

Regular Meeting of the
Board of TFD Fire Commissioners

DRAFT -- Meeting Minutes – March 16, 2022

Thompsonville Fire Station, 35 N. Main Street, Enfield, CT

1. Call to Order: by Comm. Perry at 7:00 pm.

2. Roll Call: present were Comm. Perry, Comm. Bouthiette, Comm. Gillespie, Comm. Pliszka, and Comm. Dodd. Also, present were Chief Deskis and Dept. Secretary Steneri.

3. Chief's Report:

Chief Deskis said the starter burnt out on Squad 21. This is fixed and the apparatus is back in service.

Chief Deskis said emergency response buttons were installed in the captain's office and in the watch room. These buttons will be used to notify the members when a call is about to come in.

Chief Deskis said he contacted the security camera company. The cameras are available but there is a short supply of TV monitors. The monitors will be installed in the chief's office, the captain's office, and in the watch room.

Chief Deskis said the gaskets on the boilers were leaking. Eversource came to investigate the situation. It turns out that new gaskets were not installed when the boilers were serviced last week. So that boiler is shut down until the parts come in.

Chief Deskis said the alarm panels in Building 6 of Bigelow Commons are not reporting properly. Our members are providing firewatch in the afternoon and overnight. The District charges for these firewatch services.

Chief Deskis said the structural gear that was purchased with Heroes Fund grant money has arrived. WFSB News Channel 3 is going to do a story about it.

Chief Deskis said the station bell should be installed next month. The District should hold a small ceremony and invite previous members to come.

Chief Deskis said there are no big building projects coming up in the near future.

Chief Deskis said he received an email from retired Chief Macsata about the training building. The Board can decide what to do about it.

Chief Deskis said he would like to put together a hiring list because a couple of members may retire soon. The previous list has expired.

4. Treasurer's Report:

Comm. Dodd read the balances of the bank accounts: apparatus fund: \$127,866, operating account: \$47,000, building fund: \$82,000, municipal investment account: \$2.3 million. The total cash is \$3 million.

Comm. Dodd asked what the supplemental grand list is. Dept. Secy. Steneri said that is from the supplemental motor vehicle list. Comm. Dodd said then we should adjust the budget because our budget included that. Comm. Perry said no. Secy. Steneri said the supplemental list was not included in this year's budget. Comm. Dodd said grand list is broken out now. There is nothing in the budget for it. Comm. Perry said we don't know the amount for the supplemental list. Comm. Gillespie said the supplemental amount is what the district receives for the middle of the year. Comm. Dodd said when I calculate the grand list, the motor vehicles are included. Comm. Perry said we don't know what that amount is until the supplemental grand list comes out. Comm. Dodd said this can be discussed when we talk about the budget.

Comm. Dodd said our income is up over our budget already. Part of that is due to fire marshal fees. We have collected almost double what we budgeted. And then there is the grand list. The rest of the expenses are in line with where they should be. Salaries are going to be close this year. The budget is \$1.6 million and so far we have spent \$1.1 million.

5. Public Communications:

Councilor John Santanella introduced himself and Town Manager Ellen Zoppo. We are here to discuss some things that are of interest to the Council. We want to establish a different working relationship. It is a firm belief of mine and the Council's that having five fire districts is not the most efficient way to structure the fire services. We would like to work on what the future is going to look like. I don't believe we are optimizing our EMS services. The goal is to have one fire department and integrate EMS into it.

Councilor Santanella said the Town has different agreements with all the departments for tax collection, dispatch services, and IT support. We are currently discussing the tax collection arrangement. The Town could stop collecting taxes now or have this year be the last year. We would like to restructure that. I tried to meet with the Interlocal but my request was denied. We don't know how to get the conversation started.

Councilor Santanella said we all share the same taxpayers. The way things are organized now are not doing them a service. There is a difference of several million dollars of what it should cost to run fire and EMS and what it actually costs. The Council cannot justify continuing to do that. I know the Town doesn't have the best relationship with the fire districts. Especially after the water mains issue. This council couldn't justify making the districts pay a bill that the Town has been paying for years.

