



Fire Commission

236 DANBURY ROAD
WILTON, CONNECTICUT 06897

Wilton Fire Commission Minutes of Special Meeting Fire Department Headquarters

January 18, 2005

Present: Commissioners Richard McCarty, Hesham El-abd and J. Casey Healy

Others: Chief Paul Milositz, Deputy Chief George Peters; Captain Karl Dolnier; Lieutenant Mike Michelsen; Firefighters Brad Carlson, Bill Sampson, Dan Lewis, Dave Chaloux and John Dwyer; Volunteer Firefighter Lt. Cliff Juleson; special advisors Ken Walsh and Troy Ellen Dixon; First Selectman Paul Hannah, Administrative Service Manager Sarah Taffel; Second Selectman Marilyn Gould; Board of Finance Member Richard Dubow; Wilton Bulletin reporter Ken Mastro and Wilton Bulletin reporter Lee Higgins.

A. **Call to Order:** Chairman McCarty, noting that a quorum was present, called the meeting to order at approximately 1900 hours.

B. Executive Session

1. **A MOTION** was made by Commissioner Healy to retire to Executive Session to discuss the mandatory retirement age under the Department's current pension plans. The motion was seconded by Chairman McCarty and unanimously approved. The Commission, Chief Milositz, First Selectman Hannah and Ms. Taffel retired to Executive Session at approximately 1901 hours. At approximately 2000 hours the Commission ended the executive session and upon motion duly made and convened the special meeting. Chairman McCarty reported that no action was taken by the Commission.

C. New Business

1. Discussion of budget for fiscal year 2006 – Deputy Chief George Peters presented a revised budget that had been reduced from a 5.7% to a 4% increase as requested by the Board of Selectmen. The reductions were highlighted by the Deputy Chief on a line by line basis. In response to inquiry made by Chairman McCarty, the Deputy Chief advised the Commission that he was not comfortable with some of

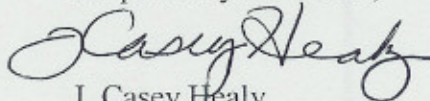
the decreases. Commissioner El-abd suggested that the Commission investigate revenue enhancement as well as cost cutting. Second Selectman Gould applauded the effort of the Department to cut its budget to 4% and she requested that the history of the line items cut be provided to the Board of Selectmen. Discussion then focused on some of the budget cuts suggested including training and schooling. First Selectman Hannah recommended that the Commission submit the 4% budget to the Board of Selectmen and advise the Board which of the cuts the Commission supports and which it does not. Mr. Hannah noted that the Board's first work session is scheduled for February 9, 2005.

2. Discussion on Regional Cooperation as a Long and Short Term Means for Budget Savings and Operational Efficiency - Commissioner El-abd distributed a document that he prepared entitled "Cost Savings/Revenue Enhancement Ideas for Re-Discussion" (a copy of which is attached hereto). Chairman McCarty stated that the Commission would review the points set forth in the document. Mr. McCarty advised that he favors regionalization and he noted that Chief Milositz had made great strides in that direction as evidenced by the automatic mutual aid agreements that have been entered into with Weston, New Canaan, Westport and Ridgefield and that are being negotiated with Norwalk and the Georgetown Volunteer Fire Department. Mr. McCarty also stated that the Department's 6 man shift is the minimum required in order to properly serve the Town of Wilton.

D. Adjournment: At approximately 2052 hours upon motion duly made and seconded the meeting was adjourned.

The next regular meeting of the Commission will be held on February 1, 2005 at Fire Department Headquarters.

