

**MINUTES OF PUBLIC HEARING
TOWN OF GORHAM
TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2016 6:00 PM
GORHAM TOWN HALL**

Gorham Selectmen present: Jeff Schall, Grace LaPierre, Terry Oliver
Also present: Robin Frost, Town Manager

1. Call to Order: The public hearing was called to order at 6:00 pm by Chairman Schall.

Chairman Schall stated that the Public Safety Organizational Review Committee's Recommendation Report had been available on line at the Town's Website. The purpose of this evening's public hearing is to listen so that a decision can be made at the regular Selectmen's meeting.

The floor was turned over to the Committee Chair PJ Cyr. He opened the floor for discussion.

Paul Robitaille – Asked if the facts of what the proposal was for could be presented.

Chairman Schall read the following from the written recommendation review:

The Gorham Board of Selectmen requested Town Manager Robin Frost to continue to explore the viability of a merger of the Gorham Fire Department and Gorham Emergency Medical Services to create one department to provide fire suppression, rescue services and emergency medical services to the Town of Gorham and contracted communities.

Given the complex nature of examining and providing recommendations, Town Manager Frost created the Public Safety Organizational Review Committee (PSORC) to allow a potential merger to be studied in greater detail. The following people were appointed to the committee.

Members

PJ Cyr - Chief of Police
Chairman
Robin Frost – Town Manager
Secretary
Rick Eichler – Fire Chief & Health Officer
Gerry Marcou – Coos County Sheriff and Community Member
Dana Horne – Assistant Fire Chief
Wanda Tanguay – EMS Lieutenant
Chad Miller – EMS & Emergency Management Director
Allan Pike – Community Member

Mission

To conduct a feasibility study to see if a reorganization of the Gorham Fire Department and Gorham Emergency Medical Service will provide a more efficient service to the Taxpayers of Gorham.

Goals

1. Identify and review current organizational structure, mission, goals, SOPs, staff, schedules, budgets of departments.

2. Review potential organizational structure of Fire and EMS Departments merged under one leader.
3. Conduct research on other municipalities that have recently merged their Fire and EMS Departments.
4. Develop a summary of findings and recommendation to the Gorham Board of Selectmen.

Organizational Structure and Operations

Fire Department

The Gorham Fire Department currently staffs a full-time Fire Chief that is expected to retire during July 2016. The Fire Chief also fulfills the duties and responsibilities of Health Officer and Fire Warden. The Department is staffed with a part-time secretary (approximately 8 hours per week). In addition, the department has 42 on call volunteer firefighters: three Assistant Chiefs, two Captains, five Lieutenants and 32 firefighters. The fire fighters have varied levels of training and certifications. The Department operates under adopted local by-laws, local standard operating procedures, standards of the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA 1500, 1710 and 1720) and NH RSA 153 and 154.

Emergency Medical Service

The Gorham Emergency Medical Service currently staffs a full-time Director, an Assistant Director, an Operations Manager and a newly hired Paramedic. In addition, it staffs 32 on call EMS members: one Captain, two Lieutenants and 29 Providers. The roster has about 15 active members. The GEMS have varied levels of licenses: five Paramedics, ten AEMTs, nine EMTs and five EMRs. The GEMS operates under NH RSA 153-A, NH Department of Safety Saf-C 5900, NH Patient Care Protocols, and local standard operating guidelines.

Paul Robitaille asked what the recommendations were.

Chairman Schall read the following from the recommendation review:

The Public Safety Organizational Review Committee has found that a reorganization of the Fire Department and Emergency Medical Service will provide for a more efficient service to the Taxpayers of Gorham. (Committee voted in the affirmative 7/1 12/29/2015)

The Committee also suggests that the Gorham Board of Selectmen hold a public hearing before any action is taken on the Committee's recommendation.

PJ Cyr – Chief Cyr stated that the Committee was assembled to review whether or not a merger would be beneficial. The Committee feels that if the departments merged, it would be more efficient administratively. There would be one centralized leader with one vision for both departments. In the end, the Committee feels that it would be more efficient. Chief Cyr stated that he has heard that 60% of municipalities that are the size of Gorham have merged departments. He said that he had heard concerns that the Committee was "stacked", however, he does not feel that this was the case at all. All members had changed their minds at one point, but that they came back to the same conclusion. It would be a better service for the Town.

