

Selectboard Joint Special Meeting with East Montpelier Board and East Montpelier Fire Department Minutes

Thursday, August 12, 2021 at 7 pm at the EMFD

Present: Denise Wheeler (Chair), Rick Kehne (Member), Sharon Winn Fannon (Vice Chair), ORCA Media, Toby Talbot, Ty Rolland, Paul Guare, Seth Gardner, Albert Petrella, Bruce Johnson, Jon Jewett, Judith Woodbeck, Carl Etnier, Larry Brown

Absent: John Brabant (Member), Marc Mihaly (Member)

1. Call to Order: Denise Wheeler called the Calais Selectboard meeting to order at 7 pm; East Montpelier Selectboard was called to order immediately following.
2. Public Comment: None.
3. Review, Additions/Changes to Agenda: None.
4. Financial Review of the Fiscal Year: Toby Talbot explained the Fire side surplus of approx. \$4,000 resulted because of the timing of the fire hose testing. It was a budgeted item for FY21 but the testing had been delayed due to COVID-19 and finally did happen this month in FY22; therefore, FY21 will show a surplus of approx. \$4,000 but once the hose testing bill is paid, that will in effect lower that amount back to about \$875. He reviewed the Capital Expense Equipment line item for power cots; he showed the annual expense for vehicle payments.

The group reviewed the Ambulance side, including a grant received unexpectedly for COVID-19 expenses and hazard pay for EMTs. Toby noted that Marshfield's FY21 payment total is one payment "extra," because the first FY22 payment was deposited slightly prematurely and was recorded as FY21. Ambulance surplus was approx. \$340. Over \$164,000 was brought in as revenue. EMFD got a contract from the State of Vermont to serve as contracted vaccinators (maximum \$100,000). Approx. \$40,000 has been expended so far for these hours to be utilized by EMFD staff members. The Department gets \$400 a week to administer the grant plus funds for scheduling.

There were over 650 total calls all year (fire and medical). There has not been a problem with brush fires this year, but Chief Roland noted the potential for significant fires is real in light of climate change and resultant dry forest floor conditions. Calls were reduced somewhat this year as people avoided COVID-19 exposure; recently, that has changed and calls are busy. The Department took in \$90,000 less than they billed due to Medicare rates.

5. COVID Updates: Chief Roland explained that EMFD has remained in semi-lockdown mode; public access may be limited once again as infection rates change rapidly locally. Supply and inventory of pandemic supplies were amassed last year so they are well-provisioned at this time. The hospitals are slowly increasing precautions, and the EMFD is expecting to follow soon. Washington County has entered "red" status, the highest level of transmission.

6. EMFD Updates: A UTV (side by side utility vehicle with tracks on it) was purchased this spring, designed for off road rescue and usable in all four seasons. It has been used a number of times already. There has been an increased need for off road rescue, and EMFD is updating their maps of all off road trails where rescue could be needed. EMFD has made connections with all trails committees in being aware of the hundreds of miles of trails in the area (rescues do happen on trails). Under the statutes, they can access as they need to in an emergency; it is easier to have understanding of trails systems and use of the UTV. The UTV has a stretcher and option for hose. The Department brings their own chainsaws to open trail as needed, and the UTV is a huge asset for saving time and manpower (it equates to six people); the UTV allows for keeping staffing at the office for multiple calls. Monies from haz mat, donations, and the capital expenses were used for this purchase. Three people have completed the “third rider” program, and some will transition to regular staffing members. The flow in of new staff has met the need vacated by exiting staff. Third riders come in and spend time going through a qualifying review (often as new EMTs without experience).
7. EMFD Local Agreement Contract Language and Renewals: Chief Roland explained that on March 30, 2021 Calais sent a letter notifying non-renewal of the interlocal agreement that had been in place 11 years and proposed changes. Calais Chair Denise Wheeler commented that the contract had not been reviewed in years and due diligence is owed the taxpayers to do that review before signing off. She explained that the fire department budget inside the Selectboard budget is always able to be questioned from the floor on Town Meeting, but people like to hear from the departments every year which helps increase support and see up front what the budget amounts are. Emergency services are the largest portion of the Calais budget. Calais and East Montpelier Selectboards proposed contract language changes and voted to approve a final version. Sharon Winn Fannon commented that it was at a previous joint EMFD meeting that it occurred to the Calais Board that because of transparency, they wanted the option to take the emergency services portion of the budget out of the Selectboard to present to voters; it was clarified at that meeting that the only way to achieve this was to make edits to the interlocal agreement. Rick Kehne and Calais Selectboard reiterated that as a practical matter, Calais sees due diligence including reviewing and ensuring all Board members are familiar with all contracts on a regular basis. The Fire Department has good support in Calais and this is an opportunity to engage the public vocally in that support and transparency. Calais Selectboard emphasized this is not about a lack of support or trust with the fire departments.

