

Cromwell Fire District

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FIRE DISTRICT OFFICE
WATER DIVISION

FIRE DEPARTMENT
FIRE MARSHAL'S OFFICE

BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS Fire Operations Committee Meeting

Monday, October 18, 2021

5:30 PM

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

Present: Commissioners David Colligan (Chairman), Jason Hinnners, Charles Epstein and Robert Donohue. Also attending were the Executive Director Julius Neto, Fire Chief Jason Balletto, Assistant Fire Chief Jason Brade, Firefighter Lt. William McKnight, Acting Fire Marshal Harold Holmes, Communications Manager Justin Lonergan and Commissioner Chip Darius.

- I. Call to Order. The meeting was called to order at 5:30 PM, by Chairman Colligan.
- II. Approval of Agenda. A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Hinnners and unanimously approved to accept the agenda as submitted.
- III. Approval of Meeting Minutes of September 20, 2021. A motion was made by Commissioner Hinnners, seconded by Commissioner Epstein and approved 3 to 0 to accept the Fire Operations Committee meeting minutes of September 20, 2021, as submitted. Chairman Colligan abstained.
- IV. Public Comment. There were no public comments to report.
- V. Communications Report. The Chairman reported that communications are working well with the new system. The issue of fire ground communication has been brought up at the last two safety meetings as well as Fire Ops. It has been characterized as a safety issue. As Chairman of the Communications Subcommittee, Commissioner Colligan had instructed the Communications Manager to get a price from Norcom on what it would take to correct the problem. The District has been advised that they will need to purchase another frequency.

The Communications Manager has been working with the Clerk of the Works regarding the final touches on the project. They have been working with other Departments on MOU's. They just completed one with the Town of Newington. The template is almost finalized. It has to go to Norcom for buildout, then the State to add their data. Once that has been completed, it will go back to Norcom, and Norcom is tasked with programming the system. Mr. Lonergan did not have a timeframe but was hopeful things will be completed within the next month or two. At that point there should be very good interoperability with Cromwell and its mutual aid partners.

A Communications Subcommittee meeting was scheduled for Thursday, Nov. 4, 2021, at 5:30 PM, at the Coles Road firehouse, based on discussions at this meeting. The purpose of the meeting will be to authorize final payment of the project.

The Communications Manager also gave an update on the pagers. There is no firmware upgrade to fix the random opening of the pagers. Mr. Lonergan has to do some reprogramming from Berlin's upgrades and is planning to do that and the firmware upgrade all at once. Once everything is in place and completed there will be some type of ceremony to publicize the completion and success of the radio project.

A motion was made by Commissioner Donohue, seconded by Commissioner Hinnens and unanimously approved to accept the Communications Report as presented.

- VI. Reports of the Chief Officers. Chief Balletto reported that September has been a busy month.
- A meet and greet was done at the Coles Road Firehouse which did not go over very well.
 - They also did a 9/11 tribute which had a good showing.
 - The Fire Department has been attending the high school football games. Their presence consists of an EMT and an ambulance. They are also doing youth football standby's.
 - The Department did fire prevention with the Fire Marshal's Office as well as participated in Trick or Trunk sponsored by the Cromwell's Children's Coalition.
 - They also did an open house at the West Street firehouse with the Fire Marshal's office.
 - During the month there were approximately 228 calls through Dispatch, and there were 10 turnovers, 123 ambulance calls and 34 fire calls.
 - They continue with training. They just completed the inspection for the Fire Department burn building. This inspection will become a budgeted item since there are things needing replacement after inspection. The inspections will be established as an annual event.
 - Monthly officers' meetings have been established with the Chief's staff. He continues to meet with Union officials to establish other guidelines between the Chief's office and the Union.

The Chief briefly explained the situation with the bonfire at the high school. The Fire Department/FMO is not getting involved with any type of activity like that at the high school because the Burn Official for the Town of Cromwell is the Health Director. Therefore, the Fire Department will not oversee this event. The Burn Official in the Town of Cromwell was appointed by the Town Manager. The appointment comes from the DEEP. If the Chief does not receive a plan from the party responsible for the bonfire and what is being burned, then the Fire Department will not get involved. The only involvement the Fire Department will have is an emergency response if something goes wrong. The Chief is looking for guidance from the Committee or the Board on how they will proceed on these matters.

There was continued discussion on this issue. The Chairman suggested bringing this up for discussion at the full Board of Commissioners' meeting. He would like to have the District officials and the Town officials get together to come up with a plan going forward.

