

Cromwell Fire District

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FIRE DISTRICT OFFICE
WATER DIVISION

FIRE DEPARTMENT
FIRE MARSHAL'S OFFICE

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

Monday, February 22, 2021

5:00 PM

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

Present: Commissioners David Colligan (Chairman), Jason Hinners, Lee Brow (President), Robert Donohue and Charles Epstein. Also attending were Executive Director Julius Neto, Dispatch Supervisor Justin Lonergan, Acting Fire Chief Jason Brade, Assistant Fire Chief William Stacy, Fire Marshal Ray Saracco, Health & Safety Officer Chip Darius.

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 5:00 PM, by Chairman Colligan.
- II. Approval of Agenda. A motion was made by Commissioner Hinners, seconded by President Brow and unanimously approved to accept the agenda as submitted.
- III. Public Comment. There were no public comments to report.
- IV. New Business

A. Discussion and Possible Decision on Non-Career Officers' Positions in the Fire Department. Acting Chief Brade distributed copies of a preliminary survey he took of the unscheduled and volunteer staff. Fire Police unscheduled and volunteer are a total of 7. There is one Captain, one Lieutenant and 5 Fire Police. Fire staff that are unscheduled and volunteer: 10 firefighters, 2 Lieutenants and 3 Captains for a total of 15. There are 16 EMS staff unscheduled and volunteer with one Captain for a total of 17. There are some auxiliary people as well. There are also 2 Safety Officers (Command Officers). One of those is a Health & Safety Officer. Regarding Fire Police, there are 5 people that are supervised by a Captain and Lieutenant. The Chief suggested that those staff be managed by one person in a supervisory role. He added there are 10 firemen and five of them are Officers. The Chief would like to look at a reduction in those officer positions. One of the Captains is assigned to West St., one is assigned to Coles Rd., and the other was assigned to Court St. until Court St. got split by the continuity plan. That Captain was asked to assist with training. There were 2 Lieutenants that were assigned to West

St. and Coles Rd. to supplement the Captains there. This was put in place about 2-2 ½ years ago. There were a lot more people back then, and it was a different structure.

The Acting Chief is looking to restructure to make it appropriate to today's needs. Chairman Colligan asked if the Acting Chief planned to wait until a new Chief comes on board or was he looking to do something today. Chief Brade stated that he knows this is going to be a controversial decision. It is a complete restructuring. He thinks that it is the type of decision that cannot be made in a ½ hr. meeting, and it would not be prudent to the operations of the Department. He would like to start thinking about the process and what options there are based on how the Department is currently operating. He would personally like to see a workshop to get to the "nitty gritty" on what is really needed. Both Fire Chiefs can provide some input on that. He would like to see where the Commission wants to go under the new staffing model. He feels there is a place for these people. He thinks there is a need for an officers' structure along with that staff. He thinks it is to be determined what the leadership is looking for. Chairman Colligan stated that in summary the Chief is looking for a workshop to discuss the issues. He asked the Chief again if he thinks we should be prepared for when the new Chief arrives. Should they start the process then or now?

In addition the Chief has the volunteer EMS with one Captain. He knows not everyone sees Capt. Ferone, but he does help the Chief on the sidelines. He discussed Capt. Ferone being a vital position on the EMS side. He has had some issues so he has been more of a staff Captain, and he does a little bit of the Q & A. The Chief would like to have a little more help with Q & A. Capt. Ferone does do a lot behind the scenes. That position is vital on the EMS side.

There are vital positions on the Fire side as well. He stated that we need to define how many positions are needed and what those functions will be. The Chief doesn't think this can be decided in a quick meeting. There needs to be a lot of thought and effort put into what the District is looking for. If the District is hiring a new Chief in the near future, they may want to get that person's input as well.

It was brought before the Chief that the terms for unscheduled and volunteer officers had expired. He did not know if the Fire Operations Committee or the Board had the authority to extend those terms until the Department could look into it. President Brow explained that when they dissolved the Fire Department Bylaws everything fell under the auspices of the Fire District as a whole. The Fire District is the only body that has the authority to hire, fire, promote, demote, suspend, etc. Under those auspices those positions were to remain filled until they could get this straightened out.

President Brow stated that for Fire Police it is imperative to get input from the Captain. He was present tonight. Is the Captain good with having one Lieutenant and 5 fire police or have the Captain as the sole officer with 6 fire police. Regarding Captains and Lieutenants, there are career staff that are on 24/7. He thinks it is valuable to have Station Captains. Should there be 12 firefighters vs. 10. Duties can be delegated to Captains such as maintenance or cleaning up grounds. The Chief noted that the EMS Captain position went from EMS Chief to EMS Captain. This would be something to discuss with the new Fire Chief. What would be an appropriate title for the EMS position, Chief or Captain?

