

Coventry Fire District

Special Meeting, December 16, 2014

Club Joques, Coventry, RI

Minutes

1. Emergency Evacuation Procedures were reviewed by John D'Onofrio

2. Roll call was taken. Present were John D'Onofrio, John Cook, Frank Palin, Sam Rachiele and Brenda Raposo

3. Nomination and Election of Officers

a. Mr. D'Onofrio nominated Frank Palin to be Chairman of the Board. The nomination was seconded by Mr. Cook. A vote was taken resulting in 5 in favor and 0 opposed.

b. Ms. Raposo nominated Sam Rachiele to be Vice Chairman of the board. The nomination was seconded by Mr. D'Onofrio. A vote was taken resulting in 5 in favor and 0 opposed.

c. A motion was made by Mr. D'Onofrio pursuant to RI Gen Law 42-46-5 (a) to move in to executive session for the purpose of discussing the ongoing investigation into the allegations against suspended fire Chief Paul Labbadia. The motion was seconded by Mr. Rachiele. A vote was taken resulting in 5 in favor and 0 opposed.

4. The meeting was reconvened from Executive Session

5. A motion was made by Mr. Rachiele to seal the minutes to the Executive Session. The motion was seconded by Ms. Raposo. A roll call was vote was taken resulting in the following vote:

Brenda Raposo – Yes

Sam Rachiele – Yes

Frank Palin – Yes

John D’Onofrio - Yes

John Cook – Yes

6. Mr. Palin called for a motion to change Paul Labbadia’s status from “suspended with pay” to “suspended without pay”. The motion was moved by Mr. D’Onofrio and seconded by Mr. Cook.

A roll call was vote was taken resulting in the following vote:

John Cook – Yes

John D’Onofrio - Yes

Frank Palin – Yes

Sam Rachiele – Yes

Brenda Raposo – Yes

7. Mr. Palin called for a motion stating that the initial findings of the board’s investigation of Chief Labbadia will be forwarded to the RI State Police, who will be contacted to continue and expand the investigation. The motion was moved by Mr. Cook and seconded by Mr. Rachiele.

A roll call was vote was taken resulting in the following vote:

John Cook – Yes

John D’Onofrio - Yes

Frank Palin – Yes

Sam Rachiele – Yes

Brenda Raposo – Yes

8. Mr. Palin made a statement regarding the events that occurred at the annual financial meeting. This was made to address the

comments stating that the board and Mr. Palin personally, are going to ruin the fire district. Mr. Palin reiterated that this is not the case and that we are the “voice of the taxpayers”. Regarding the unruly crowd at the meeting, he does not blame them and it was an expression of “anger”. Mr. Palin stated that the district is made up of hard working families who are taxed to the limit and this has to come to an end. Regarding the budget being labeled as “irresponsible”, Mr. Palin stated that the budget is not irresponsible. He continued that in fact, the budgets and contracts in the past were irresponsible. In particular, the chief’s contract looks like it was negotiated “over a beer” six years ago with the board asking the chief what he wanted in his contract. Mr. Palin concluded that based upon the report of Channel 12 news, the board was “asleep at the wheel when it came to monitoring the chief’s actions”. Due to possible litigation, Mr. Palin refrained from further comments on the matter. Mr. Palin had concerns that the chief’s memberships in organizations and boards were not limited and his benefits were tied to the union contract. Mr. Palin stated that this is unheard of in an executive position. Mr. Palin questioned why the chief was given 30 days annual vacation. In Mr. Palin’s opinion, 20 days is more in line with the norm. Regarding the chief’s termination clause through arbitration rather than at the service of the board, Mr. Palin expressed this questionable in regards to the districts by-laws. Mr. Palin questioned the responsibility of purchasing a \$30,000 SUV to be used as the chief saw fit. With the chief living less than a mile from the district, it wouldn’t be unreasonable to have the chief keep the car parked at the station

