

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 Special Personnel Committee Meeting

Monday, June 28, 2021

5:30 PM

Coles Road Firehouse
105 Coles Road
Cromwell, CT

Present: Commissioners Mertie Terry (Chairwoman), Lee Brow (President), David Colligan and Jason Hinnners. Commissioner Roger Rukowicz was absent. Also attending were Executive Director Julius Neto, Fire Chief Jason Balletto, Dispatch Supervisor Justin Lonergan and Commissioners Robert Donohue and Charles Epstein.

- I. Call to Order. The meeting was called to order at 5:30 PM, by Chairwoman Terry.
- II. Approval of Agenda. A motion was made by Commissioner Hinnners, seconded by Commissioner Colligan and unanimously approved to accept the Agenda as submitted. It was noted that this is a Special meeting, and the agenda cannot be changed.
- III. Public Comment. There were no public comments to report.
- IV. New Business
 - A. Discussion and Possible Decision on Annual Increases and Employee Benefit Costs for Non-CBA Employees. The Executive Director took the floor to explain that at the end of every fiscal year, it is the Personnel Committee's responsibility to address any salary increases, benefit changes or benefit impacts. The budget does have an increase plugged into it associated with non-CBA employees. The CBA's already have these issues incorporated into them. The salary increases and benefit changes are automatic and non-negotiable for CBA employees. Every year the Personnel Committee needs to evaluate whether or not they want to provide an increase to the non-CBA employees. That increase is identified as COLA, annual increment or assessment of cost of living. He went on to say that 2½ % has been budgeted for a COLA increase for the non-Water Department personnel and 2% for the Water Department personnel. The reason for the discrepancy is because a reduction was done to the Water Department personnel COLA as a cut to balance and pass the budget. Therefore, they reduced the COLA by ½% on the Water Department side.

Also in the same budget, they identified the benefit costs of the non-CBA increasing by 1½%. The cost is currently at 7½ %, but it was included in this budget at 9% with an increase of 1½ % year over year. This is something that historically has been adjusted to

put more of the burden on the employee. Compared to other employers, 7½ % of medical costs is extremely beneficial for the employee side but puts a burden on the District side. The CBA for the firefighters is at 15%, and the Communication Center CBA will go up to 10%. Mr. Neto had more specifics for each individual depending on their family situation and what type of insurance coverage they have. For a single individual, the additional cost would be \$11.38 a month, and the District will pay \$758 per month. For an employee plus one it would be \$24.72 a month, the District will pay \$1,648 per month. For a family it will be \$35.61 per month, the District will pay \$2,374 per month. There is no increase to dental or vision.

Although the Water Department will be losing a ½% for COLA, the Executive Director mentioned that there has been some discussion in the past about salary increases for the Water Department. Relative to the Town with similar job functions, the Water Department salaries are below standard. Two years ago a 2% salary bump was given to the Water Department as a salary adjustment. This last year there was no increase given. A bump was put into this next 21/22 budget.

A motion was made by Commissioner Colligan, seconded by Commissioner Hinnens and unanimously approved to accept 2 ½ % and 2% for the non-Water and Water employees for COLA increases, and for the budgeted amount discussed of 9% as the employee contribution for medical coverage of non-CBA employees.

B. Discussion and Possible Decision on Water Department Salary Adjustment Program.

The Executive Director explained that part of his salary comes from the Water Department budget and so does the IT manager's salary. The Water Department salary adjustment is intended for the staff on the front lines of the Water Department. For clarity, the Executive Director needed to know if that included Mr. Palmieri or the 2 Administrative Assistants. One of the Assistants is within the range of appropriate salary and one is below the range of an appropriate salary. Should everyone be put in the bucket excluding Mr. Neto or Mr. Alvarado? Mr. Neto didn't know if they wanted to take a step back and look at the person that is over range and the administrator which would be Joe. Angel is not contracted, Julius is based on a performance review and a COLA. Should they include everyone except Julius and Angel.

Commissioner Hinnens thought that everyone should be included. Commissioner Colligan thought that everyone should be included including the girls in the office. He felt that the District should take care of their employees. For many years the employees did not get what they deserved. It is time to make it right. The office staff has been stepping up to the plate for everyone else. Commissioner Colligan clarified this to mean that the other two individuals in the office should also be considered for a salary adjustment even though they are not classified as Water Department employees. They do fill in for the water department staff when the staff is out or on vacation.

