

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, December 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, December 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 Lee Brow (President), Charles Epstein, David Colligan, Chip Darius, Robert McIntyre and Mertie Terry attended. Commissioners Jason Hinners, Robert Donohue and Roger Rukowicz were absent. Also attending were Executive Director Julius Neto, Fire Chief Jason Balletto, Assistant Fire Chief Jason Brade, Communications Manager Justin Lonergan, Finance Manager Michael Alibrio, Acting Fire Marshal Harold Holmes, Water Operations Manager Joseph Palmieri, IAFF Local 4662 representative Brett Hallden.

CALL TO ORDER

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

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

A motion was made by Commissioner Colligan, seconded by Commissioner Darius and unanimously approved to accept the Agenda as submitted with the addition of Item H. under New Business, Disposition of Old Radios and Associated Equipment.

PUBLIC COMMENT

There were no public comments to report at this time.

APPROVAL OF THE BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS' MEETING MINUTES OF NOVEMBER 16, 2021

A motion was made by Commissioner Colligan, seconded by Commissioner McIntyre and unanimously approved to accept the Board of Commissioners' Meeting minutes of November 16, 2021, as submitted with the following note by the Executive Director as a recommendation for change to the minutes under Public Comment. Comments that were made by Mr. James Rude,

page 8, the top of the page, the last sentence should read, "As it relates to Accounts Receivable, Mr. Rude was excited to hear about collections. With over \$1.6 million in accounts receivable in the organization, it is going to be truly important for the Commission to begin to see on a monthly basis an aging of the accounts receivable for EMS, water and tax billings as well as begin to look at a calculation of a statistic of accounts receivable which tells folks how old the receivables are."

APPROVAL OF SPECIAL BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS' MEETING MINUTES OF
NOVEMBER 30, 2021

A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner McIntyre and unanimously approved to accept the Special Board of Commissioners' Meeting minutes of November 30, 2021, as submitted.

APPROVAL OF SPECIAL DISTRICT MEETING MINUTES OF
NOVEMBER 30, 2021

A motion was made by Commissioner Colligan, seconded by Commissioner McIntyre and unanimously approved to accept the Special District Meeting minutes of November 30, 2021.

READING OF COMMUNICATIONS & WRITTEN APPEALS
TO THE BOARD

Secretary Epstein stated there were 3 communications to be read. There was a communication from the Cromwell Children's Coalition that was addressed to the Fire Chief and Assistant Fire Chief. The letter thanked the Fire Department for its support in their food distribution event, on November 6, 2021. They appreciated all the community spirit the Department provided with their participation. They were grateful to be able to store the donations at the firehouse.

The second communication was from the CT State Firefighters Association Memorial Foundation thanking the Board of Commissioners for their \$100 donation.

The third communication was from the Rocky Hill Ambulance Association. The note thanked Cromwell Fire and EMS for participating in services for their former EMS Chief.

REPORTS OF THE STAFF

- A. Executive Director. The Executive Director's Report for November had been previously distributed and reviewed. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office. The Executive Director added that he had a meeting with Don Smith of Covenant Living as well as approximately 100 attendees. The purpose of the meeting was to introduce the Executive Director to the group and explain some of the functions of the Fire District. It was a short meeting that was a last minute add-on to their agenda. Mr. Smith is working with others to get the Fire Chief and the Executive Director to return and address items from a set agenda. Mr. Neto is looking forward to working with that community to further educate that group on the Water Division and Fire Division business and current issues.

A motion was made by Commissioner Darius, seconded by Commissioner Terry and unanimously approved to accept the Executive Director's Report for November as presented.

- B. Financial Report. The Financial Report for November had been previously distributed and reviewed. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office. Mr. Alibrio did not have anything to add to his report. He noted that the audit is still underway. He is getting ready to start working on next year's budget. The Executive Director and Mr. Alibrio are hoping to have something to present to the Board next month regarding the audit. Mr. Neto thanked Mr. Alibrio and Janet Schmaltz for the work they do to make the audit run smoothly.

