

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

District Operations Committee

Wednesday, January 27, 2021

5:30 PM

West Street Firehouse

1 West Street

Cromwell, CT

Present: Commissioners Lee Brow (President), Jason Hinnens and Charles Epstein. Also attending was Executive Director Julius Neto. Commissioner Robert Donohue had called in as well as Brian Petrocelli (Dispatch Union Secretary).

Per Executive Order No. 7B, Governor Lamont has ordered and directed that in-person open meeting requirements be suspended. Therefore, the 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 5:34 PM, by President Brow.
- II. Approval of the Agenda. A motion was made by Commissioner Hinnens, seconded by Commissioner Epstein and unanimously approved to accept the agenda as submitted with the following addition: Item C. under New Business: Clarification on COVID Workshop vs. COVID Committee.
- III. Public Comment. Mr. Petrocelli spoke on behalf of the Executive Board of AFSCME Local 1303-475, and its members. He wanted to send a message of appreciation to the Commission for looking out for the safety and wellness of the employees, especially during the pandemic. By appointing a health & safety officer, they recognize that is the Commission's true concern. They look forward to working with Executive Director Julius Neto and Chip Darius, as the Health & Safety Officer in upcoming safety and labor management meetings. They wanted to make a public comment about the fact they do appreciate the efforts of management to provide a safe environment for its members. A lot of things are changing on a daily or weekly basis, but the fact that the District is looking for people with expertise in certain areas shows their genuine concern.
- IV. New Business
 - A. Discussion and Action on Health & Safety Officer. The Executive Director gave some background on Chip Darius. He has been a life member of the Cromwell Fire Department. A few years ago he became a life member to concentrate on his business. He owns a company called "Safety Priority." He has over 27 years of experience in

occupational safety and health. He is the founder of Safety Priority consultants and has provided training all over the United States focusing on management systems. He has worked with over 750 clients in 30 different states. Since 2002, Chip has served as an instructor for OSHA training, Institution Region I. He is an adjunct faculty of Keene State College. He is very knowledgeable on a whole array of health, safety and infectious control topics. Mr. Neto added that approximately one year or so ago Mr. Darius re-activated his membership within the Cromwell Fire Department. He is a volunteer. Initially he was assigned to Fire Police and has been a great asset. He is very active in the community and over the last three months has been working with the Acting Fire Chief on various items. With his expertise, he volunteered his time and talent to help the Fire Department increase its status for a safe environment at no cost to the organization. He is very focused on the community and wants to give back.

The former Chief and the Acting Chief have found a great partner in trying to first identify the baseline status of the Fire Department as it relates to health, safety and the new challenge of COVID. They have been having multiple meetings, and Mr. Darius has been asking to attend the working group for COVID. He has been a great asset of information for the group. A lot of it is empirical data or information he has either by research and/or his expertise in the areas of concern or discussion. He has already created within the Fire Department, a Health & Safety packet. After the last OSHA complaint he has established open communication with the front line staff so that if an individual sees or is concerned about any safety or health issue and they are not comfortable bringing it to management, they can forward their concerns directly or indirectly. It can be anonymous or off the record as long as they have the opportunity to voice their concerns. Chip will work with the Chief or whomever to deal with any concerns that have surfaced. Management has been trying to deal with multiple issues. There was a complaint directly sent to ConnOSHA back in December. There were 3 or 4 items that were identified. ConnOSHA did an inspection. The bottom line is that a member of the Cromwell group felt they needed to go to a State agency before coming to the District. If a person chooses not to use management to resolve the issue, Chip will be able to bring that same level of attention to mediate the problem once it is given to him.

Mr. Neto's recommendation based on his experience with Chip historically and from what he has seen or heard from him is to have the District Operations Committee appoint Mr. Darius to the Safety/Building Committee as a regular member so he can have direct input to assist the Committee and management to deal with any present or future issues. The Executive Director recognized that Mr. Darius is doing this because of his commitment to the community and to meet the Fire Department needs. He is breaking the mold in terms of individuals in today's world doing volunteer work.

The President has known Mr. Darius for approximately 30 years. President Brow worked closely with Mr. Darius when he first started training to be an EMT. He does not question his dedication to public service or to the Department or District. Commissioner Hanners met Mr. Darius informally a couple of times, and has heard his name mentioned at various meetings. There is no doubt of his knowledge and ability to serve the District. Commissioner Epstein reported that he has known Mr. Darius for about 25 years as well. He added that Mr. Darius also has been active and an advisor for the National Academy of Emergency Dispatch. He thought Chip held an instructor credential for that as well. He has made a niche for himself with health & safety issues. Commissioner Epstein feels we are lucky to have Chip in our community. He has been very helpful in helping the Department navigate COVID.

A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Hinnens and unanimously approved to add Chip Darius as a non-voting informational member of the Cromwell Fire District Safety/Building Committee. The Executive Director will advise Mr. Darius of his appointment to the Safety/Building Committee. Commissioner Hinnens asked for clarification on Mr. Darius' title. He is the Health & Safety Officer, but is not an official officer of the Fire Department and does not carry a badge.

