

The Exeter Fire District

(March 3, 2005)

Peter Lacouture called the March 3, 2005 meeting of the Exeter Fire District to order at 7:10PM. Present were Commissioners Vergano, Lacouture, Nievera, Swanson, Reed, and Walker. Commissioner Wilbur was absent. Also in attendance were twelve members of the public, including Mr. Joe St. Jean, a retired firefighter from North Kingstown.

Public Comment

Rosemund Fisher (Ten Rod Rd.) asked why the administrative figures were not figured into the total budget. Mr. Lacouture responded that during the campaigning prior to the formation of the district it was made clear in press releases, editorials and during both informational meetings that the administrative costs would be between \$25,000 and \$40,000. He also anticipates the administrative costs to decrease in the second year and thereafter remain somewhat level.

Ray Warner (Nooseneck Hill Rd.) wanted to know if the total cost will be announced prior to the annual meeting. He wants to know the tax rate including the exemptions.

Ted Nataly (Nelson Dr.) noted the 11+% school increase and the proposed 9.3% fire district increase and stated the town is at the end of the line and the last guy in line usually gets what's left over. Ted

thinks the 9.3% fire district seems high. He recommends lowering the increase so as to leave something for the town budget. Mr. Lacouture explained the administrative budget was responsible for the increase to 9.3%. The public safety entities alone were less than 5%. Mr. Nately asked what would happen if the district was given 2½%. Mr. Lacouture replied the rescue might have to lay off employees.

Commissioner Swanson (Ten Rod Rd.) suggested a cut in the budget to a level equal to last year's budget minus the capital fund. Chief Franklin (station #2) added, "You get what you pay for". ISO dictates the useful life for trucks, hoses and ladders and the like. These things can only be used so long and must be tested to meet ISO standards. There being no additional comments, Mr. Lacouture closed the public comments portion of the meeting.

Approval of Minutes

The minutes of the February 24 budget hearing and meeting were unanimously accepted, without correction.

Treasurer's Report

Ms. Vergano stated that the \$1.30 - \$1.33 figure should not be taken too seriously. Last year's budget and this year's cannot be accurately compared. She also noted the fire district will not tax motor vehicles and that will cause a difference in the figures.

Communications

In reference to Mr. Swanson's question concerning our filing of ethics reports with the state, Mr. Lacouture stated he has forwarded the names of each commissioner to the ethics panel and we can expect to receive a questionnaire in the mail. Mr. Lacouture also expects the request for state tax exemption to be processed tomorrow or soon thereafter.

Old Business

Mr. Nievera moved (Mr. Reed second) adopting the proposed budget with a 9.3% increase over FY04/05. Mr. Swanson stated he wanted all bills to be paid by the board rather than allowing the individual departments pay their own bills as they have since their inception. Mr. Reed stated we are not here to micro manage the organizations. Mr. Nievera explained the need for a truck fund to replace aging trucks. He tried to explain the advantage of purchasing vehicles without accruing financing charges. Chief Caito (Rescue Corps) said he had applied to the Champlain Fdn. for a grant but had been turned down because the Champlain board had approved grants for the dispatch Corp. (\$35,000) and the new library (\$15,000). Ms. Vergano stated she had a problem with an increase of 9.3% but understood the need for the increase. Mr. Walker revisited the capital fund as a place

to reduce funding. His reasoning was to reduce funding for the organizations to help the administrative budget. Mr. Swanson wanted to know how anyone could rely on the figures given by the public safety organizations. Several board members suggested by looking back over the past budgets it was obvious the supplied figures were not only accurate but also as low as could be expected. Chief Franklin noted his organization's history of submitting budgets with increases lower than the inflation rate. Mr. Nataly stated the need for a five year plan to explain/predict the increases coming next year and thereafter. Mr. Walker asked what impact losing \$18,000 to Exeter #1's budget would have. Chief Kettelle's response was that the money was intended to be used on testing of SCBA's (Self Contained Breathing Apparatus), bottles, ladders and portable fire extinguishers. Chief Kettelle also says he cannot be guaranteed of receiving even the \$10,000 because we may not collect 100% of the billed taxes. He feels he has done more than his share to help the district with his lower than necessary budget as well as his search for office furniture and possibly a computer. Chief Kettelle continued, "We have duties and responsibilities that must be met". Mr. Lacouture stated the possibility of not collecting 100% of the billed taxes. To which Ms. Vergano replied, "we will not collect 100%". Chief Kettelle stated the district needs time to get started. Next year should see a decrease in administrative requirements however; the Rescue Corps is looking at putting two more people on the payroll. Additionally, the truck fund must be considered. "Plan review fees should help to offset some of next year's budget", says Chief Kettelle. In addition, he cited the

