with the Town to minimize expenses. Having a strategic plan for the District will do a lot of good for the District and the taxpayers.

Commissioner Rukowicz thought that a lot of the money in the budget will go for staffing. Mr. Neto reported the District is about 5% above where it should be with payroll expenses. We are not in great shape, but we are not in dire straits either. However, the District is still practicing the continuity plan which is an unexpected expense. Commissioner Rukowicz noted that the ambulance chassis was requested two years ago by the Chief for \$120,000, and that amount was approved. At the end of the fiscal year another \$20,000 was requested. The \$120,000 was carried over to the next year, and \$20,000 was added for the total cost of \$140,000. Six and half months have gone by of this fiscal year.

Commissioner Rukowicz wanted to know what we are waiting for to do this chassis. Mr. Neto explained the first three months of this year, large purchases were timed out. After the 3 months, the order was placed. They anticipate this to be done within the next two to three months. By the end of the fiscal year there will be one re-chassis ambulance. The Executive Director's next discussion with the Fire Chief will be if the other two ambulances need the same thing. The President thought that it was critical that any apparatus or ambulance going forward should be staggered as far as re-chassis or any other major work. The same should be done for fire apparatus. One of the priorities for the next Fire Chief for his equipment should be to rotate out and spread out the servicing cycles of apparatus. Potentially we need a Rescue and an Engine. Both of those could come at a cost of \$1.6 million, being \$800,000 each. This needs to be planned out so there would be a schedule of when a vehicle or apparatus needs to be replaced. They also need to get the best bang for their buck.

Commissioner Rukowicz asked about the \$26,000 that was appropriated for a Fire Marshal vehicle. He wanted to know if that would be happening. The Executive Director explained that this was originally described as a small SUV vehicle. However, based on recommendations they are now looking for an F150 type truck. There are not sufficient monies in the budget for that type of vehicle. The closest they have come to that for that type of vehicle is \$30,000. At that price the vehicle does not come with anything. Mr. Neto thought another \$5,000 - \$10,000 for any extra bells and whistles. Mr. Neto does not know where he can find another \$7,000 minimum.

Commissioner Rukowicz stated that three years ago there was no money in the truck fund. \$100,000 was appropriated that year. The following year \$100,000 more was appropriated. Last year \$150,000 was appropriated. He would like to see another \$150,000 appropriated this year. That would be half a million there. The previous Chief applied for grants. Since he left there isn't anyone else that can write grants. There are a lot of grants out there. The President wanted to know if the District could get grants for security upgrades other than the grants for fire equipment and safer grants.

Commissioner Epstein stated that there is a grant available for COVID that might help the District get money for its infrastructure. There is money for the protection of the employees under COVID. Mr. Neto stated that he had worked out a budget for the Rescue with the past Chief. It was turned down. The District was not politically connected at the Federal level. Grant writing is a talent that needs to be purchased or hired. The District does not have it. If this is put on the plate of the new Chief, it may get buried with a bunch of other priorities. Mr. Neto stated that if he is asked to do it he will, but he is not very good at it. It also requires a lot of time. It is months of work. He said we may need a different way of getting a grant writer.

Commissioner Hinnars reminded everyone of the Safer grant the District is currently tied to. In another three years the District will be responsible for paying for those employees. Every year the District takes on more of those salaries. Mr. Neto clarified that the District is one and a half years into that grant already.

The President asked if security upgrades to all Water District buildings would be a proper use of Water District funds. Mr. Neto stated that any capital improvement whether it be security, telephone, etc. will identify a percentage of that portion of it and allocate it to the Water Enterprise Fund. The rest will be to Fire/Fire Marshal. That is done for everything. Mr. Neto answered the President by saying for security upgrades they can do a percentage. They would determine how many calls or what level of service does the Communication Division perform for the Water Division. It is possible to use some dollars from the Water Enterprise Fund, but Mr. Neto stated it is a small amount.

Commissioner Rukowicz asked if the District ever got a price to hook up with MDC in Middletown. Mr. Neto reported they have not looked into it because they would need to do an engineering study. Mr. Neto stated he had a price of \$1.5 million for the interconnection both north and south of Cromwell. From MDC it is gravity fed to the north. To the south they would have to force the water up. The District had to report to the State what their intentions were and assign it a price. Interconnection will be a priority for the Water Division. It has to be before any other major projects are done. Commissioner Epstein stated that the State has already told the District that the tank needs to be drained at a certain point in the near future to get in there and see what is going on inside the tank. The District does not want to drain the tank until they have a second source of water. Commissioner Hinnars asked about the VFD project. Mr. Neto reported that has been completed. Mr. Neto stated that in theory they could take the tank off line if we are confident that the VFD and the system they invested in can work for 6 mos. Mr. Neto's comfort level is not there. Commissioner Hinnars asked about shutting off the valve to the tank to see if the VFD will work. The concern is that the valve has never been touched in 50 years. The engineer says the valve works. The concern is that the District does not have the solid opportunity to test it because of the unknowns. Mr. Neto stated the District needs a second backup. If the District taps into MDC or Middletown or both they know they can test because they have a guaranteed water source. Without the interconnection, the District is in a holding pattern. If there were a failure now, Cromwell would work with Berlin to obtain small amounts of water running hoses to connect. The same would be true on Rte. 99.

Commissioner Epstein noted that this budget needs to include some monies for COVID supplies. Last year we did not because we did not know about COVID. This year needs to have COVID monies as the pandemic may last another 6 mos. to a year. The President added that we need to keep the supply chain for the front line supplied. The first responders need to have the equipment they need.

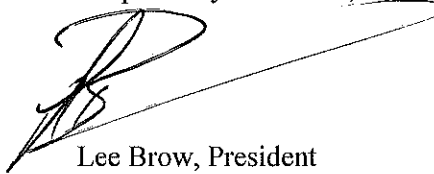
Commissioner Epstein asked if there were any vehicles in the fleet that could be sold to provide funding for other things. He had discussed this with the former Fire Chief. President Brow noted that this is something that needs to be looked at. What should be housed at which firehouses. He gave an overview of what is housed at each firehouse. For major fire apparatus, they identified five major pieces. He asked what the Fire Department currently has. Mr. Neto stated they have more than they can man. The President stated that the former Chief was on the right track, and the next Chief should

also look into it. There is a lot of apparatus that is old. It costs money for maintenance, insurance, etc. There is a lot of work for the upcoming fiscal year.

Commissioner Hinnars stated he likes the ideas that have been presented. This is the beginning of the whole budget process. They don't have a lot of time. Things have to be finalized shortly. Mr. Neto stated they will begin the process in a couple of weeks meeting with the Division heads. That will take about 2 weeks. At the end of the month Mr. Neto will ask Commissioner Rukowicz to call a meeting of the Executive Committee to review budgets.

- V. Adjournment. There being no further business, a motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Hinnars and unanimously approved to adjourn the meeting at 5:56 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'LB', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Lee Brow, President

Nancy Deegan
Recording Secretary
2-9-21