when not in use for district matters. Regarding what Mr. Palin labels as extensive mileage (26,000 miles in one year) on the chief's vehicle, due to the size of the district it would have been difficult for the chief to log more than 3,000 miles under normal use. Mr. Palin again stated that "the former board was asleep at the switch...plain and simple...and to attack this board who are trying to make things right, is unfair." Referring to the Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) Mr. Palin stated that once again, the former board, (not referring to Mr. D'Onofrio who has only served in the prior year), did not adhere to the physical fitness provision of the CBA. In addition minimum staffing with no flexibility is "crippling" the district with overtime cost. Outside contracts and volunteers are prohibited. "There's a house full of chiefs and no Indians". The clothing allowance of \$1,500 is never monitored with receipts from the firefighters. Mr. Palin suggested that cost of clothing could be cut by a 1/3 if the district supplied the uniforms. Regarding firefighter compensation, Mr. Paling stated that the average base pay is over \$50,000 per year. With an EMT certification, which is not required by the state, a firefighter receives an extra \$40 per week or \$2,080 per year. There are 11 paid holidays. Longevity average approximately \$5,000 per firefighter. The medical health plan requires \$17 bi-weekly per individual and \$35 bi-weekly per family. Mr. Palin stated that most people in the private sector pay at \$75 to \$100 per week for a health plan. Mr. Palin continued that "we are giving away the store and that this budget was made to stop this. We need to stop the rubber stamping of past boards that were doing just anything that the

firefighters and the chief wanted”. Mr. Palin invited comments from anybody else on the board who would like to speak on the matter. Ms. Raposo stated that “she ran for a position on the board so she could represent the taxpayers and that’s what she intends to do”. Mr. Rachiele stated that “he didn’t want the firefighters to think that it’s us against them. It’s really not. I know what type of job they do. I know a lot of us could not do that job but what it comes down to is not them signing a contract but it’s the people that drew up the contract for them to sign and if anybody gave me that contract if I was in the private sector, I would say, ‘I’ll sign that’. Mr. Rachiele summarized that it’s a taxpayer funded contract and the taxpayers have spoken. He stated that he respects firefighters and the police but the current financial situation in Coventry has made it difficult for the taxpayers to pay the bill and continue living here. Mr. D’Onofrio declined further comment on the CBA and prior boards. He further stated that “No matter what we do as a board, the safety of the district is primary as is the safety of the firefighters. They are risking their lives so let’s be prudent. Let’s not be irrational”. Mr. Cook had no further comment other than to reiterate Mr. D’Onofrio’s concerns on the safety of the firehouse and the safety of the district.

9. A motion was made by Mr. Cook, to accept the minutes of the December 10, 2014 meeting. The motion was seconded by Mr. D’Onofrio. A vote was taken resulting in 5 in favor and 0 opposed.

10. Mr. Palin asked for a motion to construct a small assign in front of the fire station, with materials and labor donated to the fire district. The purpose of the sign is to better inform the taxpayers of the

district of upcoming public meetings for the fire district. The motion was moved by Mr. D'Onofrio. The motion was seconded by Mr. Rachiele. A vote was taken resulting in 5 in favor and 0 opposed.

11. Mr. Palin stated that after his brief review of the budget and after researching the district's finances he feels the board should investigate some potential cost savings for the district.

a. Regarding street lighting, there is a chance that the taxpayers are being double-taxed if they are paying for any lighting in the district that is already being paid for by the Town of Coventry. Mr. Palin requested a motion from the floor to send a formal letter to the Town of Coventry to investigate this matter further. The motion was made by Mr. Cook and seconded by Mr. Rachiele. A vote was taken resulting in 5 in favor and 0 opposed.

b. Regarding the district being charged for lighting along state highways and for traffic signals. Mr. Palin requested a motion from the floor to send a formal letter to the Department of Transportation to investigate this matter further. The motion was made by Mr. D'Onofrio and seconded by Mr. Rachiele. A vote was taken resulting in 5 in favor and 0 opposed.

c. Regarding payment by other fire districts for street lighting. Mr. Palin requested a motion from the floor to send a formal letter to the other fire districts to determine if we are on "equal footing". The motion was made by Mr. Rachiele and seconded by Mr. D'Onofrio. A vote was taken resulting in 5 in favor and 0 opposed.

d. Regarding the districts billing from National Grid, Mr. Palin requested a motion from the floor to send a formal letter to National

Grid, requesting a street by street breakdown of the bill. The purpose is to determine if the district is being billed for lighting on state roads.

