

A Regular Meeting of the Board of Selectmen was held on Tuesday, March 5, 2009 beginning at 7:00 p.m. in the Council on Aging Room of the Town Hall. The following members were present.

Catherine Winston, Chairman
Clifton Snuffer, Vice Chairman
David Sullivan, Clerk
Al DeNapoli
Christopher Timson

Also present:
Chief Timothy Bailey
Firefighters:
Paul Barry
Steven Smith
Richard Cofsky
Brian Cherella

7:10 p.m. Firefighters:

The Firefighters have not yet settled their contract and are still in negotiations with the Town Administrator. Paul Barry expressed concern over the proposed layoffs in FY 2010. The Firefighters suggested that it can be difficult for people to understand everything they do. They are doing something every day and the personnel they have now is at bare bones level. They do more than fire and medical calls.

Mr. Timson noted that the Town wants to protect its residents, but the system we have now is operating on overtime and funding it over and above the budget. He does not see how that can happen in the next fiscal year under the current circumstances. It was suggested that call firefighters be used to help cover.

Chief Bailey explained there is a call department but not many show up during a call as they may not be available. It is not the same as when Walpole had mills around town and the employees would be volunteer firefighters.

The requirement to back fill an out of work firefighter has created a monster with the overtime budget. It was suggested that if one firefighter is out from his shift, that it not be covered. Paul Barry stated that would be concerning to the staff.

Mr. Snuffer asked the firefighters if they believed that there was funding available and if the ambulance funds were for the Fire Department only. The Firefighters stated they are aware of the fiscal constraints but did feel since the ambulance runs did generate the funding it should go back to that department. Mr. Snuffer suggested that it could be said the same for the Building Department or any other department that generates revenue.

The Board and Firefighters discussed drug testing and Paul Barry stated they are not opposed to drug testing. Mr. Snuffer noted that it always seemed to have a fight associated with it. He felt the Town has done a lot for the Fire Department, probably more than any other department.

Mr. DeNapoli expressed his opinion that the Board has done a lot for the Fire Department in the last several years. They put on 8 paramedics and opened the East Walpole Fire Station and it seems to him that the Firefighters do not think it is enough. The Board has not heard complaints from the Police Department. The town can only bring in more resources or cut the budgets. When the Town was sold the ALS we were told that the ambulance fund would cover costs and that is not the case. He also expressed his displeasure with the amount of grievances that have been filed by the Fire Department.

Paul Barry did not feel the Firefighters had a lot of grievances and suggested the Firefighters meet with the Board quarterly or annually to have discussions.

The Board had discussions regarding the ambulance runs to the prison. The loss of the Prison Mitigation funding has had a tremendous impact on the budgets. The town has basically taken a hit twice with cuts from the State. It is a concern of the Firefighters when there is a run at the prison. There have been injuries sustained by Firefighters from ambulance runs to the prison and these costs are not paid by the State.

Mr. Timson stated that the Fire Department is a high priority, but in the current fiscal times we need to make it work. He keeps hearing about minimum manning being the problem. There has to be a solution to make it work.

The Firefighters asked if a board member would consider sitting in on the next negotiation session as they felt it might be a benefit for everyone. Ms. Winston thanked them for attending and noted that these are hard times for everyone and the Board would be in touch with them.

8:45 p.m. Chief Bailey

Chief Bailey reported that he has received two more hardship case applications. He would like to know how to move forward with these. He does not have the authority to grant hardship only the Selectmen have that authority. The Board suggested he obtain further information from the applicants which would prove they are incapable of paying the bill or if they require some type of payment plan and then forward to the Selectmen for a decision.

He also discussed the mutual aid agreement with MCI Cedar Junction. He would like to have that signed within the next two weeks. The Secretary will provide each Board member with another copy of the document and comments from Town Counsel in preparation of adoption.

Budget: The Board discussed the overtime budget for the Fire Department being a serious problem. The Chief suggested that it will always be a problem as long as the contract reads minimum eight men per shift. He did not see the Firefighters ever budging from that. Another issue is call backs. The Chief explained that as long as there is fire and smoke he calls them all back and that can be as many as twenty-four firefighters and as few as three that show up and there is a three hour minimum pay requirement per the contract. Mr. DeNapoli questioned if it were necessary to make the call as soon as there is an alarm and what constitutes a need to call in off duty personal? Suggested waiting until he knows it is absolutely necessary. The Chief felt that in some instances he might be able to reduce the call backs, but it can be difficult. If there is a serious fire and he waits to call back firefighters, the outcome may be devastating. Members felt a better more efficient call back system was needed. Mr. DeNapoli would like to know how many recalls were deemed false alarms, malfunctions and what did that cost the Town. He also questioned if sick time was a problem and if that effects overtime. He wanted to know what the average sick time usage for 2008 was.

Chief Bailey will review all the questions and respond to them in writing. The Chief explained that Firefighters may live within 15 air miles of Walpole and that can bring you to Weymouth. This can create a problem where those Firefighters do not come in for callbacks. He discussed regionalization of Fire Departments which is a discussion that needs to take place. He noted that currently 25% of their runs are overlapping calls and that is when they call in mutual aide. You can not run with two firefighters on a truck Walpole does have mutual aide and provides mutual aide to surrounding towns.

The Board members discussed the idea of dropping to six man minimum and two hour callback pay which might help save jobs. It was suggested that a Board member sit in on negotiations with the Firefighters .

MOTION moved by Mr. Sullivan to adjourn at 10:30 p.m., seconded by Mr. Timson,
VOTED 5-0-0