expected increase in commercial construction in Exeter as a source to increase the assessed value to help reduce taxes. Mr. Swanson offered an amendment to change the amount of the proposed increase to 3% over last year. After a short discussion Mr. Swanson withdrew his amendment. Ms. Vergano moved (Mr. Walker second) an amendment calling for a reduction in the budget to \$823,445 (bringing the public safety entities to a 3½% increase) and funding the admin portion at \$30,000. The total budget amount would represent an increase of 7.8%. Mr. Lacouture again noted the collection rate concern, and that we could go deeper into a hole. Ms. Vergano questioned why 7.8% wasn't much better than 9.3% to the taxpayers. The vote on Ms. Vergano's amendment was defeated by a vote of 4 – 2. Ms. Vergano and Mr. Walker voted in favor of the amendment and Messrs Reed, Swanson, Lacouture and Nievera opposed. A vote was then taken on the original motion. Voting in the affirmative were Messrs Lacouture, Reed and Nievera. Opposing were Ms. Vergano, Messrs Swanson and Walker. The motion failed on a tie. Mr. Swanson moved adoption of a budget of \$787,050 (\$789,550 including abatements) consisting of:

Administrative \$ 31,505

Station #1 \$119,400

Station #2 \$102,900

Dispatch Corp. \$215,000

Rescue Corps \$318,245

The motion failed to receive a second.

After a short discussion on the steps needed to arrive at an 8%

budget increase Mr. Walker moved (Mr. Reed second) to offer a budget of \$824,950, which is \$10,000 less than the original (an 8%, increase). A voice vote to approve a budget of \$824,950 was taken with Ms. Vergano, Messrs Nievera, Lacouture, Reed and Walker voting in the affirmative and Mr. Swanson opposed. Chief Kettelle asked for a brief recess so as to allow the department heads to caucus and determine from where \$8,500 (\$1,500 to be removed from the administrative budget) could be cut. The meeting recessed for 15 minutes.

Upon their return the department heads indicated the sum of \$1,000 would be cut from the budgets of station #1, #2 and the Rescue Corps along with a cut of \$5,500 from the Dispatch Corp. The department heads agreed to submit new budgets reflecting an \$8,500 decrease in requested funding.

Mr. Wilbur circulated an e-mail earlier in the day stating that there was nothing to report on the insurance. He has yet to hear from VFIS concerning the bonding of board members.

There is nothing new to report on a search for a tax collector. This search will begin after the annual meeting.

Mr. Lacouture noted the ads for the annual meeting was placed in the Standard Times. Several people noted seeing the ads in the paper.

Mr. Lacouture submitted his report on the fire district, a requirement of the bylaws. Mr. Nievera moved (Ms. Vergano second) to accept the report. The motion carried unanimously. The report will be a handout at the annual meeting.

It was generally agreed to remove the presentation from the ISO representative and discussion on the tax collector until after the annual meeting. However, ISO will remain listed on the meeting agendas to ensure it officially remains on the action list.

The deadline for filing for the moderator's position is March 10. All filings must be sent to the post office box (197).

