

Cromwell Fire District

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FIRE DISTRICT OFFICE
WATER DIVISION

FIRE DEPARTMENT
FIRE MARSHAL'S OFFICE

BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS **Special Fire Department Operations Committee**

Wednesday, February 3, 2021

5:30 PM

**West Street Firehouse
1 West Street
Cromwell, CT**

Present: Commissioners David Colligan (Chairman), Lee Brow (President), Charles Epstein, Jason Hinnens (via Zoom) and Robert Donohue. Also attending were Executive Director Julius Neto, Ass't Fire Chief William Stacy, Health & Safety Officer Chip Darius, Dispatch Union President Andrew Cook (via Zoom), Firefighter Union President Brett Hallden (via Zoom), Dispatcher and Part-time Firefighter Chris Bellamo (via Zoom).

Per Executive Order No. 7B, Governor Lamont has ordered and directed that in-person open meeting requirements be suspended. Therefore, the Special Fire 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 5:30 PM, by Chairman Colligan.
- II. Approval of Agenda. A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Donohue and unanimously approved to accept the Agenda as presented.
- III. Public Comment. The Executive Director had not received any public comments to be read at this meeting. There were no public comments presented.
- IV. New Business. Chairman Colligan reviewed the topics for discussion at tonight's meeting. He reminded everyone that if anything is decided at this meeting, it still needs to go before the full Board of Commissioners for approval. He requested that any private texting during the meeting be kept to a minimum.
 - A. Discussion and Possible Decision on the Recommendation from the COVID 19 Work Group Regarding What Firehouse Will Be Utilized During the Temporary COVID Plan. The Executive Director reviewed the decisions made previously by the Board of Commissioners. One topic was the sunseting of the continuity plan on Sunday, February 7, 2021. The other topic was for the District to institute a stricter mask policy using N-95's under certain environments by using the grid that was approved. The open item that was kicked back to the work group was to come up with a recommendation as to what firehouse will be used. The question is whether to continue to alternate firehouses or

move everyone to either Coles Road or Court St. The workgroup met and forwarded their recommendation. The recommendation was to go to the Coles Road environment for the next 4 weeks. Commissioner Colligan added there are others that still want to rotate both stations.

The Chairman opened up the meeting for discussion at this point. He stated that in looking at the statistics for the State of CT, the positivity rate has been going down a little more every day. They have been keeping a close eye on the numbers. The Governor has been easing restrictions a little at a time. This will lead to another phase of operations with restrictions being lifted. He has not received any reports from Lt. Hallden regarding other fire stations and what their policies are. He has called some stations himself to find out their policies. Chairman Colligan feels that after talking to the Chief and the COVID committee, everyone should be at one station, and getting things back to where they were in November before the COVID policies started.

Commissioner Epstein thinks that the key to everything is the mask situation. If people have the right masks and distance, he didn't feel it mattered as to what fire house they are in. What matters for the safety of everyone in his opinion is based on the information they receive from the Town's Health Director and the Fire Department's Health & Safety Officer. Commissioner Epstein gets similar information from his branch of government as the Emergency Manager at his workplace. He feels the most important thing is mask and distance. If those policies are being followed, the risk of exposure is very low.

Acting Fire Chief Brade was asked for his feedback. His opinion is that the current way of staffing has worked. It has gotten them through the surges between Christmas and New Year's. He also noted that the numbers are starting to come down. The current model that the Department is operating under is the most effective way to keep the transmission of the virus from spreading throughout the firehouse because people are not together. He did not think the Department needed to do any other measures. He thinks that with the mask policy that was voted on, that would be a viable option to get the staff back together and a sense of normalcy. There may be some challenges with the mask policy as far as compliance. That will be dealt with on a case by case basis. The mask policy will be in effect no matter what is decided with firehouses. In order to get back to a sense of normalcy that policy will need to be enforced and adhered to in order for it to work.

Commissioner Colligan added that there has been an issue for the Chief in terms of being able to hire in order to replace members that have left. Trying to hire under the current pretenses where people have been separated and they are trying to keep groups separated makes the hiring process harder. It is also tough for training because there are only so many people on a shift. It would be easier to hire when the crews are back in a normal state where they can intermingle and bring those people in when they are able to come in to be trained.

Commissioner Colligan called on Commissioner Hanners who had dialed into the meeting. Commissioner Hanners had some thoughts similar to Chief Brade. He was against putting people together at the last meeting. He feels the most effective way to stop the spread of the virus is to keep everyone separated. The consensus of the room seemed to be leaning towards data that supports declining numbers and enforced mask policies being effective in the elimination of the spread of the virus. He is concerned

with enforcement and the buy-in of the crews to make sure they are wearing their masks 100% of the time on every call for every reason around the public and around themselves.