Respectfully submitted,



J. Casey Healy
Secretary - Fire Commission

Cost Savings/Revenue Enhancement Ideas for Re-Discussion

<p>1. Close Station #2 and transfer the men and equipment to headquarters.</p>	<p>The cost savings of such a drastic action are yet to be calculated. While such a move would seriously affect public safety, it might be preferable to reducing our six-man shifts to five-man shifts. <i>Requires only commission action</i></p>
<p>2. Work with surrounding towns to establish a regional dispatch center for fire, EMS and possibly police.</p>	<p>This concept has been around for over 15 years, originally proposed by SWRPA as part of its call for greater regional cooperation. The issue came up once again, prior to the town's investment in new communications technology. It was the sense of the Commission at that time that this idea was worthy of further in-depth study before the town committed new funds for the current system. The BOS did not concur and proceeded to fund the current system. To hear now that the BOS will first seek to get the current system operating flawlessly, and then consider discussing a regional dispatch, is in my belief financial irresponsibility. <i>Requires joint action and coordination between the Commission and the BOS.</i></p>
<p>3. Eliminate Wilton's volunteer firefighting force (currently 11).</p>	<p>The immediate cost savings of this action would be \$30,000-plus per year. Such action would, however, suggest that the town has tried and failed to maintain a functional and effective volunteer force. The Commission is constantly being asked by the BOS what we are doing to increase the number and effectiveness of our volunteers. I do not believe that the Commission or the BOS has adequately attempted (be it through proper funding, training, management oversight or community appreciation) to make a determination as to whether our efforts have indeed failed. It is high time that the Commission, the BOS and the Department's management properly address the issue of volunteers. Only then can we judge it a failure or success.</p>

	<i>Requires only Commission action to eliminate the volunteer force; joint action in coordination with the BOS is required to properly restructure.</i>
4. Work with surrounding towns to establish a unified volunteer firefighting force.	If in fact the BOS is serious in its desire to properly fund, for one year, efforts to revitalize the volunteer force, then perhaps such efforts would be more effective if recruitment, training and management were coordinated on a regional basis. The talk of the possible establishment of fire police, which would require funding, training and oversight, seems meaningless if we cannot do something more effective with our current volunteer force. <i>Requires joint action.</i>
5. Work with surrounding towns to establish the position of Regional Fire Chief, starting with one additional jurisdiction and adding more towns later.	State law has been amended to allow for such actions. I am more concerned about the egos of towns to yield absolute control over their departments and employees. And yet in the post-9/11 environment, and given the economic realities of the cost of emergency services to individual towns, it seems like the prudent thing to study and discuss. It is my understanding that, for example, the town of New Canaan is currently seeking a full-time Fire Chief. New Canaan's current Fire Chief is a volunteer, who actually works in New York City. As a starting point, I believe that it is worth exploring with New Canaan the idea of having our Fire Chief oversee both departments, with his salary being split between the two towns. Not only would each town realize an immediate cost savings (even after a salary adjustment to reflect the additional responsibilities), but it would be synergistic in terms of regional cooperation in training and equipment acquisition. <i>Requires joint action.</i>
6. Postpone filling the Deputy Chief position and delegate those current job responsibilities among the line officers in the Department, making appropriate title and salary adjustments.	Should the Fire Commission, after appropriate and careful deliberation, recommend to the BOS codifying the mandatory retirement age for all fire department employees, and should the BOS adopt this recommendation, we would find ourselves in the unique position of having the Department's first-ever planned retirement, that being the Deputy Chief's

	<p>position at the end of this fiscal year. (Salary plus benefits are over \$120,000). This would give the Commission many new options, including:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Postpone filling the position by as many months as necessary to achieve the BOS budget guidelines. I do not recommend this. 2. On a one-year trial basis, assign the Deputy Chief's current job responsibilities to three or four of line officers to be selected by the Commission. They would receive additional compensation as well as a temporary title change, which would still be more cost effective than filling the Deputy Chief position at the current salary scale. I remind you that we had in the past negotiated and agreed to creating two Station Captain positions with added responsibilities, time commitment and compensation; but the Commission chose to postpone the implementation of this. Obviously, if we choose and are successful in negotiating the concept of a regional fire chief, this proposal may not work or would need to be altered. <p><i>Requires a joint action.</i></p>
<p>7. Establish regional fire stations, jointly staffed and/or funded on a regional basis with surrounding jurisdictions.</p>	<p>In addition to the current concept under consideration among Wilton, Westport and Norwalk for a joint station, we should consider a regional station in Georgetown, staffed and/or funded by Wilton, Westin, Ridgefield and Redding. This is not only an issue of response times, but also the availability of volunteers during the day to properly man Georgetown's needs. We must keep in mind the growing pressures from expanded senior housing, as well as the development of the G&B complex. We must also keep in mind that the aforementioned four towns currently contribute to the operating budget of the Georgetown Volunteer Department (Wilton's being \$250,000), with no oversight or control of the response times and quality of service to the residents of Wilton and the taxpayers who fall within that fire district. If we are to be realistic, we must acknowledge the fact that Westin and</p>