Councilor Santanella said Ellen and I came here today to see how the Commission feels about getting a conversation going. I have already talked to a few other fire districts. Most commissions and firefighters I have spoken with see a value in moving things forward. Comm. Perry said this is something that all the fire departments have been looking at for a while. It is difficult to do. It is expensive. And it is a lengthy process. The districts would have to vote to disband. Is the one department going to be part of the Town or a separate district? Councilor Santanella said I don't think the Town needs to run the department.

Town Manager Zoppo said Thompsonville is in a unique position because it is a paid professional department. The conversation needs to start in the other districts. Enfield is well set-up with station locations. But from a taxation standpoint, there are costs that can be reduced. Having more paid firefighters is better than relying on volunteers. It's not so far out of reach to do that than it was in the past. Several chiefs may retire in the next few years.

Town Manager Zoppo said we don't want to overtax our residents. There are overlapping costs between the departments. There are ways to reduce that. Comm. Perry said volunteers are important but we need to have a paid department. This department can't afford to have volunteers.

Councilor Santanella said the amount of taxes you pay depends on what neighborhood you live in. There is an equity issue. Comm. Perry said we are always putting a dollar amount on someone's life. Comm. Santanella said everyone should pay the same amount and have the same level of service. We would just like the five departments to start talking to move in that direction.

Comm. Dodd said everyone in this town gets the same level of service. Our residents just pay more for it. We would like to combine departments. It is the other departments that don't. The other districts don't want to pay what we are paying. Comm. Perry said it's also a trust issue. The districts were in the process of doing things together. Two districts decided to join together on their own. Comm. Dodd said we even budgeted for the consolidation.

Comm. Gillespie said consolidation has been talked about for many, many years. Yet, we are still not consolidated. Two departments went off and decided to consolidate on their own. This department wanted to combine EMS with the Town and the Town said no. Councilor Santanella said it wasn't because of this department. Comm. Gillespie said our members were looking forward to running EMS. Three of the departments

were left out of the consolidation. I don't want those other two departments looking for help from us.

Comm. Perry said a study needs to be done. It needs to be done by a professional. Town Manager Zoppo said the Town may be willing to pay for that as long as there is representation from everybody involved. Chief Deskis said we should use an out-of-state consolidation company that will perform a quality study. Councilor Santanella said there should be somebody to represent the Town so that we understand the process. Comm. Perry said we would need guaranteed protection for our members.

Councilor Santanella said the problem is that everybody wants something to happen but nothing is happening. Comm. Dodd asked what do you propose to do about the other districts that decided to consolidate on their own and not allow the other districts in. Councilor Santanella said they should consolidate and decide how to do the next consolidation. Comm. Perry said our residents can decide to dissolve the district. The fire service becomes the responsibility of the Town. But people are still going to have to pay taxes. It also has to be approved by the State Legislature. Town Manager Zoppo said there is statutory language where the State Legislature can also vote to dissolve.

Comm. Dodd said explain to me why the Town would no longer want to collect our taxes. Councilor Santanella said there are residents that don't know the Town has five fire districts. They don't know where their money is going. All of the money goes to the Town. People would know the fire department is accountable if there is a separate bill. Accountability is a part of our concern. Town Manager Zoppo said it's a means of furthering the conversation. We can do this for you but if we don't see appreciable progress with consolidation conversations, so it's something that can be removed from the table.

Comm. Gillespie said I want to be involved with the consolidation committee. I am frustrated with the two districts.

Councilor Santanella said another problem is there is one department that wants nothing to do with this. Those two departments wanted to move ahead with the consolidation process. Every time consolidation was discussed between the five departments there has always been one nay-sayer. Comm. Perry said the other four departments could have consolidated together. Councilor Santanella said it easier to consolidate two departments into one than it is to go from four to one. Once two departments are combined, then you can add another department in. Comm. Pliszka said we would be the last department in and we will get the worst part of the deal. Councilor Santanella said I'm just trying to figure out how to make this happen.

