

**Town of Haverhill, NH
FIRE DEPARTMENT COMMITTEE**

Internal Stakeholders Public Meeting

**MEETING MINUTES
Tuesday, August 12, 2020, at 7:00 PM**

(All attendees participated by videoconference because of the COVID-19 pandemic)

DRAFT / subject to review by the Committee

Fire Department Committee Members:

Jon Bouffard, St. Johnsbury Fire Chief, Resident of Pike (Committee Chair)
Darwin Clogston, Select Board Chair
Keith Charpentier, Deputy Chief, Haverhill Corner Fire Dept.
Jeff Robbins, Woodsville Fire Chief
Phil Blanchard, N. Haverhill Fire Chief
Michael Lavoie, Haverhill Corner Precinct Commission Chair
Paul Kidder, Woodsville Precinct Commission Chair
Dennis Fournier, No. Haverhill Precinct Commission Chair
Bob Long, Mountain Lakes Precinct Commission Chair
Brigitte Codling, Haverhill Town Manager
Jennifer Boucher, Haverhill Finance Director

Committee Members PRESENT:

Phil Blanchard (Lead for meeting)
Jon Bouffard (joined late, was on a fire call)
Brigitte Codling
Darwin Clogston
Keith Charpentier
Jennifer Boucher
Jeff Robbins
Dennis Fournier

Members of the Public Present: Ed Ballam, Nathan Heathe, Anthony Smith, Kevin VanNorden, Jay Holden, Bill Silbreth, Regis Roy, April Hutchinson-James, Chelsie Boutin, Kaylee Heathe, numerous attendees logged in anonymously.

Meeting began at 7:00 PM

Phil Blanchard, meeting moderator, opened the floor to comments.

Question 1: Anthony Smith asked the Committee if this consolidation is a *want* or a *need*. Smith observed that the article in the *Journal Opinion* was focused on three items: redundancy, funding, bringing the Town together, and a new fire station, which he stated were all not important.

Smith suggested that consolidation does not always give the results you want because with a spread-out power base, like we have now, it is better. Smith stated that the final question is about taxes because it is much easier to cut finances when the money is in a large basket. Blanchard responded that staffing is an important issue, so right now the consolidation is a *need* for some and a *want* for others. TM noted that the creation of a Town Fire Department was by Articles on the Warrant at Town Meeting and that residents approved them by majority vote. The committee was created in response to the will of the people. Smith reiterated that he thinks putting things under one roof does not always work.

Ed Ballam asked if the meeting was about listening and not refuting. Ballam noted that at one push of the button, we all come together anyway.

Keith Charpentier responded to Smith's; stating that the Town voted for this.

TM noted that any large capital improvement, like an emergency services facility, would need to be voted on by residents.

Question 2: Jay Holden asked if there was a petition presented to rescind the vote from the last Town Meeting, would the Select Board honor the wishes of the people and leave the fire departments as they are. TM explained that there are two types of Warrant Articles; one is by petition and the Select Board cannot change the wording of a petitioned Warrant Article. It goes before residents for a vote as written, whether its properly written or legally binding. The second is an Article placed upon the Warrant by the Select Board, they have full authority over how those are written. However, the outcome of a vote of residents cannot be changed by the Select Board. Jay Holden responded with "We will see."

Question series 3: Ballam presented the following questions/comments:

- Firefighters are contemplating leaving the fire service over this merger process. How would the Committee be prepared for this and face the costs of a full time career fire department?
 - Charpentier stated that he would like each Fire Chief to provide the number of fire fighters from their stations that have stated they would leave if their station joined the new Town Fire Department.
 - Blanchard said, none. That their desire to serve, is what keeps them on the fire department.
 - Jeff Robbins stated that Woodsville Fire Department is just observing and not involved in the outcome.
 - Ballam noted that Haverhill Corner is not involved either because they voted not to participate; but that maybe 3 or 4 firefighters would leave.
- Ballam asked about the cost-benefit analysis of the proposed merger.
 - Blanchard noted that it is something the Committee will be looking at.
- Ballam asked about firefighter certification.
 - Blanchard stated that even though the Town has training for officers, it is something the Committee will be looking at.