Commissioner Terry stated the District is lucky with the employees they have. She agreed with Commissioner Colligan that they have not been properly compensated compared to Town employees. Mr. Neto thought his objective was to focus on what he thought was a discrepancy of low salaries for Water Dept. job functions that are similar to Town job functions. The full-time Administrative Assistant does not meet that criteria. He did not identify the other two individuals in the office because they are not part of the Water Department. They had been focusing on the Water Department, not the other individuals in the office who provide backup Water department functions.

President Brow noted that Item A. was already giving a 2 ½% COLA to the employees in question or non-Water employees, and a 2% COLA to the Water employees. The salary adjustment for the Water employees is for those employees on the front lines of the Water Department to make them more equitable to the Town employees with similar job functions.

Commissioner Colligan suggested that we re-evaluate the roles in the office because when the full-time Administrative Assistant for Water is out, the others in the office have to fill in or become a backup for those responsibilities which is beyond their scope of responsibilities. Commissioner Hinnners understood these proceedings as being able to vote for the salary upgrade program for the Water Department front line employees and to consider an increase for the two people that provide backup.

The issue then becomes where would the money come from to fund the other two employees. The Executive Director suggested reducing the 2% salary adjustment to 1.75% so that they can include the two Administrative Assistants that do backup for the Water Department.

A motion was made by Commissioner Hinnners, seconded by Commissioner Colligan and unanimously voted nay to appropriate a 2% increase for the Water Department for the salary upgrade program as budgeted.

A motion was made by Commissioner Hinnners, seconded by Commissioner Colligan and unanimously approved to increase the Water Department salaries and two backup Administrative Assistant salaries by 1.75% as part of the Water Department salary upgrade program.

- C. Update on Status of Acting Assistant Fire Chief as Well as Discussion on Salary vs. Hourly Compensation for the Role. The Executive Director announced that Acting Assistant Fire Chief Bill Stacy resigned his position about a week and a half ago. The Chief accepted the resignation, but a few days later Mr. Stacy wanted to modify his resignation. The Chief and Mr. Neto did not accept the rescinding of the resignation because Mr. Stacy failed to comply with the Chief's request. The Chief had asked that Mr. Stacy think about his decision over the weekend and touch base with the Chief on Monday. Mr. Stacy instead started to disseminate the information that he had resigned before he spoke to the Chief on Monday. Therefore, the Chief and the Executive Director felt compelled not to accept the rescinding of his resignation. He is still an employee of the Fire District. He is a "black hat" on the floor.

This situation opens up the position of Assistant Chief of Training. It is an hourly position because it is 20 + hours a week. It is not a salary position. The Union part-time firefighters are looking to enroll any employee of the Fire Department into their union membership. Based on their negotiations, they have identified, Ass't Chiefs, Deputy Chiefs, Fire Inspectors and Deputy Fire Marshals. It is a concern of the Executive Director and some Commissioners if the Assistant Chiefs are a part of the Union. There needs to be some separation between management and labor.

The salary environment needs to be evaluated. The Committee wanted to hear the Fire Chief's thoughts on the subject. The Chief relayed what transpired with his 2 meetings with Ass't Chief Stacy. It was the same scenario that Mr. Neto had described. He added that he did not hear from Ass't Chief Stacy on Monday, and he had reached out to him.

Instead Mr. Stacy contacted the Chief on Tuesday and informed him that , Mr. Stacy resigned as Assistant Fire Chief.

The Chief had been reviewing records and looking at the Department's history before he had come on board and learned that the Fire Department members were lacking in training and lacking significantly in safety. The Assistant Chief of Training position is a critical position that has to be maintained. The Chiefs have some significant ideas as to what to do with the position which is why it is still an acting position. The Chief's recommendation is to keep the position acting until they figure out what is going on with the CHRO complaint. The Chief stated they need someone in that position that is qualified. As the Director of Training and Safety at Norwich, his level of responsibilities were Fire Officer II, Incident Safety Officer, Health & Safety Officer and EMSI.