Chairman Colligan asked Mr. Darius to review the policy so everyone understands what they should be doing. There are people on board that do not understand it. The Department has a policy and supporting documentation. If crews followed the policy that came from the Health Director, and had N-95's on for the last incidents they had, then the only person that would need to quarantine would be the person that tested positive. Everyone else would have been on a watch list. Chairman Colligan clarified the mask should be an N-95 or higher.

Chip Darius explained there is a chart that shows what is acceptable for a face covering. That chart also shows that if there is an exposure to an infected person within 6 ft. for more than 15 min. in a 24 hour period, and people around that infected person are wearing N-95's, there is no need to take those people off line. The optimal respiratory protection to maintain effective staffing is set forth in the one page PPE selection chart that has been presented and approved. Mr. Darius stated that a separate issue from that is the compliance element. There may be some education needed, some enforcement or having Lieutenants getting together with their crews. There is also the issue of reaching people who are not on duty regularly. The Department needs to reach out to the part-timers and volunteers to make sure they understand and buy in appropriately as well. Separate from those two issues is ventilation within the stations. Based on the last meeting, it is Mr. Darius' understanding there is no difference in the ventilation efficiency in the Court St. or Coles Rd. sleeping areas. If they were to add the stand alone HEPA filtration units, the two would be the same in terms of risk during sleeping or crew occupancy.

Chairman Colligan noted that they will need to be purchasing HEPA filters. Mr. Darius reported that they have started to look into those things including price. All they need are the dimensions of the rooms to be protected. He stated they are readily available on Amazon or places like that. The Chief added that part of the plan in purchasing the filters depends on the outcome of the continuity plan. If the crews will be staying at one station, the Chief only needs to purchase 3 or 4. If it is decided to go to two separate stations, he will need to purchase 8 or 9. The filters are between \$400 to \$800 a piece. Those areas needing filters are: the Chief's office, small bunk room area, two in the common area upstairs, one in the Kitchen downstairs. That would be 5 at Court St., and also including the Dispatch room. The ventilation system is ready and able to accept MERV 13 filters. Once installed they will be at the higher level of filtration. This is for Court St. Dispatch only. The Chief will also need Trane to come in to evaluate the system for Coles Road. If this is the viable option for Coles Road, it will be the cheaper option. The air circulation system at Coles Road is not capable of MERV 13 at this time. It would require system upgrades in addition to MERV 13 booking time and availability. The HEPA units will still be useful in the future during flu and pollen season. They are relatively cheap running about \$300 per unit. This would be a quality of life improvement across the board.

Commissioner Hinnners reported that there is no HEPA filtration already in place at Coles Rd. It had been reported in error that it was in place at Coles Road. That system is incapable of that filtration without significant improvements. That was the main comment he wanted to make.

Commissioner Donohue personally felt that it was too early to make a change at this time. He reported that the District is getting better, but he does not think that another 4.3 weeks is going to hurt sticking with the same plan that we are in. Mr. Darius did a preliminary review of what is on Amazon. They are pretty much all over the map in terms of square footage capability and number of air changes per hour given the square footage. You can't just look at number of feet, you also have to look at air changes per hour. There should be at least 3 air changes per hour. They need to be conservative on the square footage they think the unit is going to cover. Commissioner Donohue added there is a configuration, length times width divided by 144. There will be additional cost to the Department with filtration expenses and overtime.

Chairman Colligan asked Ass't Chief Stacy what his thoughts were. He stated he was in favor of keeping things the way they are for another 4 weeks, and re-evaluate after that. He thinks that the plan is working well. There was one incident where people at Court St. got sick and they kept it on that side. He might try to recommend that they let people from the stations fill in for one another since they are quarantined to that one station. Let the people at that station rotate with one another if need be.

A motion was made by Commissioner Hinnners, seconded by Commissioner Donohue and unanimously approved to continue with the current arrangement of two separate fire houses for the next 4 weeks with a revisit afterwards.

B. Discussion and Possible Decision on Local 4662 Recommendation for a Possible Extension of the COVID Continuity Plan for an Additional 4 Weeks with No Bonus Plan.

It was noted that currently the end of the continuity plan will be February 7. The Executive Director recapped where the workgroup was at this point. There was a sunset date for the continuity plan of February 7, unless a new decision is made tonight. The Union through its President asked this body to re-evaluate maintaining another 4 weeks of the continuity plan with no bonus. This group needs to decide if it wishes to maintain the former decision of stopping the whole program on the 7th or continue for another 4 weeks without the bonus plan.