New Business

Mr. Joe St. Jean gave a "plan review" presentation. Mr. St. Jean is providing inspection assistance to both fire companies and will be reviewing the submitted plans after "plan review" is implemented. Mr. St. Jean stated Rhode Island has one of the most strict fire codes in the nation as a result of the Station Nightclub fire. He further stated the results of the program would help to ensure fire code compliance and the fees generated would help with the district's fire prevention program. Mr. Swanson stated he wanted zoning enforcement to be part of Mr. St. Jean's job, citing the close proximity of houses being built in the town. Chief Kettelle explained that was the responsibility of the zoning board. Mr. Swanson also had questions concerning retail stores. Mr. Kettelle referred him to the building inspector. Mr. Nievera asked what steps had to be taken to initiate a program such as this. "It simply has to be adopted," added Mr. St. Jean. Mr. Kettelle stated his request to have the fire companies adopt resolutions initiating plan review fees. He also voiced a desire to have Mr. St. Jean remain a contractor paid (on a 1099) by the fire companies

rather than by the fire district. Mr. Nievera requested copies of both resolutions be forwarded to the fire district. Mr. Kettelle stated he would comply. Mr. Swanson asked whether Mr. St. Jean would be required to be at town hall on Wednesday nights. Mr. Kettelle responded he would probably be available “as needed” if not on Wednesday nights.

Ms. Vergano proposed three task force committees for cost reduction, ISO improvement and grant identification and application. Each committee would be headed by a board member and consist of members of the public service organizations, totaling 5-7 people on each. Mr. Swanson expressed his desire to have the board participate in all discussions of this type and not have any committees.

Ms. Vergano explained the intent of increasing efficiency and having the committees provide reports to the board. She also mentioned that board members could be part of any committees they desired.

The cost reduction committee would work on identifying and investigating any areas of service duplication and potential consolidation among the public service organizations that could reduce costs such as insurance, payroll, fuel costs, etc. She suggested that the treasurers of the organizations, including the treasurer of the board, would be a good fit for this group. Chief Kettelle offered the organizations would have the names of people interested in serving on this committee for the next meeting.

The ISO committee would give support to the chiefs and the grant committee would identify and apply for various grants to alleviate the

burden on the individual organizations. Mr. Lacouture suggested leaving the ISO work to the fire companies citing that there is not much the board can do for the ISO rating. Ms. Vergano stated her intent is to help deliver on a promise to lower the rating made to the voters of the district and her desire for that to happen in a timely manner. Chief Franklin stated the most helpful thing we could do, as a board, would be to fund the companies in a somewhat level manner. “Ladders, hoses and pumps must be tested on a regular basis”, says Chief Franklin. “ISO is looking for 3 to 4 years of records”. Mary-Ellen Thurber (Gardner Rd.) offered to help with the grants. Mr. Nievera also voiced his interest in searching out grants for the district. Chief Caito suggested looking into legislative grants offered by the state of Rhode Island. Chief Kettelle reminded the board that because the public safety organizations are 501(c)(3) organizations they must be the grant applicants. Mr. Swanson stated his wish to have ISO visit us in the near future.

Ms. Vergano asked how long it has been since ISO has been here. The chiefs agreed it was in or around 1989. Chief Kettelle explained the rating is based on a 5,000-point evaluation. A varying number of points are given in different areas. He also explained that water supply is responsible for approximately 40% of our rating. Chiefs Kettelle and Franklin will assemble a plan of action, due in 90 days, for the board explaining where we are in the process and where we expect to be in 6 months and a year from now. “ISO wants to see significant improvement over your last review”, Chief Franklin offered. For maximum effect, it is likely to take 3 years to obtain your

best rating. The lowest rating is a 10; Exeter is a 9. Mr. Morgan (Dispatch Corp.) noted funding stability is an important part of the process. Ms. Vergano expressed her disappointment that it may take another 3 years to obtain the savings promised to the voters. Mr. Swanson asked if fire protection should be what people can afford. Chief Kettelle responded, "We are giving better than bare bones service now".

It was agreed that after the annual meeting the board would meet on the third Thursday of each month. The first of the regular monthly meetings is scheduled for April 21, 2005.

The next meeting will be March 24, 2005. We will interview candidates for and appoint a moderator for the annual meeting.

The annual meeting will be held on April 13, 2005 at the EWG High School auditorium.

Ms. Vergano moved (Mr. Swanson second) adjournment at 9:58pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Bill Nievera, Clerk

The Exeter Fire District