Commissioner Epstein asked about the transition of ambulance billing companies. Mr. Neto reported that currently there is some background work being done with Shared Response. Quick Meds is sharing their billing information with Shared Response. They anticipate a smooth transition. They will be able to manage the accounts more efficiently because they will have a quicker response for reporting. Shared Response is committed to a higher collection or process rate. If this is managed efficiently, it will increase the District's cash flow.

Mr. Neto has been working with Mike Alibrio and Angel Alvarado on changing the online payment process for the Water Department. They are trying to make it a simpler process. There will be a new website design at the same time. It will start to be marketed in the next 4 to 6 weeks. They are working to provide the best security to the system so the public can trust the site. They may have to find a new cyber security company because the current company is getting out of the cyber security business with municipalities. They are doing a full analysis to determine the District's needs.

A motion was made by Commissioner Colligan, seconded by Commissioner McIntyre and unanimously approved to accept the Financial Report for November as presented.

- C. Fire Department Chief. The Chief's Report for November had been previously distributed and reviewed. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office. Chief Balletto noted that the Department was very busy in the month of November. The Chief's Office, the Training Office, mercy calls for the Fire Marshal's Office and public outreach were all part of the Fire Department activity during the month. There were no changes to the Chief's report.

A motion was made by Commissioner Colligan, seconded by Commissioner Epstein and unanimously approved to accept the Fire Department Chief's Report for November as submitted.

The President asked the Acting Fire Marshal if he had anything to add to the Fire Marshal's Report for November. Mr. Holmes had nothing to add. They are moving forward as best they can.

- D. Water Operations. The Operations Report for November had been previously distributed and reviewed. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office. Mr. Palmieri added that he and the Executive Director as well as representatives from ONG and DOT Railroad services did a site walk of the railroad project that was just completed. He reported that the site looks wonderful. There were some suggestions for the Spring. They plan on milling and repaving the road and providing new curbs and a new gate. They plan to relocate the gate a little bit so a slide gate can be installed for better security. There will be concrete barriers to secure the access road at the train track trestle.

A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Darius and unanimously approved to accept the Water Operations Report for November as submitted.

- E. Communication Center Report. The Communication Center report had been previously distributed and reviewed. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office. Mr. Lonergan added that the Knox boxes came in, and Mr. Logan is in the process of installing them. Mr. Logan has also been working on apparatus. They are doing a security/fire protection audit for all buildings of the Fire District. It is part of the bond process. They are working with Associated Security to identify things such as alarm systems and what needs to be replaced.

A motion was made by Commissioner Darius, seconded by Commissioner Terry and unanimously approved to accept the Communication Center Report for November as submitted.

REPORTS OF THE STANDING COMMITTEES

- A. District Operations. There was no meeting.
- B. Executive. There was no meeting.
- C. Fire Operations. Meetings were held on October 18, 2021, and November 15, 2021. They had been previously distributed and reviewed. Copies are attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office. The December meeting was held last night. Several issues were discussed such as communications and disposing of very old equipment. Mr. Lonergan will make every effort to sell whatever he can of the old equipment.

A motion was made by Commissioner Colligan, seconded by Commissioner Darius and unanimously approved to accept the Fire Operations Committee meeting minutes of October 18, 2021 and November 15, 2021, as submitted.

1. Communications Committee. A meeting was held on November 4, 2021. Minutes had been previously distributed and reviewed. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office. Commissioner Colligan noted that the Communications project is winding down. He thanked the Fire Chief, the Communications Manager and the Water Department. They took the generator to Holy Apostles to test it. It does work but they think it would be better if an access road was installed, especially for the winter months. The Executive Director will be working with Holy Apostles to see if the District can get permission to install an access driveway. The District may have the materials needed to construct the driveway which will make the job a lot cheaper.

A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Terry and unanimously approved to accept the minutes of the Communications Committee meeting of November 4, 2021, as submitted.