Commissioner Colligan had asked Mr. Neto to identify what the costs would be if we continue the plan knowing that they will not have the cost of the bonus. There is an overtime component. Mr. Neto went back to a full month prior to the continuity plan which was November 2020. At that time the Fire Department incurred \$5,170 of overtime. That was considered the baseline. This was based on the way scheduling was done 4-6 months ago. Once the plan kicked in 6 or 7 weeks ago, the OT they incurred within those weeks was divided into a monthly average. There was an increase of \$4,100 of additional overtime. There was some decrease in full-time overtime, but an increase in part-time overtime. That makes sense because they are decreasing the number of people engaging to cover the same hours. This is roughly \$1,000 a week on overtime as an additional expense for the plan to continue. If going back to the old scheduling, there will still be some overtime because they are low on staff. They are adding a seventh person on a shift which translates to overtime.

Chief Brade did not see much of a difference between this vote and the previous motion. Commissioner Epstein asked the Chief how the overtime could be reduced. The only way would be to allow more people into the mix. Without the bonus there is a significant reduction in cost to the plan, but there is still added overtime cost. The Chief feels this is

the most effective way to do it. He believes wearing masks would be a viable and effective option.

If part-time staff are working more than 90 days, there is a concern about full-time employment. Mr. Neto stated he does not know of any Statute that allows an automatic full-time assessment. Management dictates to some degree when they classify individuals. There are some Labor Department numbers that state full time could be considered to be 30 hours or more. There is a time span involved. This plan was initiated to prevent exposure to COVID to keep the District performing fire and EMS services whether it costs full or part time hours. The group needs to evaluate if the District is comfortable enough where they are today as a Fire Department with what they are trying to do to keep everyone safe. The Department has masks and protocols, and the success of the plan all depends whether or not people are adhering to the PPE and protocols.

Commissioner Colligan added that the Department did not have a mask policy like the one they have now. This policy should get them through some of the problems. He wants to make sure the District is moving in the right direction and they are not over spending. The Department has received a little over \$1,300 for COVID financial relief associated with EMS. That was some time ago. Mr. Neto reported that the criteria for reimbursement has been modified. They are paying a lot of attention to the school systems.

Commissioner Epstein asked how to get more people in the mix that are not potentially dangerous. Chief Brade stated that no matter what is done, the Department needs to hire. There is approximately 28 part-time scheduled staff. That number has dropped. There are some people that are still on the books but not necessarily participating due to other job commitments, new jobs or attrition. Cromwell is not very competitive in that field. They have lost people due to that on the part-time side.

Chairman Colligan asked for input from Commissioner HInners. Commissioner HInners was still listening to everyone else's feedback on the coverage issue and crew safety. Commissioner Donohue wants to put the crew's health & safety before money, but it the Commission's job to be fiscally responsible. So far the plan is costing the District \$4,300/month. The additional cost would be \$4,300/month.

The Chairman asked President Brow if he had any concerns or comments. He had concerns about the health & safety of the crews but also the health & safety of the people we serve. He asked Chip Darius if there were any concerns about the variants to the virus that are now surfacing. Will N-95's still protect? Is there a concern this will be a more dominant strain of the virus. Mr. Darius reported that is what is going to happen eventually. He stated that all virus' drift and shift. The fact that variants are on the scene is fully expected. The media hype about things being more deadly or more easily infectious is just media hype. They are seeing in England a greater rate of hospitalization. Where people are becoming severely ill, the percentage of those people is increasing. The percentage of population becoming ill is not increasing. Where there is severe illness, there is a greater rate of admission to intensive care units. That is a complex factor because of the amount of time people have been on isolation, the amount of time the economy has been at a standstill, the number of people who haven't gone to their doctor for regular care, the number of people with underlying co-morbidities, etc. It is a complex scenario. The media would like everyone to dig a hole and not come out

which is not possible. There are going to be variants. The official word from the WHO and the CDC and the Center for Infectious Disease, Research and Prevention in Minnesota is that the current vaccine is effective against the variants. All the vaccine manufacturers are very closely studying the variants. They are already working on booster doses that would be targeted to specific strains of the variant. They are seeing international shut downs.

Mr. Darius discussed the risk to our residents. Cromwell has the opportunity to vaccinate people. All people should be encouraged to get vaccinated. The Department has respirators, cleaners and disinfectants. They are doing all that they can with the technology they have.

Ass't Chief Stacy reported on the calls and what is billable money. He has had Lt. Wolmetz working on this information. Out of 41 calls where the 7th guy was covered, 28 were when no seventh was passed. The 28 calls that were taken have the potential of \$20,608 in revenue vs. a loss of income of \$9,568.