The Fire Department does have the potential within their Department to fill the gap with the personnel they have. One of his recommendations is to offer this position on a part-time basis to one of two individuals that have all those qualifications mentioned. Those qualifications are needed and used for training on the career side. If the Department does not have an Assistant Chief of Training, Chief Balletto will be trying to pick up the pieces. He is setting up the calendars and doing everything right now regarding training. He is lacking right now on some of the other issues. He cannot give this responsibility to Chief Brade because his plate is already full. The Chief's recommendation is if they can possibly fill this position as an acting position, it will be beneficial for the Department, the Commission and all personnel. This will also establish what they will do in the future, and give them time to create an accurate job description and qualifications to filling this position. He agrees with the Executive Director that this cannot be a Union position. If Chief Brade is not available, the Chief has no one that can do discipline or write SOP's. All the Fire Departments the Chief has worked in, the Assistant Chief was never in the Union. If a firefighter is in a leadership role where harsh decisions have to be made, that person cannot be in the Union.

President Brow asked the Chief who he was recommending for the Assistant Chief position. The Chief identified those people as Brian Petrocelli and Andrew Cooke. These individuals can jump right into the role and hit the ground running without any additional training or guidance. They can take care of all documentation requirements and OSHA training.

Commissioner Hanners stated they still need to discuss the issue of salary vs. hourly. President Brow is adamantly opposed to any Assistant Chief position being a union position. It is a management position that also is responsible for disciplinary actions. In the absence of the Chief, they are the next in line to be in command of the Department. If they want to be a union member, they can stay part-time or apply for a full-time position. He felt that it is an exempt position and needs to be a salary position. It needs to be in writing and made clear to applicants that this is a non-union position. If you are applying for the position as a union member, you must agree to withdraw from the Union if you are offered the position. The Chief would like to keep the position as an "Acting" position to see how it works out. It will be on a trial basis. There was additional discussion because the candidates being considered already work for the District. The Chief thought that they could take a transfer to the Fire side so they would not lose their seniority with Dispatch. They would have to take a Leave of Absence.

Mr. Lonergan explained how this can be done because he has done this with a couple of his employees in Dispatch. It has already been established that when they are working on the Fire side they are no longer represented by the Dispatchers' Union because they are not doing a Dispatch function. There was an MOU that was done at the time. There is another issue to discuss which is cross-staffing. There has been discussion with Dispatch and Fire on cross-staffing of members that might be causing issues. If this practice was to continue, and one of these individuals was to take an Acting position and serve both sides of the District, he doesn't see it as a Union issue because they are not acting as a Dispatcher, they are on the fire floor and they are not covered with the Union for Dispatchers. But they would be covered while they are actively dispatching.

The Executive Director explained the proposal for the two candidates under consideration for this assignment which is temporary. They will need to take a Leave of Absence from the Communication Center. They do not cross over. If a candidate takes a leave of absence from his or her present duties and responsibilities, that person gets temporarily assigned as Acting Assistant Chief of Training for a designated period of time and they get to perform those duties on a trial basis. It also allows management the opportunity to work on a better job description. This position getting filled will help the District in terms of its CHRO environment. Mr. Neto suggested that the Committee think about the options for this position. Commissioner Colligan would like to get a legal opinion. He does not want to disturb the existing CHRO case without advisement from the District's Attorney.

Commissioner Colligan asked the Chief to delegate some of his responsibilities to his Lieutenants. The Chief reported that unfortunately the Lieutenants are not all certified. The reason he recommended the two individuals is because they can hit the ground running, and they know what to do.

President Brow stated that this issue was not specifically on the agenda for this meeting. The issue on the agenda related to this issue is whether or not the individual should be paid a salary or an hourly wage. The crossover issue will need to be put on the Personnel Committee agenda for their meeting in two weeks.

A motion was made by Commissioner Hanners, seconded by Commissioner Colligan and unanimously approved to make the Assistant Fire Chief position a salary position with a salary to be decided by the Fire Chief and the Executive Director.

The President asked Chief Balletto to make some inquiries to see who would be interested in the Assistant Fire Chief Position.