2. Apparatus Committee. There was no meeting.
- D. Pension. There was no meeting. The scheduled meeting was canceled because the Executive Director did not hear back from Dan Jock who was supposed to be providing documentation for the Committee to review and vote on. Once that information is received, a special meeting will be scheduled.

- E. Personnel. There was no meeting.
- F. Water Operations. There was no meeting.

BOARD APPOINTMENTS

There were no appointments to report.

CONSIDERATION OF OLD BUSINESS

- A. Report of the Town Council Liaison. The Liaison was not present.
- B. Reports of the Special Committees
 - 1. Public Safety Tower Committee. There was no meeting. The Executive Director made a note in his report that the \$143,000 check was received from AT&T. The District is now working with the engineers on the reinforcement. AT&T will get 50% capacity, and the Fire District will get the other 50%. If any other provider wants to be part of the Tower, they will have to pay the District for a portion, and the District will reimburse AT&T. The District will not provide all the capacity that it gained. The maximum that will be provided is 25% of the 50% capacity it has.
 - 2. Health & Safety/Building Committee. There was no meeting.
 - 3. Bylaws Committee. A meeting was held on November 3, 2021. Minutes had been previously distributed and reviewed. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office. There has not been another meeting because the Committee was waiting until the minutes were published. The minutes were asking Commissioners to review and bring back any questions or comments to the Committee regarding the proposed changes. They will be scheduling another meeting to discuss and vote on the revisions. There were some technical difficulties preventing the Committee from producing a working draft copy of the proposed changes.

A motion was made by Commissioner Colligan, seconded by Commissioner Terry and unanimously approved to accept the Bylaws Committee meeting minutes of November 3, 2021, as submitted.
 - 4. Publicity Committee. There was no meeting. Mr. Neto will be reaching out to the Co-Chairs to schedule a meeting. The next quarterly newsletter is scheduled to be published in January with the quarterly water bills.
- C. Discussion and Possible Decision on Volunteer Recognition. The Executive Director reminded everyone that this was tabled from last month. The issue is that paid staff were compensated for the time they worked during COVID. Full-time staff received \$1,000, and part-time staff received \$500. Volunteers were not recognized or compensated. The funds were from the Recovery Act which were managed by the Town Council and Board of Finance. The issue was brought up that the volunteers were not recognized, and how can they be compensated on a non-financial basis. In terms of finance, it is a non-budgeted item. Mr. Neto was looking for direction from the Commissioners. There are six individuals that are affected. Commissioner Terry suggested having a dinner for them that is catered, and present them with a certificate, or even just coffee and cake just to be able to show

recognition to them. Commissioner Darius suggested submitting letters in the Cromwell Chronicle or a display ad in the paper, space on the website. He didn't know if it would be possible to recognize them with response wear. Commissioner Epstein suggested scheduling a workshop with the Commissioners to discuss the ideas brought forth at this meeting. The President agreed with the suggestion.

NEW BUSINESS

- A. Commissioners' Comments. Commissioner Colligan thanked the three Fire Chiefs for all their hard work in coming up with a plan to move the volunteer organization forward, i.e., drills, etc. Commissioner Darius informed the Board that former Fire Explorer Austin Gangler has completed his boot camp as a Private First Class in the U.S. Marines. He is home on break with his family in his dress blues. He is a credit to the Department, and Commissioner Darius would like to see him recognized with a letter on his accomplishments from the Commission.

A motion was made by Commissioner Darius, seconded by Commissioner Terry and unanimously approved to have the President and Executive Director draft a recognition letter to Mr. Austin Gangler to acknowledge his accomplishments both with the Fire Department and now the U.S. Marine Corps.

Commissioner Terry thanked everyone present for their support and hard work throughout the year.

The President discussed having an official "swearing in" ceremony for the dozen or so individuals in the Fire Department that have been hired over the last year or so. Uniforms are now in, and it seems fitting to schedule a ceremony. The President would like to schedule this sometime in February with members in their dress blues and photos with family members.