Pat Lefebvre – Mr. Lefebvre asked if the proposal is strictly administrative? Chief Cyr stated that it was not and noted that the report contained the proposed structures. He went on to discuss how the Committee felt it would be structured and the duties of on call personnel, etc.

Dana Horne – Mr. Horne stated that the Committee was not unanimous. The Fire Department was told a week ago it was a feasibility study, tonight it is something different. He went on to say that there is a lot of information in the proposal that is not just cut and dry.

PJ Cyr – Chief Cyr stated that the Committee realizes that the merger would be a huge change and may effect morale on the fire department. He said that he would expect a lot of turmoil and bad feelings, like Whitefield experienced. However, he feels that the efficiencies and level of service will be much better.

Adam White – Mr. White stated that Whitefield did not have EMS full timers to start with and noted that it is not a perfect situation in Whitefield.

PJ Cyr stated the Town is blessed to have their current fire department, noting that the study committee realized what they do in the field.

Pat Lefebvre – Mr. Lefebvre commented that Whitefield cannot be used as apples for apples because the retirement cost is larger. He said that while it may sound good administratively, everything underneath will cost more.

Chief Cyr stated that if the merge takes place in 2016, the budget will still work. However, the budget for 2017 may be a different story.

John LaPierre asked assuming merger takes place where will the new chief come from? Who will have final say? He said that the new chief position should not be from out of town.

Chief Cyr stated that the Town Manager and Board of Selectmen will have the final say in the hiring and new candidate criteria. He feels that the residents will need to trust the Board and Town Manager with regard to their judgement.

Sue Demers asked how many people on the committee and how many lived in Gorham. She said that she feels that the new Chief should be a resident because response to a fire is immediate. She said that she feels that the EMS department is turning into a business. If the Firemen are not in favor of this merger, then it should not be done. The matter should go before the whole town.

Chief Cyr asked EMD Miller how much money the department made last year. EMD Miller stated that it was approximately \$460,000, noting that the department is more self-sustaining since he has been hired.

Mike Waddell – Mr. Waddell did not raise my hand for either side. He said that when he was on the Board of Selectmen with Glen Eastman and Yves Zornio, they had agreed to merge the two departments, but we didn't because they did not want to see the current display at that time. He said that he hoped the Board did not force this on the departments. He also stated that the Board would write up a job description and hoped that they could find the right person for the job.

Chief Cyr stated that was one of the warnings from Whitefield, do not force this on the departments.

Paul Robitaille said he has been listening for a while. In yesteryears, more times than not EMS calls were not answered. We forget what kind of situation we are in now and the down turn in residency. Everyone approves of what our emergency services do. Coos County has the highest rate of 85 year olds. The people that are moving into the area are older. He said we need to remember what we are all here for. The decision will be based on what the Board feels is best for community.

John LaPierre said he is not a member of Fire Department, but has used the Ambulance service. He wondered why fix something that isn't broken.

Arthur Perry said that it is not a merger, but a take-over. He said that it seems like the Board is hearing them, but not really listening. He also asked about job descriptions for the proposed positions.

PJ Cyr stated that it is not a back door agenda and as Chairman he tried to stay on topic and look at the agenda during the Committee meetings.

Bob Demers stated whatever the decision might be for the Fire Chief position, noting this is the most important position in the Town. The Chief needs to react immediately and cannot be 10 miles away. The chief needs to live close by in order to react quickly.

Henry Sanschagrín asked whether the Town will need to require a new chief to be able to follow NH Standards Training. He also asked why the town became a full time EMS department. Why is the Town doing transfers for Groveton, Colebrook and Pittsburg? The ambulances are always broken. We could get rid of two and just keep one. He also asked besides sitting around with his feet on the desk, what does EMD Miller do during the day. TM Frost stated that the department will not go out on a transfer unless there is a crew and ambulance here to cover the Town.

Patrick Sanschagrín asked if the new chief will have to uphold to NH Standards. He stated that a new fire chief needs to be hired and should be shadowing Chief Eichler before he retires. He feels that the merger should be put on the back burner noting why fix what is not broken.

EMD Miller stated that somewhere around 1989 the two departments had merged and stated that the department is technically ½ full time staffed. He also said that he completely resents Mr. Sanschagrín's comment and reviewed what he does for work in a day, using today as an example.

Paul Nault said he just wanted to follow up on the ambulances. If the department is in fact getting a third ambulance, it sounds like EMS is running a business.