	<p>Redding, who currently operate volunteer departments, will come under pressure (due to the decline in daytime volunteer response) and consequently will have to consider hiring career firefighters. This would further enhance opportunities for regionalization, assuming a proper framework is in place. The automatic mutual aid agreement currently under negotiation with the Georgetown district is not a substitute.</p> <p><i>Requires joint action.</i></p>
8. Eliminate the Department's recruitment line item in the budget.	<p>There is currently \$2,000 in the budget for recruitment costs that could be offset by charging \$100 to each applicant whenever we advertise for a position.</p> <p><i>Requires only Commission action.</i></p>
9. Eliminate the Department's advertising line item in the budget.	<p>There is currently \$600 in the budget for advertising costs. Notably, we had negotiated for free advertising at the cinema in Wilton (an estimated value of \$6,000 per year). We were unable to avail ourselves of this free offer, however, because there was no specific line item in the budget to go to for the one-time cost of producing the slides required for cinematic display.</p> <p><i>Requires only Commission action, with the BOS approving the cost of producing the slides</i></p>
10. Attempt to sell advertising on our trucks to enhance revenues.	<p>While the potential revenue flow cannot be known at this time, this is a proven concept, in Minneapolis as well as other jurisdictions around the country. I believe it is well worth exploring in greater detail.</p> <p><i>Requires action by the BOS.</i></p>
11. Bill insurance companies, when we respond to either a working fire or a car accident, to enhance revenues.	<p>Legal precedent for such billings practices has been established in many jurisdictions nationwide. All homeowner policies allow for such reimbursements. Making assumptions about the amount we might set for such calls, we could calculate the income the town would have received last year for some perspective on future revenue potential.</p>

	<i>Requires action by the BOS.</i>
12. Charge a fee for plan reviews, as well as State-mandated fire inspections by the fire marshal's office, to enhance revenues.	The Building Department currently charges for building permits. The Fire Marshall's office spends a significant amount of time and therefore money on plan reviews for new commercial construction, as well as for State-mandated inspections – at no charge. There is national precedent for this as well. <i>Requires action by the BOS.</i>

The ideas, concepts and suggestions put forth above are intended to serve as a basis for serious review and discussion by the Fire Commission in coordination and cooperation with the Board of Selectmen, and perhaps the Board of Finance. We can reasonably expect the financial pressures on the town of Wilton that have brought these topics to the fore to persist, i.e. continue to impact the Fire Commission's annual budget requests. I believe that it is high time, and the right moment, for out-of-the-box thinking and determined exploration of some bold new ideas and initiatives.

One should keep in mind that two or three years ago, legislation was adopted in Hartford allowing towns in Connecticut to combine and/or coordinate any function they were currently performing individually. This would mean, for example, that towns could join forces or extensively coordinate their fire, police, EMS and even education departments. I can only presume that the purpose of enacting such legislation was to give municipalities greater flexibility in controlling their operating costs, as well as delivering more efficient services to their residents. I believe that as a Commission, we have a fiduciary responsibility to the town and its taxpayers to at least explore in more detail the possibilities for regional cooperation and whether such cooperation would enhance the Department's operating efficiencies and/or reduce operating costs in the long term.

In the current post-9/11 environment, and considering the continued residential and commercial growth in Wilton, our Commission will be under increasing pressure to properly fund emergency services going forward. I fully appreciate that there are severe limitations on the actions and authority vested in the Fire Commission by state law and town charter that constrain our ability to implement some of the ideas discussed above. I am of the view that the Fire Commission is entrusted with a moral responsibility to promote the interests of good governance, transparency, fiscal responsibility and long-term planning; and as such, should raise the aforementioned issues and consider new proposals with the Board of Selectmen, and possibly the Board of Finance.

Should the Fire Commission, after careful consideration of these concepts (none of which are new), present our recommendations by way of a formal proposal to the Board of Selectmen, I believe we would have fulfilled our sworn constitutional duty of good governance, fiscal responsibility and prudent long-term planning. Should the Board of Selectmen then fail to act (as has been the case in the past, with the acknowledgment that our proposals on some of the subjects were not in writing and not presented to the full Board directly), we would have at the

very least established documentation that future Fire Commissions might choose to site when confronted with requests to cut the budget.

I respectfully request that this document, in its entirety, be included in the official minutes of tonight's special meeting.

Very truly yours,

Hesham H. El-Abd