There is also an issue with Todd Gagnon, former Fire Marshal that this Board recognized as a line of duty death. There has been some discussion about making a plaque and dedicating the Fire Marshal's Office in his name, or the West Street Firehouse in his name because he was a volunteer firefighter before he became a Fire Marshal. The President requested if anyone had any ideas to contact him. He is starting the process of doing something. His idea is similar to the plaque the District issued for Bill Jarzavek and the Water Garage.

Commissioner Terry suggested a \$100 gift to be given in Todd's name to a high school senior at the awards night at Cromwell High School. The gift should go to someone who is pursuing firefighting, the military or a career where they will be serving the public. This would get the word out to the public that the Board is a friendly, warm and supportive group. It would also honor someone that the District holds near and dear to their hearts. Commissioner Epstein suggested adding this item for discussion at the workshop to be scheduled in January. The President agreed.

- B. Budgetary Adjustments. There were no adjustments to report.
- C. Approval of Contracts/Contractors. There were no contracts or Contractors to report.
- D. Discussion and Possible Decision on Extension of MOA for Acting Assistant Fire Chief. The Executive Director explained that a couple months ago the Board approved an MOA for

Brian Petrucelli to become Acting Assistant Fire Chief of Training. He has done an outstanding job over the last couple of months working with the other Assistant Chief to keep up with OSHA training requirements, and he has made the training office a more efficient process. Mr. Petrucelli's agreement expired yesterday. Mr. Neto reached out to Mr. Petrucelli and the President of the Union to advise that he would be bringing this issue before the Board at this meeting. The District has not found a permanent, part-time Assistant Fire Chief. The Executive Director is recommending that the District extend Mr. Petrucelli's agreement with one change. He would like to have until the end of February to give the President and the Executive Director the opportunity to reach out and start the process of hiring. They need more time to complete this objective. The rate of pay for this position is also not competitive at \$30/hr. Mr. Neto is recommending, because Mr. Petrucelli has gone above and beyond in this role, to bump the hourly rate to \$35/hr. If the District does not comply with the extension, there will not be an Acting Assistant Chief. President Brow's recommendation was to concur with the Executive Director's recommendation.

A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Colligan and unanimously approved to extend the Acting Assistant Chief MOA until the end of February along with the increase in the hourly rate.

Commissioner Darius asked if there were any other candidates in the pipeline. The Executive Director noted that there are none at this time. With the new hourly rate established, they feel they can go out in the marketplace to recruit. They want to be able to take their time with the recruiting process because the position is a key position in the Fire Department. They want to make sure the individual fulfills the obligation of that role. OSHA has already identified to the District that the training component is critical not just to perform the role but also to properly document it. Consistency of training is as critical as the documentation.

There was some discussion about the timetable to recruit someone. The Executive Director noted that Mr. Petrucelli is flexible, and willing to work with the District to help achieve their objectives. Training and onboarding will be the responsibility of the Fire Chief. He has held the position on many occasions in his career, so transitioning a new Assistant Chief will not be difficult at all. The Chief recommended that the District recruit someone the is certified to hold that position and not downgrade the requirements for that position.

- E. Discussion and Possible Decision on MOA's on Sharing Staff Between Divisions. The Executive Director explained that they have two MOA's that were to be presented to the Personnel Committee. However, since the meeting had been postponed a couple of times, Mr. Neto felt this item should come before the full Board because eventually it would come before the full Board anyway.

He explained how the staffing model has changed over the last couple of years. Volunteers are no longer volunteering or signing on. This created a staffing void, even though the situation needed "all hands on deck." At the time there were dispatchers that were also certified as EMT's and/or firefighters. Through the transition, the Board concurred they were going to allow Dispatchers, when not on shift, to work on the fire side to fill shifts. It was anticipated that this was a 6 month transition. There is a Water Department employee that does unscheduled fire fighting duties. There are at least 2 or 3 Dispatchers that are EMS/EMT certified and firefighter certified. The anticipated 6 mos. has turned into 20 mos.