- A. Fire Marshal's Office Report. They had to pull building permits at 41 and 5 West Street to put new exit lights up and a new sprinkler system in. There were 37 inspections done for the month. The mutual responses to Middletown brought an increase in the response time. This has been happening more and more. There were 42 inspection actions. There were 6 fires that occurred last month that required investigations.

Mr. Holmes also reported that tomorrow they are having a Zoom call with Red Lion. Someone has purchased it, but the plan now is to demolish it and build something new. The call will include the contractor for the board up, the developers, the Police Chief and Fire Chief.

A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Hinnens and unanimously approved to accept the Reports of Chief Officers as presented.

- VII. Firefighter/EMT Staffing, Hiring and Response Capability. The Chief reported that they are in trouble with Firefighter, EMT staffing. They are having difficulty filling shifts, especially the part-timers. He had to hire a full time firefighter so that he could have 5 on a shift. This seems to be an ongoing trend with certain shifts. The Department is trying to adapt and overcome. The Chief had been sending out text messages and emails to try and fill shifts. Regarding hiring, they have made two conditional offers to two individuals. The Chief is waiting for them to complete their physicals. The Chief feels they will have to post one more time because he doesn't feel confident going off the list they originally had about 3 months ago. At the time, no one remaining on the list met the Department's standards. They are not just going to hire anyone. The Department needs to come up with standards for hiring.

Regarding response capability, the Department had 10 turnovers last month. He explained they are turning over a lot of calls, and that is due to staffing. The Department needs to figure this out. The Department is getting much busier. They are not getting anyone from call backs. All Fire/All EMS are very sporadic. On the Fire/EMS volunteers they are getting no one. A lot of people on the unscheduled side are picking up shifts. They are not getting a lot of individuals going to all fire calls or all EMS calls.

The Chief has also been trying to work on mutual aid agreements. They came to an agreement that they will not do station coverage in Middletown. They will call Cromwell to the scene. This was due to all call back on the career side. He did not want anyone on the career side manning their fire house with no one manning Cromwell's. To assist with structure fires or working fires, Middletown will be able to send an engine as well as a truck company with an Assistant Chief of Training which will be the Safety Officer and Battalion Chief to assist before Cromwell can get on scene.

Commissioner Colligan noted that a change in scheduling has occurred from the Lieutenants to the Chief's Office. The Chief's Office is now handling all the scheduling. The Chief explained that there were some individuals that were getting a large amount of overtime. It wasn't being distributed equally. There were a lot of discrepancies. It seems that there is a trend where no one wants to work on certain days. The Chairman asked the Chief to provide a report that the Committee can analyze.

The Chief explained that part of the problem to recruit is the District only offering \$17 an hour as a starting hourly wage. Commissioner Darius was trying to understand where the bottleneck seems to be. Was the issue reaching applicants, getting applicants or just having a slower onboarding process. If it is the processing of applicants, he suggested finding a Human Resource professional to help expediate onboarding. The pool of candidates they are receiving are mostly decertified. The Chief established a panel twice to review applicants consisting of the Chief, Assistant Chief Brade, Acting Assistant Chief Petrucelli, Justin Lonergan, and a career Lieutenant. The Chief wants to have a plan of how the Department wants to portray themselves professionally. The panel made a decision based on professionalism and the way applicants presented themselves. They cannot hire just anyone off the street. The Chief

believes they are handling things in the way a human resource department would handle things. Mr. Lonergan added that when someone is hired, they also need to be outfitted with gear which is not easy to come by. The primary issue is trying to hire people of quality at the rate of pay being offered.

The Executive Director believes that the part-timers need to be solid, especially with a CBA in place. The Fire Chiefs need to come up with a couple of options. Commissioner Darius added that there are temporary staffing agencies that focus on EMS. Many of those are cross-trained. He suggested getting some people in here on an emergency basis as temps. To be qualified for the Fire Department an individual needs to have Firefighter II and be an EMT. The cost for one person in the Department is \$5,000. That includes Firefighter I & II, PPE, fit test and physical. The Department has been working this in different ways, but nothing they have tried is helping. They are a combination department of career and part-time. Volunteers will get lost on the part-time side of the Department.

The Committee needs to come up with a report with options and then discuss policy and decision making. There needs to be a way to keep the staff engaged, safe and meeting the needs. Commissioner Donohue felt that something should be set in motion from this meeting to start somewhere.

Mr. Lonergan added that the mutual aid partners will provide assistance, but their resources are also dwindling. The Chief had put together some statistical information and was asked to prepare a report to be reviewed and studied at the next meeting. Commissioner Epstein did not feel a separate committee would be needed to address these issues. A committee that is already established should be able to work on this. The Chairman will wait until a report from the Chief is received.