- Ballam asked about CDL licensing for fire personnel.
 - Blanchard noted that two of the three departments now have CDL requirements, but it is something the Committee will be looking at.
- Ballam asked if the Town would require physical examinations of the firefighters, which leads one step closer to full time firefighters.
 - Blanchard noted that for someone who is a health risk, we do have that liability. The burden and responsibility are on the Fire Chief(s).
- Ballam asked how the Town plans to integrate two nonparticipatory fire departments within the Town.
 - Blanchard noted that there can still be a Town-funded fire department, such as N. Haverhill is right now, and keep everything the same. The Committee is still examining all the facts. TM noted that the Committee will be determining the required organizational structure; one that best serves residents of Haverhill.
- Ballam asked how money will be channeled to the two non-participatory fire departments providing coverage for all residents who pay taxes equally.
 - Darwin noted that if the departments do not join the Town Fire Department, they could be funded by the precincts as they used to be funded, however, no decisions on funding have been made as there is more work for the committee to do first.
- Ballam asked if there is one fire department, how the department will provide coverage to all parts of the Town.
 - Blanchard responded that the Fire Department Committee is currently discussing this topic.
- Ballam asked a question relating to firefighter retention and recruitment. What can the Committee do to preserve some of the identity and autonomy of each station?
 - Blanchard responded that that topic is under discussion in the Committee.
- Ballam asked what will be the criteria for membership in the new Haverhill fire department, including residency, licensing, physical examinations, and other conditions of employment, and who will decide.
 - Blanchard responded that the Committee is considering what the departments are doing for recruitment now.
 - Smith suggested that there is a large skill set that is available in Town, for example retirees who could do paperwork or other duties.
- Ballam asked how the Town will select leadership, including chiefs and officers, for the fire department.
- Ballam asked how the dispatching will work, which is currently dispatched by the County Sheriff's Department, and how enhanced mapping of the 9-1-1 calls will work.
- Ballam asked the Committee to consider how agreements and contracts with the nonparticipatory precincts will work and if each precinct will be reimbursed for services rendered.

- Ballam compared the financial appropriations between Littleton (\$1.1 million) and Haverhill (\$454,550) fire departments and stated that Haverhill is a bargain. Ballam further stated that there is little monetary value to be gained with a merger, and that the need for the merger is based on anecdotal surveys and a vote that many consider to be questionable.
 - Jeff Robbins suggested Ballam’s questions and comments be posted on Facebook and in the newspaper.
 - TM offered that Ed Ballam’s questions, the format and presentation of them were exactly what the Fire Department Committee needs and is looking for. She thanked him for his thoughtful, productive contribution to the discussion.

Question 4: Jay Holden asked if the meetings of the Fire Department Committee could be on site rather than by ZOOM. TM responded that audio is a problem with large gatherings. Holden stated that it would work at the Haverhill Corner Middle School, which has all the space needed and the necessary audio/video equipment. Dennis Fournier replied that no outside group is allowed to come into the Middle School without permission.

Question 5: Kevin VanNorden asked TM where the survey was posted. TM responded on Facebook and in local businesses and post offices around Town, as well as the Town Offices. VanNorden noted that anyone, not just Haverhill residents, can fill this out. TM responded that the first question on the survey is: In what part of Town are you located?

- Charpentier stated that the scope of the survey has to do specifically with merging the departments.
- VanNorden noted that many people can’t get out and could the survey be mailed to everyone to be most fair and accurate.
- TM stated that, at this point, there are 45 responses to the survey.
- Blanchard noted that the Committee will look at the survey responses and consider them just as more information.
- Charpentier suggested the survey be included in the tax bill envelope.

Question 6: Holden directed his question to TM stating that the Town Meeting vote was 200+/- . The TM stated that closer to 500 people had attended Town Meeting. Holden stated that there are 4,600 residents, with 3,000 registered voters, and he has never seen the Town so divided as it is right now. Holden stated that the Town needs to get a real consensus about how people feel about this. TM stated that Town meeting was well attended, and a majority voted in favor of creating the Town Fire Department. Clogston stated that only around 100 residents had voted on the school’s 14-million-dollar budget, but that is how it goes.

Jon Bouffard entered the meeting and stated that the Committee is moving forward on developing the Town fire department that has already been voted on, and the discussion [in this meeting] is moving forward, as well.

Question 7: Bill Silbreth stated that there was not much time and information available to voters, and he asked if the Committee can show that they will save money. Silbreth also stated that the survey was pointed and only answers that they wanted to hear were in the replies.

Question 8: Regis Roy, Town resident, asked about the survey and her difficulty getting the responses inputted and was, also, concerned about shutting down the discussion from the firefighters by the Committee Chair. The Chair apologized to the resident.

Adjourn

Blanchard adjourned the meeting at 8:33 PM.

Transcribed by Joanna Bligh