Now they need to transition back to the norm. They need dispatchers to be dispatchers, certified EMT and firefighters to be firefighters and EMT's. Having people working in other

capacities besides their own position is becoming more challenging. It has come down to staffing being unstable but demands or call volume being higher. They need to go back to a clarification of roles. The MOU's presented at this meeting refers to single-focused individuals working for a department. This will be a slower process, giving the employee some time to think and decide which area they want to work in. Once it is decided, that person will be expected to work on the side of their choice, but then be expected to remain in the role they have chosen.

Commissioner Darius had some concerns about the Omicron variant. He understood the rationale and the net result behind the MOU's but wanted to know if there were any emergency rollback of this if necessary. Mr. Neto said that it can be renegotiated if need be. Commissioner Terry commended the Union and management for coming to an agreement about what is needed for staffing and supporting each other.

A motion was made by Commissioner Darius, seconded by Commissioner Epstein and unanimously approved to accept the draft MOU's as presented by the Dispatchers' Union and the Firefighters' Union.

- F. Discussion and Possible Decision on Cromwell Fire Department Staffing Solutions. The Executive Director stated that this issue was discussed a couple of months ago. There were two workshops held with the Commissioners, the Executive Director and the Fire Chief. Included in the packets was a power point worksheet that highlighted the challenges, the proposed solutions and the additional expenses discussed during the workshop.

Based on their analysis, both the full-time and part-time salaries in the Fire Department are not competitive with today's market. In the marketplace through the COVID years all entry level positions and then some have been increasing their hourly rate enormously. Cromwell is competing with AMR for EMT services. Their rate is anywhere from \$24 to \$28 an hour. The rate in Cromwell for an EMS/firefighter is \$17.60. The outcome of the workshop as far as what is being proposed is to increase the part-time hourly rate by \$1. This is above the rate that was contractually agreed upon. The rate will become \$18.60. The single certification EMT or Firefighter will have an hourly rate of \$17.60 per hour.

There are also part-timers that are doing more than a part-time schedule. Some are working 40, 50 or close to 60 hours a week just to make sure there are enough "boots on the ground." Part of this proposal is for the Board to approve 4 full-time positions. That will take the stress away from the level of hours where part-time hours are needed. There is a financial impact on the budget because this is an unbudgeted solution to the staffing issue. If both proposals are implemented to increase the hourly rate and create 4 new full time positions, the additional expense to the budget would be \$49,971. This is a full analysis including medical benefits, FICA, etc. This would be a \$50,000 financial burden to make the plan work.

Mr. Neto introduced 4 ways to get the \$50,000 back.

- The first is to hold a District wide meeting to reallocate some capital dollars from different capital improvements or purchases and put them on the operating side.
- Another suggestion is to lay off support staff or reduce hours.
- Take \$50,000 out of the General Fund. There is already \$1 million in the General Fund for emergencies. This would also need to come before the taxpayers.

- Go to the present budget and scrape out \$50,000. Some monies could come from insurance since those expenses are for a calendar year. The second half of the year they would have to do estimates. The insurance company held the same rates as last year so they will be able to work with those funds. Professional fees are budgeted. Not all of those funds have been used. Some were legal fees and other funds were \$18,000 that was put aside for Human Resource services that was not used.

The three scenarios described by the Executive Director will get the District \$50,000. He added that six months ago they never thought they would see the job market the way it is. They still have a fiduciary responsibility to stay within budget. The medical/fire suppression environment requires a minimum of 5 or 6 staff fully cross-trained to meet the need of the Department. They believe that the solution proposed at this meeting is worth trying.

The President went around the table to hear Commissioners' comments. Commissioner Colligan was the first to comment. He is in favor of this proposal 100 percent. Hourly rates do need to be competitive with everyone else. Times are different, and the District needs to recognize that. The District needs to take care of the people that are taking care of the citizens.

Commissioner Colligan noted that if money is taken from Capital Expenditures, the staff members will be hurting. The items that are currently in Capital Expenditures are not things that the members want, they are things that they need. Those things eliminated will have to be added to next year's budget. Commissioner Epstein agreed and added it is not a pretty picture, but the Board needs to support it. Commissioner McIntyre was also in support.