Safety officers are staff positions. They do have fire ground authority when they are on scene with an emergency. They can have a dual role. They are not supposed to be used as command officers, but are part of the command staff structure. They have the authority to shut operations down above the authority of the Fire Chief. Under the new Bylaws, they will remain in office until they resign or are removed for cause. It is Section D under Officers positions. It covers career officers, part-time scheduled, unscheduled and volunteer. The only positions in the career staff are the 4 promoted Lieutenants. Part time scheduled, appointed or assigned serve at the District's will or the individual's will. If they want the position and are performing it, they can have it unless there are grounds for removal.

The Chief asked if they should keep the positions they already have in some fashion and downsize accordingly or retest. If Captains are performing their job and have the qualifications set forth by the requirements and are doing the job, the Acting Chief and the new Chief should make the recommendation to the Board. That decision should be made by the new Chief when he or she gets here. Commissioner Hinners thinks that the Department is top heavy. He thinks this should be the Chief's decision. Performance is a big concern. Some are holding a title vs. doing a job. That needs to be addressed as well as if that person is not performing well, should that position be maintained. That should be a decision of the new Chief.

Commissioner Donohue was asked for his opinion. He could not speak for Fire or EMS but could speak for Fire Police. They are non-certified but academy certified. They are basically an 8 man unit. They are cohesive together, and have a good relationship with the Police Department. They perform beyond their call of duty. His Lieutenant is a huge support to him and the Police. It would be a hit if that position was eliminated. Commissioner Hinners added that his statement about being top heavy was meant for the Fire Department.

Commissioner Colligan had some thoughts. There were two things he thought about. One was to come up with a structure that is workable. COVID kept things from moving forward and people from being motivated. He suggested that a workshop be formulated, and assign the Chief and his officers with the task of coming up with a plan based on what is needed and what needs to be done. He asked that they accomplish this within a week or so. Commissioner Colligan offered to attend the workshop to represent the Commissioners. President Brow thought that if the work of the workshop starts now, they can establish the framework. Then the ground work will already be done. Commissioner Colligan thought that they would give the Chief until the April Fire Operations Committee meeting to present some recommendations from the work group.

A motion was made by Commissioner Hinners, seconded by Commissioner Donohue and unanimously approved to have the Acting Chief organize a workshop with his officers and a representative from the Fire Operations Committee to develop some type of preliminary staffing plan/structure for future discussion with a new Fire Chief.

Chip Darius had some comments. He has seen a huge difference in Fire Police having a volunteer Captain and a paid Lieutenant. A paid lieutenant is not available to do training, onboarding or work with the new members coming in because they have to be on the clock. There is a wage and hour issue to think about when that differential is in the volunteer and part time paid ranks. Every officer position is an officer in training for the next level. The Department doesn't need to worry about being top heavy in terms of

titles. It is developing its leadership and command structure. Not everyone will rise to the level of Chief, and that is not going to be a problem. It is a way to keep volunteers and members involved. It is not hard to do.

The Chairman reported that an email was received here at 5:17 PM, and sent by the Firefighters' Union President and Lieutenant Brett Hallden that included his opinions of the positions in question. This meeting had already started when the email was received. The Chair did not have a chance to read it or comprehend it. He asked the Executive Director what would be appropriate. The Executive Director stated that it was the Chair's call whether the document should be read into the record or be a part of the record. Chairman Colligan thought that because the document was received after the meeting had already started, it should be recognized by the Chair and given to the Committee members to read. He did not feel it was appropriate to go back to review this issue when as Chairman he was running a meeting and had no time to prepare for it. Lieutenant Hallden's public comments were received after the meeting had started, and that agenda item had already come before the Committee. Commissioner Epstein recommended that since the correspondence was late, it be held to the next meeting although that would mean it would be two months before the issue is addressed. It is not critical that it be addressed tonight. President Brow stated that no decision will be made on it tonight. However, he was going to read through it and see if it was something he could bring up under Commissioners' comments.

- B. Discussion and Possible Decision on Next Steps for COVID Continuity Plan. The Chairman stated that a meeting was held last week. That is why this Special meeting was scheduled. He was going to give the floor to the Acting Chief and the Assistant Chief to give the Committee an update. Acting Chief Brade reported that HEPA filters were purchased, are in place, and they are working. Updates to COVID procedures have been published. Staff is wearing masks. There will be spot inspections by chiefs and safety officers. If there are violations to any COVID policies, members responsible will be held accountable. The Acting Chief had a discussion with Sal Nesci, Cromwell's Health Director. All of Cromwell's COVID numbers are significantly dropping by infection rate, fatalities and hospitalizations. All COVID related numbers are coming down. There is concern about the new variants and strains out there. It has not affected the numbers dropping. In the Dept. everyone that wanted a vaccine received it. Second doses have been administered. Vaccine effectiveness has been determined to start two weeks after the second shot has been administered.