Commissioner Hinnners asked for clarity. He wanted to know if the District wants to continue to pay the overtime and are we looking to justify the expense of the overtime for the next 4 weeks. The Executive Director explained that if a motion is made it should be that effective February 7, the Continuity Plan ceases to exist. What the motion could be is to continue past February 7 for another 4 weeks without the bonus. If nothing is done, come February 7 there will be no continuity plan and no 14 part-timers working a large number of hours. They will go back to the way they were operating 4 months ago.

A motion was made by Commissioner Hinnners, seconded by Commissioner Donohue and approved 3 to 1 to continue the Continuity Plan for 4 more weeks with no bonuses. Chairman Colligan abstained. There was discussion whether or not there will be coverage issues over the next 4 weeks. The Chief stated the crews have been notified that the plan might be ending on February 7. They have been having weekly meetings with the understanding that the timeline could change. The Chief thought that Lt. Hallden should be notified to see if he has any issues. Lt. Hallden noted that the 12 individuals are willing to continue following the continuity plan for the next 4 weeks for their own safety and are not anxious to get back to the way things were. Some have time off requests for the month of February, but the Lieutenant reported that 99.5% of the shifts will be covered by the same people. The Chief added that he had several requests for time off from career staff during the month of February or March. He asked how this should be handled. He asked if there would be another MOU or should they be granting the time off and filling those spots. Ass't Chief Stacy suggested maybe to let them intermingle shifts within the building. The Executive Director had some informal conversations with the Local 4662 President on this issue. They would be looking for qualified firefighters to take a shift if a person is on vacation. No different than what we do today. If a person is sick, the schedule will be burdened a little. The plan was that if there is an open slot or position, a person can serve on that shift, but then needs to be excluded for 7 days if he or she is going to be assigned to a different shift. If they are assigned to the same shift, it becomes his or her availability. That flexibility can continue. The Chief had received requests for time off already for February after the 7th. The Chief requested that if the MOU's are extended, he wanted them to read that vacation time will be at the discretion of the Chief. He has no problem granting a vacation day as long as there is someone who can fill the spot.

- V. Commissioners' Comments. There was a discussion regarding the voting and non-voting members of the Committee. It was noted that the Fire Chiefs are non-voting members of the Fire Operations Committee. President Brow reported that the District Operations Committee has appointed the Health & Safety Officer to the Board's Safety/Building Committee Chaired by Commissioner Donohue. The Health & Safety Officer is a non-voting member of that Committee. It was thought that Mr. Darius does not need to also be a non-voting member of the Fire Operations Committee. Although he will be invited to meetings that have Health and Safety on the agenda.

There was discussion regarding meeting again to evaluate whether or not the Continuity Plan should be continued past the 4 weeks that was just voted on. Commissioner Epstein stated that the Committee will have to meet at some point because they will need to have a plan for when this ends. They discussed having conversations with the Union and staff to prepare them for what the next steps might be and to evaluate the status of staffing and scheduling. The Chief agrees that a couple of weeks would be needed to advise everyone of the changes. It was thought to have the follow up evaluation on the Agenda for the next regular Fire Operations Committee meeting which is scheduled in two weeks, on February 16, 2021.

The Chief asked for direction on how many HEPA filters to purchase based on the continuity plan and voting to continue the same plan and alternate firehouses. It is uncertain if the plan will stay in place after the next 4 weeks. The Executive Director suggested that the Department concentrate on one environment first. He would like to see Mr. Johnson contact Trane to evaluate what is needed. He thinks that ordering 5 HEPA filters immediately for Court St. is a good start.

President Brow recapped what was voted on at this meeting. For the first item it was voted to continue with every other station, and for the second item it was voted to continue 4 more weeks without the bonus and with negotiations between management and the Union for an MOU to include a hard date of March 7. Mr. Neto added that they will also need to contact the Communications Union because they have an agreement with that union for an employee who was assigned to the fire side and not Dispatch during the continuity plan. The next steps for that person need to be identified. If there are any issues that arise with that, the Executive Director will report back to the Board.

Mr. Darius shared some information on research he did on Amazon and Granger. There is nothing available from Granger that would be appropriate for the District. The unit he recommends is the largest available recognizable brand name which is Honeywell. There is an HPA 300 unit which is rated for 5 air changes per hour in 465 square feet. Ass't Chief Stacy suggested using local businesses too for those products if they have them in stock. Commissioner Epstein thought that they would be needing the filters for the next 6 to 10 months. Even if not needed, they can be left in place and can only improve the air flow. They could also be stored for the future.

- VI. Adjournment. There being no further business, a motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Donohue and unanimously approved to adjourn the meeting at 6:42 PM.

Respectfully submitted,


David Colligan, Chairman

Nancy Deegan, Recording Secretary
2-24-21