Commissioner Darius thanked the District staff for finding the funds in budget. It also gives the District the opportunity to pay attention to more things like EMS billing to help accelerate income to offset the hard numbers. He feels that the District needs to be competitive, the members deserve it and he is in support of Option 4. Commissioner Terry was also in favor. She trusts the Executive Director to be able to get the members what they need as he has done in delinquent water bill collection. She is confident that next year's budget will be able to have the things leftover from this budget. President Brow also was in support of the proposed solution. He suggested starting discussions with the president of the Union. The President of the Union was in attendance at this meeting. He is not surprised by the proposal presented. If the Board were to approve this plan tonight, the Executive Director would reach out to the Union to begin talks.

A motion was made by Commissioner Colligan, seconded by Commissioner Darius and unanimously approved to accept the proposal and accept the recommendation from the Executive Director using Option 4, getting funding from other line items in the budget to add up to \$50,000 and allow the Executive Director and the Board President to enter into talks with the Firefighters' Union.

- G. Discussion and Approval of 2022 Holiday Schedule. The 2022 Holiday Schedule for Non-bargaining Unit employees was distributed and reviewed. A copy is attached to the minutes on file in the Fire District Office.

A motion was made by Commissioner Colligan, seconded by Commissioner Terry and unanimously approved to accept the 2022 Holiday Schedule for Non-bargaining Unit employees as presented.

- H. Discussion and Possible Decision on the Disposition of the Old Radios and Associated Equipment. Mr. Lonergan explained that over the years new equipment has been purchased multiple times. They have equipment that is old and way past its life use. He has sorted and done inventory. There are some items that can be sold. With permission, he will go through the process of deprogramming and trying to resell some of the equipment that does have some value. There is some equipment that would cost more to ship than what it is worth. He would like to environmentally friendly remove some of the equipment from the inventory. Some of it is 20, 30 or 40 years old. Most of it does not comply with FCC regulations. It is of no value and has no operational use. Commissioner Darius made a preliminary call to "Doctors Without Borders." He did not know if the District would get a tax credit, but it is possible they will take the equipment to use. The President thought it was a great idea if some of the equipment can be used by those types of organizations.

A motion was made by Commissioner Colligan, seconded by Commissioner Terry and unanimously approved that Commissioner Darius and the Communications Manager work together to sell equipment that can be sold, donate equipment to organizations that could use it; and if equipment cannot be donated, give the Communications Manager permission to dispose of equipment as he sees fit.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Mr. James Rude, Highridge Road, commented that he was astounded by the process followed in the most recent vote to acquire \$2.2 million worth of routine capital items. In his opinion consideration of such acquisition should have been handled during the normal and recurring annual budget process before the start of the fiscal year. The use of a Special Commission meeting followed by a poorly communicated Special Town meeting is evidenced by only 24 voters being present for non-urgent capital needs approval is a huge disappointment. Replacing worn out equipment should not be an emergency. Trust in the Fire District by the residents of the Town of Cromwell is something that must be earned. This most recent action that was done fuels distrust of the District, not trust. The second point was in the form of a question: How could the October newsletter that went out about 45 days before the Special Town Meeting, not identify or mention the potential need for an upcoming \$2.25 million capital request approval. Again, disappointing. The third point was that Mr. Rude left the last Commission meeting with a feeling that it was much more interested in tracking the 3 minute rule than it was to listening to what was being said. He found that very disappointing. He thanked the group for hearing him this evening.

Commissioner Terry wished everyone in attendance a very happy holiday and happy new year. The President offered the same in addition to staying safe and healthy.

EXECUTIVE SESSION


There were no items to come under Executive Session at this time.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business, a motion was made by Commissioner Colligan, seconded by Commissioner Epstein and unanimously approved to adjourn the meeting at 7:38 PM.

ATTEST:

Nancy Deegan
Recording Secretary


Charles R. Epstein, Secretary