The motion was made by Mr. Cook and seconded by Mr. Rachiele. A vote was taken resulting in 5 in favor and 0 opposed.

e. Regarding the district being billed for fire hydrant rental, what is the district receiving in return in terms of service and maintenance? If maintenance and service are required as part of our rental fee, the district should have documentation that this is being done. Mr. Palin requested a motion from the floor to send a formal letter to Kent County Water Authority, requesting a detailed breakdown of services being provided. The motion was made by Mr. D'Onofrio and seconded by Mr. Rachiele. A vote was taken resulting in 5 in favor and 0 opposed.

f. Regarding the ownership of the district's water pipes and street lights. Mr. Palin feels that based upon the charter of 1899 that documentation of the early 1900's; there is indication that both the water pipes and street lights are owned by the district. Mr. Palin's indicated that his research did not uncover a legal transfer of ownership to Kent County Water Authority and National Grid (Narragansett Electric) respectively. Mr. Palin requested a motion from the floor to send a formal letter to Kent County Water Authority and National grid, requesting that they provide proof of ownership of the property for which the district is being billed. The motion was made by Mr. D'Onofrio and seconded by Mr. Rachiele. A vote was taken resulting in 5 in favor and 0 opposed.

12. Regarding the provision in the budget for an audit, and due to

concerns of mismanagement and fraud within the district, Mr. Palin requested a motion from the floor to request proposals for a “forensic” audit of the district’s books, from the appropriate firms. Mr. Cook asked that due to financial concerns, we consider tabling the forensic audit until the completion of the investigation into chief Labbadia. Mr. Palin responded that the state police will not conduct a forensic audit of the district unless the district conducts one first. The motion was made by Mr. D’Onofrio to request proposals for a forensic audit. The motion was seconded by Mr. Rachiele. A vote was taken resulting in 4 in favor and Mr. Cook abstaining.

13. Regarding the resignation of the districts’ attorney, Arthur Capaldi, Mr. Palin indicated that the district has been contacted by a few attorneys and that he would like to request additional proposals for discussion at the board’s next meeting, in Executive Session. Mr. Palin requested a motion from the floor to request proposals for a new attorney for the district. The motion was made by Mr. Cook and seconded by Mr. Rachiele. A vote was taken resulting in 5 in favor and 0 opposed.

14. Regarding the replacement of the districts’ former treasurer, Judith Hetherman, Mr. Palin requested a motion from the floor to request proposals for a new treasure, with interviews to be scheduled at the board’s next meeting. Mr. D’Onofrio and Mr. Rachiele indicated that the board should be requesting proposals from CPA’s and not simply bookkeepers. The motion was made by Mr. Cook to request proposals for a new treasure, preferably a CPA. The motion was seconded by Mr. Rachiele. A vote was taken resulting in 5 in favor

and 0 opposed.

15. Mr. Palin requested a motion from the floor to request from the acting chief, semi-monthly reports on overtime staffing of the Coventry Fire District. The purpose of such report would be to identify any trends or problems that arise that could be resolved “sooner rather than later”. The motion was made by Mr. Rachiele and seconded by Mr. Cook. A vote was taken resulting in 5 in favor and 0 opposed.

16. Mr. Palin requested a motion from the floor to request from the acting chief, a report of any employees that are on disability, including actions that have been taken and actions that still need to be taken. This report is to be presented in Executive Session. The motion was made by Mr. D’Onofrio and seconded by Ms. Raposo. A vote was taken resulting in 5 in favor and 0 opposed.

17. Mr. Palin asked for a motion to set the next meeting of the district’s fire board to Tuesday, December 30th, at 7:00. Mr. Palin would check on the ability of Club Joques for the place of meeting because he feels the current meetings have “outgrown” the space limitations of the fire station. The motion was made by Mr. Rachiele and seconded by Mr. Cook. A vote was taken resulting in 5 in favor and 0 opposed.

18. The board discussed changing the meeting day for the regular monthly meetings. Mr. Palin called for a motion to change the meeting to the second Tuesday of every month. The motion was made by Mr. D’Onofrio. A vote was taken resulting in 5 in favor and 0 opposed.

19. Mr. Cook discussed the commission being formed by Senator Raptakis, investigating the feasibility of district wide vs. town wide fire districts. Mr. Cook requested permission from the board to approach Senator Raptakis and to be the member representing the board of the Coventry Fire district. Mr. Palin indicated that he had already reached out to Senator Raptakis and that the commission is still in the preliminary stages. The members of the board were in agreement that it would be OK for Mr. Cook to reach out to Senator Raptakis for further information. No motion was made on this matter.

20. Mr. Palin called for a motion to adjourn. The motion was made by Mr. D'Onofrio and seconded by Mr. Rachiele. A vote was taken resulting in 5 in favor and 0 opposed.