Toby Talbot noted that the EMFD will need to be present for answering questions for a budget item on the floor at Town Meeting. He commented that the Department meets with the Boards three times a year to discuss the budget; that can't be explained in a single meeting and could threaten the Department's existence. Under the existing interlocal without any changes, the Department could be asked to present during a town meeting; he contrasted that putting the budget separately puts a target on it. Denise Wheeler noted the potential always existed for the budget to be discussed and changed from the floor; Sharon Winn Fannon added that it is impressive the support both fire departments (Woodbury and East Montpelier) receive at Town Meeting. There has been, by contract, a requirement that EMFD have their budget be located inside the Selectboard budget (the same is not true of Woodbury Fire Department).

East Montpelier Chair Seth Gardner commented that they are not planning to move EMFD out of their Town Budget as a separate item, and questioned if a fuss is being made over

something that will not be an issue. He pointed out that more discussion will be had over a simple concept like a \$1,000 item; hundreds of thousands of dollars is harder to conceptualize and generally just passes quickly; the fire department is well regarded and it will pass.

Chief Roland identified concerns about 1) what happens if the budget does not get voted through; 2) what happens if one town passes and the other does not. East Montpelier Board agreed that it is very unlikely to get voted down and the EMFD being present to discuss the budget at Town Meeting goes a long way to increase public support. There have been concerns from some citizens in East Montpelier asking to do the same thing (separating the line item). At the end of the day, it is the taxpayers who have to approve the budget, it cannot be voted to be guaranteed by a Selectboard. Calais Selectboard has taken an approach for a few years to ensure the Town expenses be the items contained in the Selectboard budget, with items that are not directly operations for running the Town being held outside the Selectboard budget. Calais has worked hard to create a transparent municipal budget where every item is broken down specifically and the proposed contract language changes are part of that process.

East Montpelier, alternately, has no plans to pull the EMFD budget from inside the Town municipal budget. EMFD stated they felt left out of the process of invitation to meetings and felt the communication between the three parties is falling apart. Chair Denise Wheeler offered an apology and explained the Board has been overloaded this year; they agreed this is a fair point and meetings can be scheduled going forward. Chief Rolland expressed EMFD's concern that shortening the contract renewal timeline to three months instead of six may be too short, and asked what would be done if the contract expires on September 1 and no interlocal agreement is in place. Sharon Winn Fannon noted she'd take this breakdown as a way to improve process rather than go back to a longer time frame. Toby Talbot suggested a meeting structure/attendance parameter be in place in the contract in the event of a shortened contractual renewal timeframe. He emphasized the need for the Department to have time at the table with the other two entities.

The EMFD wrote a letter to each Board, which Carl Etnier read aloud. It stated that to date, neither a replacement contract nor amendment to the existing contract have been agreed to (termination scheduled to occur Sept 1, 2021); EMFD requested the parties agree to an interim extension for up to three months to negotiate one or more contract amendments. Sharon Winn Fannon clarified that there is no way to initiate discussion on the contract other than to "notice non-renewal of the current contract" (Calais's effort is *not* a "termination"); friendlier language could include this point.

Carl Etnier pointed out that if we agree to extend the current contract, or to agree to the changes as proposed by Calais and East Montpelier Selectboard, all parties are going to do the exact same as expected (nothing changes, practically speaking). Chief Rolland added that hopefully better communication and meeting will occur. Sharon Winn Fannon questioned whether EMFD's proposed ninety days' time would allow the Department to influence, through conversation, the outcome. Chief Rolland commented he is looking for EMFD concerns to be addressed more than a different outcome. The EMFD's proposed extension was not on the agenda, and the East Montpelier Town Manager pointed out this would not be a fully warned vote and Open Meeting Law must be met. Sharon Winn Fannon noted there was a very fixed timeline required under the current contract for a board to provide notice of intent

to seek changes (by Sept. 1). The Calais Selectboard did that. Bruce Johnson proposed sending language for a motion for each Board to utilize that will offer the same language for each Board, on Tuesday.

The group planned to meet jointly; the ball is in the EMFD court. East Montpelier and Calais Selectboards provided the voted upon language (approved by Calais and East Montpelier Selectboards), signed, to the EMFD to review and return to the table for discussion.

8. Other Business/Old Business/New Business: None.
9. Adjournment: Rick Kehne motioned and Denise Wheeler seconded to adjourn the Calais Selectboard meeting at 8:23 pm. The motion was voted and passed unanimously.

Date: 8/17/2021 Respectfully Submitted, Katie Lane-Karnas, Recording Secretary
Approved by the Selectboard at the 8/26/2021 meeting

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