The Chief reported that the Department is in good standing. About half the Department got the shot through the District. About a quarter of the Department got theirs elsewhere. There is also a portion of the Department that did not want it for whatever reason. They have been looking at filtration systems. They bought 6 HEPA filters for Court St. One is in the kitchen, 2 are in the large sleeping area, 1 is in the small sleeping area, 1 is in the Chiefs' office and 1 is in the small meeting area where the Chief sits. Filters for Dispatch are still being worked on. The Dispatch Supervisor has messaged Trane. Russ Johnson will be contacting Trane for Coles Road. Mr. Darius suggested getting a HEPA filter for Dispatch until they can work out the filtration with Trane. The filters can always be switched out to somewhere else when Trane takes care of Dispatch. Commissioner Hanners asked about the life span of the filters and replacement and procurement of replacement filters. Russ was given a manual for the units. The pre-filter is mechanical mesh, and HEPA is annual. Mr. Darius asked about the noise factor. Everyone stated the noise is much better. He suggested getting a HEPA unit for dispatch.

Commissioner Colligan asked the Chief if the Department is at the point of going back to the original staffing assignments operating out of one station. The Chief stated his thoughts are the same as before. The most effective way to keep people from contracting it within the Fire Department is to keep people separate. However, they have put the mask policy in place and have tweaked a couple of policies. Everything is in place now. Spot checks are being done on masks. The Department is in a good place. He thinks they can go back to the way things were as long as people adhere to the policies.

Commissioner Epstein asked if that will affect how crews are scheduled. An Emergency Staffing Plan/Continuity Plan was implemented to get them through the holidays. That was the purpose of it, and it was an effective plan. Commissioner Epstein asked if the need arises or the Chief thinks it is safer to go back to that schedule, is there anything prohibiting the Chief from separating crews on an every other day basis. He wanted to know why the Department couldn't do both. There have been conversations with the Board on where to staff people. Coles Road has more open space. It is possible to move filtration systems there. If the new variant comes around, maybe the Department will need to revisit that at another time. The Acting Chief feels it is an OK time to go back to the original scheduling.

Commissioner Hinnners had mixed thoughts. He would agree to go back to the original staffing model if everyone is comfortable and everyone is following the policies in place. That would mean the command structure is satisfied, everyone is comfortable that everyone is following the rules and everyone has total buy-in to the policies. He would like to think that the mask policy is guaranteed to be adhered to. The mask policy is the weak link in the chain.

Commissioner Donohue stated that things are going in the right direction. Things are getting better. He likes the way things are going but thinks there needs to be discipline for those that do not follow the policies. Commissioner Hinnners would like to see a stronger mask policy. Commissioner Epstein agreed with the comments about enforcing the mask policy. If people aren't going to follow the policy, progressive discipline should be implemented. Commissioner Colligan asked the Fire Marshal if he had any thoughts. He stated that from his experience enforcement works with progressive discipline. Mr. Lonergan's position hasn't changed. With proper enforcements and policies and procedures in place, he thinks it is time to get the staffing back in order. Air filters in place make things even better. Practices done in the past has been very good. He thinks it is time to move forward.

Mr. Darius reported that the Department is in a sweet spot. Current CDC protocols and what the Town's Health Director has been enforcing is if someone has been vaccinated, received both shots, and has completed the 14 day post second shot timeframe, they are considered fully protected at the 95% level against COVID. If that person has a known exposure to a COVID positive person, they no longer have to quarantine or isolate. The staff impact is gone for vaccinated personnel. This is the news for 90 days post shot 2. The numbers are coming down, but there is a second trend that is happening. The vaccination covers the variants. The regular COVID virus has peaked and is coming down, but there is likely to be an increase in the population at the same time as the South African and England variants are on the increase. There is likely to be a projected increase in variant-induced illness in March/April. It is a matter of following the protocols in place. The Center for Infectious Disease Research and Prevention and the CDC are projecting the variant-induced increase. He thinks the Department is thinking

along the same lines in terms of following protocols. President Brow discussed the new protocols in the East Hartford Fire Department. That Department is afraid of the new variants. Face gators are no longer acceptable in that Department. He stated that the Department needs to stay on top of this. If there are a lot of people wearing net gators instead of masks, there should be possibly disciplinary action.