Town Manager Zoppo said if we are going to do this right, it's going to require staffing up and more training. There is the issue of cash flow for that. There are other pieces as well. You can't just consolidate and say you're going to be full-time. Comm. Perry said that is why a study is done.

Comm. Pliszka said nobody wants to take us on because of our debt. Urban renewal hurt this department. Councilor Santanella said I agree with you. Another thing we are trying to work on is what are we going to do down there. Not doing things down there is costing people money. We need to invest here so it becomes less of a financial burden. The debt can be consolidated to reduce the burden. Comm. Santanella said if I can get other people to come to the table to start the conversation, would you commit to sending a representative. Comm. Perry said absolutely.

Comm. Pliszka said the Town needs to invite our district to the table when it comes to community development. We need to know what's going in our district so we can plan our budget. Town Manager Zoppo said there are meetings all the time and they are televised. Every resident are responsible for their own level of government. So, there are opportunities. Comm. Pliszka said it would be nice to know because we are trying to spec out a new piece of apparatus. Town Manager said we believe that the Town should be investing in Thompsonville. Because when we invest here, it benefits everybody. Comm. Perry said if you let Thompsonville area fall apart, it's going to affect your property value. Town Manager Zoppo said developers look at median household income when deciding to invest in a community.

Comm. Pliszka said we aren't giving any tax breaks in the TIF districts. Town Manager Zoppo said the districts are not. The tax abatements will just be for the Town's tax portion.

Councilor Santanella said we appreciate that you invited us to your meeting to have this conversation. This is my district. I want to know what your concerns are. I am here just as much for the fire department as for the people that live down the street. Comm. Perry said I am all for it but there is an awful lot that needs to happen. Councilor Santanella said we have to get things going. Comm. Pliszka said I just want to make sure that we protect our members.

The Board thanked Councilor Santanella and Town Manager Zoppo for coming to the meeting. Councilor Santanella and Town Manager thanked the Board for their time.

6. Commissioners' Communications:

Comm. Dodd said we need to discuss the training center. Chief Deskis said I just need a yes or a no from the Board. All of the Board members said no.

Comm. Gillespie asked which apparatus was zapping everybody. Comm. Pliszka said that the ladder.

Comm. Gillespie asked how many sets of gear did the department receive. Chief Deskis said three.

7. Old Business: a) Union Negotiations Team:

Union Negotiations Team: Comm. Perry said Comm. Dodd was on the negotiations team but she isn't going to be around. Right now, it is just me. We can have someone who is not on the Board be on the team. Comm. Bouthiette agreed to do it. Comm. Gillespie asked how many people can be on it. Comm. Perry asked how many people the Union is having. Captain Provencher said a minimum of three. Comm. Gillespie said he will do it.

Comm. Perry said Comm. Pliszka and my terms for commissioner are up this year. That needs to be posted in the newspaper. Dept. Secy. Steneri said applications are due by April 4th. Comm. Pliszka said we are going to have to fill Comm. Dodd's seat so there will be three openings. Comm. Perry said I will be running again.

8. New Business:

Chief Deskis said we need to change the names on the government trust. There are two people on it that are no longer here. The Board just needs to sign and send a letter to make the change.

Chief Deskis said I suggest that we pay off the loan for the SCBA equipment. Comm. Gillespie asked how much it is. Chief Deskis said \$111 thousand. Comm. Dodd asked pay it out of this budget or next year's. Chief Deskis said next year's. Comm. Dodd said we can talk about it when we discuss the budget.

Comm. Perry said Comm. Dodd and Chief Deskis have done a lot of work on the new budget. Comm. Dodd said there are two budgets, each with a different mill rate. One contains the carry-over money and the other doesn't. According to the Charter, we can only have 25% in our reserve fund. Based on what we have right now, that carry-over is \$480,000. Chief Deskis wanted to add something to the budget. Chief Deskis said I wanted to pay off the SCBA loan and put the remaining amount into the apparatus fund. Comm. Perry said I can't see lowering the mill rate too much. Next year it is going to go right back up. Comm. Pliszka said I am in favor of rollover money going to one-time expenditures. Comm. Perry asked can we do that. Comm. Pliszka said yes.