- D. Discussion on District's Policy on Allowing Animals on District Premises. The Executive Director explained the past practice in the Fire Department to allow pets, mostly dogs in the Firehouse/Communication Center. There is no formal policy in the District for animals anywhere. It is not discourgeed or promoted. There have been some questions more recently about having a policy. Mr. Neto stated this does not apply to service dogs or dogs that are employed by an agency or a support environment. Those dogs are working, and a restrictive policy would not apply against animals in the Fire Department, i.e., the Communication Center or Water Department. Puppies and dogs are used as a way to soothe or smooth the environment. It is also a positive morale issue.

The downside is if the animal interferes with work or puts a burden on the employee to take care of the animal during the work shift. The Executive Director needed some guidance to create some type of policy based on past practice. He presented this to the Personnel Committee first for some feedback, but would like to present it to the whole Board of Commissioners.

Commissioner Colligan began the discussion by stating he was approached by employees that were questioning why animals/dogs would be allowed in one area and not another. He would like to see some type of policy put in place to protect the District, the employee, other employees and the animal. President Brow gave his thoughts and experience on the subject. The Fire Department he works in does not allow animals with the exception of service dogs. Pets are not allowed there either in the firehouse or dispatch. Commissioner Hanners stated there has been a past practice of allowing animals in Dispatch. He did not see this as a big issue unless something related to it becomes a problem. Mr. Lonergan discussed the situation with the Communication Center. He remembers this being a practice as far back as he can remember. He had some situations when he was asked as Supervisor if an employee can bring a dog to the workplace. He had some conditions which were: 1) They don't disrupt your work, 2) they are not a violent-natured dog and 3) if a person is working with another employee, it needs to be OK with the other employee the person is working with. Since Mr. Lonergan has been here as Supervisor there have been no issues with dogs disrupting employees or dogs defecating on the floor. To his knowledge no one has even barked or growled at anyone within the Communication Center or the lobby. Businesses and offices are becoming more pet friendly. He does not see a reason to change it unless there is something that changes it.

President Brow asked the Executive Director to come up with some criteria to be used as guidelines for a policy. Mr. Neto would like to have included in those guidelines the fact that the puppy must be at least 3 months old and up on their vaccinations, free of infection or parasites, clean and well groomed, house trained, obedient, no history of violent behavior, respectful of all employees. They may also need to post some type of notification that there may be a dog on the premises. In terms of insurance, the District may need a rider in case there is an issue. Also homeowners insurance unless the dog owner is not up to date on their premiums and a law suit occurs. The District would benefit from a rider. The owner must also own any cleanup involved if there is an accident. The Fire Chief had a recommendation to not allow an employee to leave their animal unattended. Therefore, an employee cannot bring their dog to work if there is the potential that they will be going out on calls. They will not be allowed to take an animal on a fire truck or ambulance. The Chief thinks it is beneficial to have a dog in Dispatch. He has experience with former co-workers that have committed suicide. In looking at PTSD and other mental health issues, having dogs in the workplace is one of the things he is considering as a benefit. Mr. Lonergan stated that it is hard to make a policy on this issue that would apply to all employees across the board but some jobs are different than others.

President Brow thought that this issue should come before the full Board of Commissioners. The Executive Director asked the Committee what they wanted from him. Commissioner Colligan was interested in finding out about liability and insurance coverage and expenses. The Executive Director suggested creating two policies in draft format. One policy to not allow animals, and one policy to allow animals but with guidelines. Commissioner Colligan is not opposed to having animals at the workplace,

but feels there needs to be a policy. The Chief asked if there are any informal complaints about this to inform the Chief so that he can address it before there is an issue.

- V. Commissioners' Comments. The President reported that the Executive Director's evaluation is coming due. This issue should be put on the next Personnel Committee meeting agenda, so that the Committee can start discussing his review.

Commissioner Epstein agreed with the comments made about having dogs on an ambulance or a fire truck. He added that things are changing nationally. Nationally there are ideas out there where they are considering sending EMS to calls normally handled by police officers. The reason is because they are better trained to deal with individuals with any type of mental health issues. Another reason has to do with working with therapy dogs.

Commissioner Epstein also offered his services as an EMSI to Chief Balletto if he sees a need for help.

- VI. Adjournment. There being no further business, a motion was made by Commissioner Hinners, seconded by Commissioner Colligan and unanimously approved to adjourn the meeting at 7:00 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Mertie Terry".

Mertie Terry, Chairwoman

Nancy Deegan
Recording Secretary
7-22-21