- B. Executive Director Flex Time. There was a discussion regarding the Executive Director's vacation time. He had been given 2 weeks with his contract, and after the last evaluation he was given a third week. When asked how much vacation time he has used over the last two years, his response was 5 days. Commissioner Epstein asked how many extra hours the Executive Director puts in every week. Mr. Neto stated that it varies, but he has been averaging between 55 -58 hours a week. Mr. Neto stated that unfortunately, things need to be done. There is a lot of catching up to do. He thought by now things would be leveling off. The work requirement needed by staff, self-driven by himself or the Commission is just consistently greater than 55 hrs. a week. Commissioner Epstein admitted that the Commissioners are involved in many meetings, most of which happen in the evening hours and most of which the Executive Director needs to attend. Commissioner Epstein asked what the Executive Director's preference would be, either additional vacation time or flex time.

Mr. Neto appreciated the fact that the District Operations Committee has looked at his situation and realized his duties and the time commitment are a little out of kilt. He noted that the Board does not dictate to him his work hours. He determines that based on what he feels needs his time and attention. He does not know how to balance the time element vs. duties. The fact is that the job or the District for the last couple of years has required that level of engagement. He added that having more time off is great, but unless what is put on his plate is lightened up, Mr. Neto reacts to the demands of the needs. Up to this point, the President has been very accommodating should Mr. Neto need to leave early on a work day, but the opportunity does not happen often enough to balance the work hours. Mr. Neto stated he does not want it misconstrued that the Commission is keeping him from taking the time off. He needs to own it, but admitted that there is still a lot to be done. There have been big projects and big challenges over the last couple of years. There needs to be a balance, but Mr. Neto does not know what that is. Commissioner Epstein added that when there is a major event, they know Mr. Neto will be there. They know he doesn't have to be at every major event, but he is there because of his commitment to the job and the District. President Brow noted that Mr. Neto's dedication is appreciated. Mr. Neto noted that he needs to think to set up the District's management staff for the long haul. He does not plan on being the Executive Director for a long period of time. Decisions he makes now should be looked at as setting up the bench for the next layer of new players or new people coming into the District. He needs to proactively look at his replacement. He feels that is part of his job. He needs to create an environment where the role is sustainable. At this level it is not sustainable for an individual coming from the outside that has not had an opportunity to work in a public setting. Businesses require a lot of flexibility and demand on time. Even within businesses there is a limit because you can lose effectiveness. Mental mistakes do occur after a long week.

Mr. Neto explained that the challenge for him over the last few months has been to gain control of a reasonable schedule based on the demand that currently exists. The demand is going to be here. It is a matter of prioritization. He did not answer Commissioner

Epstein's question regarding a preference of flex time or vacation time. Mr. Neto gets concerned with any additional vacation time. He does not want any special privileges. He has to be realistic to the rest of the group or team as well as what is within the "norm." He wants to have the opportunity to create time away when things are not in a crisis mode. The Chairs of the Committees need to focus on the priority list of things. If he puts into focus what the priorities are for each committee, he can decide whether or not he really needs to be at every workshop. Sometimes he has input and sometimes he does not. Maybe he can provide data through a report instead of physically being there. Sometimes these workshops have lengthy discussions, and a meeting or workshop is not over for 3 hours. He also receives three personal days and sick time the same as other employees.

Commissioner Hinnners wanted to look at this issue from a different perspective. He asked what the Board can do to ease the burden rather than give him more time off that he can't take because of his full plate. Commissioner Hinnners said it sounded like there is so much on Mr. Neto's plate, besides the support staff help, it seems there needs to be a Vice Executive Director or someone to work in that succession plan and take some of the higher level load off of his plate. He asked if it made sense. Mr. Neto stated that it does, but any individual that is hired comes at a high cost. One thing that occupies a lot of his time is the HR functions. There is no formal process for hiring. There is no formal process to work with the Division heads when there is a problem with an employee. HR issues are the ones that are most critical and if they are not handled right, they could go down the path of non-compliance with CBA's. Employee relations matter because situations can multiply. He admitted he has had a lot of experiences over the years, but he is not an HR specialist to the degree where he needs to understand the overtime environment may not be meeting all the standards. That level of research may take an hour or two just to understand the issue. Prime Pay is another example. They spend a lot of time on payroll issues. Mr. Alibrio is only in the office two days a week. He explained that the various divisions within the Fire District have evolved. All are positive things, but require a support staff to some degree. In lieu of that, most of it stops at the ED's office. That is not a criticism, it is the reality of it. The District may need to look at the structure of things to be more efficient to meet the needs of the Fire Department, Water Department and Fire Marshal's office and do it right. It seems that the District operates like the Fire Department, putting fires out. It needs to act more as a Fire Marshal and be more proactive. There is no easy answer but he thinks they need to do some evaluating or taking something off the plate and address them at a later designated time. He explained that each file on his desk requires some attention within the next week or so.