Comm. Dodd said I just want you to remember this from a taxpayer's perspective. Properties were re-evaluated. We were told if property values go up, mill rates will go down. Let's be cautious about that. We are getting more money because of the increase in property values.

The Board discussed paying off the SCBA loan and adding money to the apparatus replacement fund.

Comm. Pliszka said the money the district received from the supplemental grand list is called windfall money. That needs to be used for the next budget. Dept. Secy. Steneri

said we should budget for some amount because we receive it every year. Comm. Dodd said no because we don't know how much it's going to be. Dept. Secy. Steneri said we don't know how much the fire marshal fees are going to be and we put that into the budget. Chief Deskis said the fire marshal fees are going down. Comm. Pliszka suggested putting the windfall into the building maintenance fund. Comm. Gillespie suggested putting it in a capital nonrecurring fund.

Comm. Perry said we are going to have to have back up budgets in case this one doesn't get voted in. Comm. Dodd said I would explain to the public that the mill rate is lowered and we are saving for things that the department needs. Comm. Perry said think about where the mill rate was when we first started. The mill rate has gone down from eight to six. Com. Dodd said your tax payment is going to go up because the property values went up. Comm. Perry said we are doing the best we can. Chief Deskis said the budget is cut down as low as we can really go.

Comm. Pliszka said we are eventually going to have to pay for the apparatus. Comm. Perry said right now we are assuming that the public is going to say yes to the truck. Comm. Dodd said we would have to lower the mill rate even more just to have people paying what they were last year. We could take the money for the truck out. Chief Deskis said people are going to have to pay it anyways once we get the fire truck. Comm. Dodd asked should we pay for something that the public hasn't voted in yet.

Comm. Pliszka said our motor vehicle mill rate is five mills. Comm. Dodd said that is the highest we can go. There is a max combined rate with the Town.

Comm. Dodd said I can take out all the extra money we put into the truck and use it to lower the mill rate. We are asking the taxpayers to prepay for a truck that they have not voted on yet. I don't think we should do that. I would really not like to see an increase in what the taxpayers have to pay. Comm. Gillespie said we shouldn't drop it too low. Maybe drop it one mill. If we put the money into capital nonrecurring, then we could use it as a down payment.

Comm. Perry said if people are paying more for utilities and gas, so is this station. Costs go up. Comm. Dodd said we haven't voted on this truck. We shouldn't be banking money for it. Comm. Pliszka said if we drop the mill rate this year, we are going to have to go up next year no matter what. Comm. Perry said people will vote no on the truck if the mill rate goes up and there isn't much money for a down payment.

Comm. Pliszka asked if the chief was going to run a new captain's test soon. Chief Deskis said I'll do it when someone retires. Comm. Pliszka said the list expired.

Comm. Perry said we need to go back in the agenda a little bit. Comm. Bouthiette being on the negotiations team is a conflict of interest. We need someone from the outside who knows how to negotiate and knows about budgets. I suggest Pat Crowley. If Comm. Gillespie can't do it because of the health care, I suggest Pat Tallarita.

9. Approval of Minutes from February 16 regular meeting:

10. Executive Session: Fire Chief's Performance Review:

MOTION to enter into Executive Session made by Comm. Perry, seconded by Comm. Gillespie. Discussion: none. Roll Call- Motion passed 5-0. Entered into Executive Session at 8:52 pm with all commissioners present.

Returned from Executive Session at 9:00 pm.

11. Possible Action regarding Executive Session:

None.

12. Adjourn:

MOTION to adjourn made by Comm. Bouthiette, seconded by Comm. Gillespie. All in favor by ayes at 9:02 pm.