Merrill Santy stated he is not involved in either department, and want to know why we need to hire a fire chief. His taxes are over \$6,000 a year. He said that there are a whole set of homes above his that cannot sell because of the town's tax rate. He feels that based on the tax rate, it is time to save money and not replace the chief. There are not enough people in town.

John LaPierre said he can see Mr. Santy's concern, but the Town needs a fire chief.

Patrick Lefebvre all building permits require inspections. EMS has grown, but fire department has not.

EMD Miller stated that nothing has changed and the departments have already kind of merged. When there is a call during daytime hours, there are people available to respond to the call.

Chief Eichler said that years ago when we had the mill, we needed a big response team. However, today most of the calls are between 8:00am and 5:00pm. For the most part, they are calls that do not need additional personnel, we already have people available.

Auvern Kenison (Randolph Resident) – Mr. Kenison stated that Randolph residents are looking at their taxes and see that besides school, the ambulance contract is their biggest expense. Randolph is looking at going with Berlin because they are cheaper, but they are farther away.

Further discussion took place regarding wages, staffing and overtime for the proposed merger. Chief Cyr stated that regardless of which department a person worked in, as long as they are an employee of the Town any hours worked over 40 are considered overtime hours.

Adam White expressed concern regarding the merger being forced on them, and went on to state that TM Frost was a liar in so far as she is saying that no matter what, there will always be an EMS director, and she is not saying that now.

TM Frost stated that she did not say that there would always be an EMS Director, but that EMD Miller would always have a home here.

EMD Miller stated that he has not been promised anything. He believes he will always have a place here, but if not he would move on. Regardless of where he ends up on in the chain of command, he believes in the merger.

Dana Horne said that the change would not make a difference in employees, but it has also not proved to be cost effective.

Phil Cloutier said that it seems like the majority of the people are against this merge. As a volunteer fire fighter for the Town, he wanted to state that he was in favor of the merge. He feels it is a positive move for the Town.

A discussion took place regarding the current full-time EMS staff and the level of cross training that is currently in place. It was noted that Chad Miller and Shawn Costine are Level 3's, Matt Dustin is a Level 2 and Cagney Hatch will need to be trained.

Pat Lefebvre said that Gerry Marcou, committee member, told him that he would not have voted in favor of the merge if he had realized that it may not save the Town money for future years.

Mike Waddell questioned the Board with regard to a proposed budget for the department prior to making a decision. He suggested that the Board work on hiring the position before making an uneducated decision. He also stated that it is not in the Town's best interest to bring the building inspector work back into the fire chief position. It needs to be left as it is currently.

Further discussion took place regarding the position as well as who and how the position and/or merger should be decided.

Stephanie Kennedy asked how cross contamination at a scene would be handled. She also asked if there is a conflict of interest between EMD Miller and Chairman Schall.

TM Frost stated that if it was considered to be a conflict of interest, then any matter that the Board discussed as it relates to the Public Works Department would also need to be considered a conflict.

Nick Santy, who is a full time EMT/Fire Fighter in Augusta, Maine, stated that while it is not an ideal situation, they strip out of their turnout gear to treat patients.

Further discussion took place regarding how the possibility of cross contamination will be handled as well as staffing a situation.

Dana Horne asked if the departments are already working together like they currently are, why the need to go through with an actual merge.

Further general discussion took place regarding the merger. People expressed that they feel the Town's people have not been educated enough about the outline of the merger or its costs savings and/or lack thereof. It was also stated that there has not been enough information brought forward that explains the direct need for the merger.

Chief Cyr discussed the hierarchy if the merger goes through. He stated that the purpose is to have one leader, one mission statement and one set of values. There would be a common vision and common message.

Mike Waddell said that he has looked at report and the proposed chain of command. His assumption is Chad needs to be next fire chief. The reason the EMS department has gotten as much as it has is because EMD Miller has made a financial argument every year and it has been good. He said that if you hire a fire chief who is going to be responsible for EMD Miller's budget. He went on to say that he knows that he gives EMD Miller a hard time, but the fact of the matter is that he know EMD Miller does a lot of work. His concern with the position is that what everyone envisions is not realistic. He feels the Board is heading in the right direction, but they need to give it time.

Chairman Schall stated that the Board has heard a lot and will look at working more on the issue. Nothing is cast in concrete. Thank you all.

8. Adjournment: The meeting was adjourned at 8:46 PM.

REVIEWED AND APPROVED:

Jeff Schall

Grace LaPierre

Terry Oliver