A motion was made by Commissioner Donohue, seconded by Commissioner Hinnners and unanimously approved to accept this report and discussion and presented.

VIII. Old Business. There was no old business to report.

IX. New Business

- A. Update from Apparatus Committee. Commissioner Hinnners reported that there have been many meetings. The Committee is focusing on the recommendations from the Chief. The Chief stated that they viewed a Pierce Fire/Rescue piece from North Carolina. It has a 1,000 gallon tank, 1,500 gallons per minute. It is a big piece of apparatus and is a good piece of apparatus. The cousin to that piece is going into production. The only concern was that the tank was too big and too high but that challenge can be overcome. It is not a huge concern. Commissioner Colligan also was impressed with the apparatus. It will fit the Fire Department's needs. The Chief has been in contact with AED to follow up on other pieces.

The Executive Director gave an update on the financial side of the issue. He met with the District's bond council last week and John Healy from Mezro Financials to start the bond process. He had asked them to begin drafting a resolution to be presented to the Board so it can be voted on and a Town meeting can be scheduled for approval. The price tag is \$2,250,000. Included in that price is a rescue pumper, one engine and one ambulance. Also included is a little over \$200,000 for security and door access. It was agreed that the security and door access are legitimate capital items. This whole borrowing process is going to take some time, and the Board cannot move on anything until the bonding request has been

approved at a Town meeting. Mr. Neto suggested that a Special Board of Commissioners meeting be scheduled to discuss and approve this issue only. Two weeks after that meeting would be an appropriate time to schedule a Town meeting.

- B. Fire Chief Update on Equipment Inventory List. Chairman Colligan noted that the Fire Chief had already given that information to the Committee. He asked that the Chief add to the list what will need to be purchased over the next 5 years and the cost. The Chief noted that they will be stripping Engine 2 and it will be used as a changeover vehicle. It will not affect the Department's ISO rating.
- C. Update and Discussion on EMS Turnovers. Chief Balletto reported that Hunter's is a concern. They have gone to the surrounding towns of Middletown, Portland and Meriden. The Department cannot get Hunters to come to them. They also have difficulty getting Aetna. The order in which they are dispatched are Hunters, Aetna, New Britain, AMR and Valley Shore. They have been trying to come up with ideas for help. The Chief has had discussions with the surrounding Fire Chiefs to help come up with solutions to resolve this issue.

Hunters is having a very difficult time establishing things right now. They are not supplying the services they are obligated to. The Department is not prepared for it. It was noted that they cannot rely on Rocky Hill because they are not manning their ambulances all the time. Cromwell's EMS coordinator is working on the issue. When they are going to other towns to cover, there is no coverage in Cromwell.

Commissioner Epstein noted that Middlesex Hospital is going to start putting on more ambulances. They are going to start doing the emergencies for the Town of Durham. He thought we could make a deal with the Hospital to be Cromwell's primary backup. The Department needs to have a strategic plan in place before any decisions are made. The Chief's concern is that hospitals will only be in it to make more money and take over. Commissioner Darius felt that they need to budget as a Town to stand independently as an organization.

- D. Discussion and Possible Decision on Fire Marshal Mutual Aid Agreements. Mr. Holmes reported that Cromwell used to have mutual aid agreements. However, he cannot find anything documented. Portland had an agreement with Cromwell, but it expired in 2015. They reached out to their neighboring communities of Rocky Hill, Westfield, Berlin and Portland to ask if they would be interested in participating in mutual aid agreements for Marshal services. As mutual aid partners, each community can provide Fire Marshal services to each other if no one is available in their town. A document was drafted based on the old Portland Mutual aid agreement. The Marshal's office was looking for the Committee and the Board's approval.

A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Donohue and unanimously approved to authorize four Mutual Aid agreements for the Fire Marshal's Office with the Towns of Westfield, Berlin, Portland and Rocky Hill, and to recommend approval by the full Board of Commissioners. This will be added to the agenda for the Board of Commissioner's meeting tomorrow, Oct. 19, 2021.

- X. Commissioners' Comments. Commissioner Hinnens went on record to say thank you to the Executive Director for all the hard work that he does. Some of the meetings can be

frustrating, and he wanted to recognize the Executive Director for working with the Board to move forward.

XI. Adjournment. There being no further business, a motion was made by Commissioner Donohue, seconded by Commissioner Hinnens and unanimously approved to adjourn the meeting at 7:14 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

David Colligan, Chairman

Nancy Deegan
Recording Secretary

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