Commissioner Hinnners appreciated the opportunity to better understand the Executive Director's role. There is only so much one person can do. He can effectively do the work of three people, but that cannot be sustained at that level of effort. Giving extra vacation time is useless. If vacation time is used, a ball from all the balls being juggled will be dropped. He asked about a to-do list. He felt that letting the Commissioners know what types of things are on that to do list would make the situation more real for them. It might make sense to delegate more of those things to the managers. The District is at a point where they are getting the right people in place such as a Fire Marshal and Fire Chief. At the present time there is an Ass't Chief and Acting Chief. They are serving on a part-time basis, yet the issues the Fire Department faces are full time. Mr. Neto can take their suggestion and review the files to see what can be assisted with. Prioritizing will also be helpful. Some situations have deadlines. One priority that is

close to completion is the communications project. Once completed, it will open a whole new opportunity of time to be used for other priorities. He may need to identify with the Chairs what the priorities are of these 5 items. He needs some direction regarding what is a priority. Commissioner Hinners stated that as Vice Chair of Personnel, their biggest priority is the Executive Director. He would like to see the Executive Director make it to the top of the priority pile to give him an opportunity to catch his breath. Mr. Neto doesn't know what the answer is yet. He doesn't know where start. Commissioner Hinners in brainstorming, wanted to know if they should be looking for a Julius #2, and who hires him or her. This task adds to the Executive Director's plate because they need to define and describe that position. They would also need to find money for that position, etc. He sees the amount of time and effort Mr. Neto is giving to the District, but the pace can't be kept up forever at a cost of sanity and health. Commissioner Epstein stated that some of the Commissioners may be able to help out in certain areas where they have expertise.

The President was thinking of entertaining a motion to allow the Executive Director to apply flex time hours to his work day at his discretion based on the additional hours he spends on meetings after hours, etc.

A motion was made by Commissioner Hinners, seconded by Commissioner Epstein and unanimously approved to allow the Executive Director to apply flex time hours to his workday at his discretion based on the additional hours he spends on meetings after hours, etc.

The President also discussed the HR issue. He stated that at a full Board of Commissioner's meeting it was approved to bring in BlumShapiro to begin the HR process for the employee handbook and the hiring process guidelines. He does not know if this needs to be brought before the full Board. Commissioner Epstein stated that he thought everyone had agreed at the Special meeting to go with BlumShapiro for the handbook and hiring book. The President stated there was no discussion about an HR book. This would be a third item to the mix. The Executive Director categorizes this as discretionary spending and has put this off until the end of March or beginning of April because he does not know what the revenue stream will be. The District is following similar modified expenditures based on deferred tax revenue.

The President's second item was to identify what subcommittees have as priorities that the Executive Director needs to be involved in. If he is not needed, he should stay home.

The Executive Director should have a list of priorities that need addressing I categorized as: immediate, short term and long term. There may be short term items that can be pushed off to long term or long term items pushed off even longer so that the Executive Director's plate can be less full. The fourth discussion point by the President is part-time help in the office so the Executive Director is freed up from doing menial tasks in the office.

They wanted to see the list of things Julius is working on so they can see what is going on and what is too much or can be taken off his plate. The Commissioners want to see the list of priorities. The Executive Director explained what has happened in the past in terms of decisions made by the Commission and what it takes to clarify and implement those decisions. There was discussion about the processes for making decisions at the Board and Committee level.

The Executive Director noted that the suggestions brought up about prioritizing and having flex time do help. On long tough weeks, it would be helpful to have flex time if a break is needed. He will always prioritize health & safety and staffing. Those items require a lot of time and attention and are most critical. Mr. Neto will be doing a prioritized list for the Committee to review.

- C. Clarification on COVID Workshop vs. COVID Subcommittee of a Committee. The President was looking for clarification on this issue because it had been discussed and formulated during the President's leave when Commissioner Rukowicz was acting President. The President would like some clarification through a motion to formally assign the COVID workgroup as an official work group under the Fire Operations Committee with no power to cause any action. They operate on recommendation only through Fire Operations to the full Board of Commissioners.

A motion was made by Commissioner Hinners, seconded by Commissioner Epstein and unanimously approved to formally assign the COVID group as an official working group of the Fire Operations Committee. It is not a subcommittee, but rather a workgroup under and reporting to the Fire Operations Committee with no power to cause any action. This item will be on the agenda for the Special Fire Operations Committee meeting scheduled for Wednesday, February 3, 2021.

- V. Adjournment. There being no further business, a motion was made by Commissioner Hinners, seconded by Commissioner Epstein and unanimously approved to adjourn the meeting at 6:41 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'LB', enclosed within a large, horizontal, oval-shaped scribble.

Lee Brow, Chairman & President

Nancy Deegan
Recording Secretary
2-18-21