President Brow stated that the Board voted on a contingency until March 8, and it should be addressed on March 8. The Chief thought the reasonable thing to do would be to be able to give those individuals working the continuity plan some advanced notice that the Department will be going back to the former scheduling plan. There are people that adjusted their lives around the continuity scheduling, and they will need time to re-adjust their schedules and their lives. Ass't Chief Stacy did not have anything to add other than to say the staff has already started scheduling into March/April so they have been noticed about March 8. It was clarified that this meeting was scheduled per the outcome of the February 3 meeting at which time the Committee voted to extend the continuity plan until March 8, but convene again in 2 weeks, Feb. 22 (today) to plan for a March 8 cutoff date.

Commissioner Colligan felt that the Department should go back to one station. If numbers start to rise again, there is a plan they can fall back on. The masks need to be worn. Officers need to make sure policies are enforced. He felt that if the Department starts to get back to normal, they can start to recruit more members because with this transition to the continuity plan, the Department lost some staff. If things spike again, there can be an emergency meeting to get things back to operating under COVID protocols.

Commissioner Hinners asked the Chief what his opinion of the buy-in of the officers enforcing the protocols. The Chief responded that some are for and some are against. Some were officers that were spoken to about not wearing masks themselves. The Executive Director stated there is policy, and it needs to be enforced. There are processes to enforce it. He asked why they were not discussing HIPA violation or compliance. Everyone in this organization follows HIPA to the letter. He sees no difference on a mask policy. The same is true for contracts. Contracts dictate the process and how it will be followed. Officers are no different than staff members, Chiefs or Executive Directors. We all get direction, and the expectation is to follow the rules of engagement unless those rules are illegal, immoral, unsafe or unethical--no more, no less. Mr. Neto stated if there are individuals who do not understand the rules of engagement, he would be happy to set aside some time to meet with those individuals to discuss roles and what is expected focusing on the CBA and the policies and practices the Board and the Chiefs have put into place.

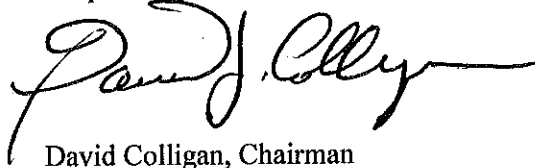
Commissioner Epstein agreed and added that officers expect people to follow their direction at a scene. The same applies for the District. When the Commission gives direction to the Chief, the Chief is expected to follow the rules of engagement. The same is true of the Officers when the Chief is giving direction. Any directives are not meant to punish anyone, and are meant for their own protection. Some changes are needed. The Board is committed to safety, but at this point they need to move forward. Ass't Chief Stacy feels it is time to get back to normal. Everyone has been vaccinated or sick with COVID. The President added that in comparing Cromwell with another town with a lot more members and officers. For such a small department, he doesn't understand why there are so many issues about compliance with policies, especially HIPA.

A motion was made by Commissioner Hinnners, seconded by Commissioner Epstein and unanimously approved to get the Fire Department back to normal scheduling and using one firehouse with strong enforcement of policy and practice about masks. All CBA's will be followed to their full extent in terms of disciplinary action. This also includes maintaining the seventh person until further notice. This will go into effect Monday, March 8, 2021. If there is an increase in COVID cases or any other concerns by staff, Chiefs or Health & Safety Officers, a special meeting will be called by the Chair of the Fire Operations Committee to review and discuss all new concerns.

The Dispatch Supervisor asked if this motion would include the seventh person on the schedule. It is part of the staffing plan. The President thought that the seventh person is part of the schedule, but suggested that this be put on the agenda of the next Fire Operations Committee meeting, Special Fire Operations Committee meeting or full Board of Commissioners meeting. The Executive Director explained that the authority to have a seventh person to cover the second ambulance ceases and desists on March 8. In the interim the President can direct the Executive Director or the Chief on an interim basis to maintain the schedule until the full Commission can hear the arguments. The President asked that this be put on the agenda for the next Fire Operations Committee meeting and the full Board of Commissioners' agenda. Mr. Darius encouraged the group to maintain the 7th person until the second quarter until we see significant abatement of community infection rates.

- V. Commissioners' Comments. Regarding the public comment that was submitted by Lt. Hallden after the meeting had been called to order, President Brow directed the Executive Director to make copies for the other 8 Commissioners that have not seen it or read it. They can review it, and it will be allowed at the next Fire Operations Committee meeting or Board of Commissioners' meeting and read or added into the minutes at that time. Chairman Colligan thanked everyone in attendance for putting the time and effort into every meeting to maintain the health and safety of not only the members but the community they serve.
- VI. Adjournment. There being no further business, a motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Hinnners and unanimously approved to adjourn the meeting at 6:05 PM.

Respectfully submitted,



David Colligan, Chairman

Nancy Deegan
Recording Secretary
3-10-21