

**BOARD OF SELECTMEN
EXECUTIVE SESSION MINUTES
MARCH 31, 2014**

Present: Priscilla Gimas, Chairman
Mary Blanchard
Mary Dowling
Mary Redetzke
Shaun Suhoski, Town Administrator
Fire Chief David Zinther

The Chairman called the executive session to order at 10:25 p.m. under MGL Chapter 30A. §18-25, #3: To discuss strategy with respect to collective bargaining or litigation; not to reconvene in open session.

Fire Chief David Zinther – Current Staffing/Schedule and Personnel

Chief Zinther appeared before the Board. S. Suhoski said that Chief Zinther has taken a proactive look at scheduling in the Fire Department, and has met with the Board to see whether it is something that should be pursued now, rather than later.

Chief Zinther expressed his appreciation to the Town Administrator and the Board for allowing him to present this to them. He said that prior to coming to Sturbridge he had known that there were some issues, particularly concerning scheduling and staffing. He met with all of the members of the department individually to give them a chance to talk to him about their concerns. There was a recurring theme, that there were issues with scheduling, staffing and balance to that program. He also met with Shaun Suhoski, who gave him a path to follow that he not bring anything too major too quickly in his tenure. At the same time, he arrived when the budget was about 80% done.

Chief Zinther informed the Board that he needs to make some changes and additions to the budget. He said that if he didn't act upon his plan to adjust some of the imbalances in scheduling, it could be as much as 16-18 months more before he would have this opportunity again. He felt that it was important to move forward. He had spoken with S. Suhoski and shared his concerns that because this is such a critical issue to morale and membership of the department, S. Suhoski had given him authorization to meet with the Board of Selectmen.

Chief Zinther had provided the Board with his proposal indicating current staffing, schedule and personnel, and the proposed staffing, schedule and personnel. He said that currently three personnel are scheduled during high call volume time, which is in the day time. He noted that the call back potential is very low. He said that it allows for part-time personnel to work on weekend shifts and enhances personnel safety during the day. He said that overtime is required to cover the night shift every time an individual wants to take benefit time, and this creates imbalances with the work schedule and benefits. There is also an increased safety risk when there are only two

personnel on duty. He came up with a proposal of \$504,000 for regular wages. The mandatory overtime just to cover benefit days on the night shift only comes to just over \$35,000. NFPA recommendations suggest that there be four personnel on duty 24 hours, seven days a week for 168 hours. Currently the Sturbridge Fire Dept. doesn't meet that recommendation. They do meet 75% of this goal about 27% of the time, 45 hours/week during the day. They only meet 50% of it 75% of the time.

Chief Zinther proposed increasing the regular wages to \$512,901 (48 hours). He noted that he has brought balance to the work schedule, addressed safety, morale and three of the items in the Horn report. He identified significant insufficiencies between staff not rotating through the shifts. He recommended that the 45 hours be increased to 48 hours to create a more efficient work schedule. He noted that greater coverage would reduce the required overtime.

Chief Zinther said that when he had spoken with staff, he explained his proposal to increase to three hours/week to make it work, but he cannot afford to pay them for three hours/week, so he will meet them halfway, so staff would give him 1 ½ hour more, and he will reduce their pay on paper by 1 1/2. Even though staff will make more money, they will split the difference. The union discussed it, and came back with a counter proposal: They would like to maintain their current salary and be paid the three hours (hour for hour) but they will forego their 2015 contractual rates entirely, in order to get this schedule implemented. Chief Zinther was surprised by their generous offer and the concession that they are willing to make to help this schedule become a reality. Along with that proposal, they requested bringing in a 9th person, a new full-time member. This will increase regular wages from \$512,000 up to \$564,000, but it reduces mandatory overtime by almost 50%. He said that he only needs about \$16,000 for the mandatory overtime necessary.

Chief Zinther said that with the savings in the overtime and having the members forego their raises in 2015, a new person starting will only cost the Town \$34,000. Staff will rotate through this each week. They are all working 48 hours, all doing the same things. He noted that the membership had agreed to this in concept.

Chief Zinther asked the Board to negotiate with the Town Administrator and the union and authorize a change in the contractual agreement made with the union, and go to a MOA to do this. He will amend his budget to reflect the increase to do this schedule. He asked the Board to consider amending the current budget to include the 9th individual, who would start after July 1st or later, in order to get the schedule up and running and save money.

M. Blanchard stated that she was not in favor of 24 hour shifts; as far as adding personnel, saving money on overtime that way has never happened. She noted that Sturbridge has a well-funded and well-staffed department. She asked S. Suhoski to get some numbers on other communities.

Chief Zinther said that the night time personnel currently work 5:00 p.m. to the following morning at 8:00 a.m., and work three days/week, then are off for four days. The daytime personnel work five days/week, then are off for two days.

M. Blanchard suggested that something could be done about shifting, as opposed to the 24 hours. Chief Zinther said that he tried to do that, to bring balance so that everyone can work during the day, and everyone could have exposure to going out on the town and doing inspections and seeing day-to-day operations. He said that right now the schedule does not allow that. When there are three people on duty, there would be the ability and flexibility to let one person take time off; right now when one person wants to take time off, Chief Zinther has no choice but to hire back overtime to cover the shift.

S. Suhoski said that he and Chief Senecal had been opposed to the 24/48 schedule proposed during the last contract. He noted that this proposal is different in that it doesn't require that extra shift. The benefit in terms of coverage greatly exceeds the cost. The shift structure is a little bit different.

M. Blanchard suggested that the Board give it time, and said that she would be more receptive to the proposal for the next fiscal year, and noted that the Fire Department is not understaffed. Chief Zinther said that the members are satisfied with the contract that they have, but would disagree with M. Blanchard regarding staffing. He noted that the Horn report states that staffing is at a bare minimum. M. Blanchard said that she had read the Horn report, and commented that there were some valid things contained in it, and others that were not quite valid.

Chief Zinther said that all of the members he had spoken with indicated that their strongest concern was the imbalance of the schedule and the fact that they are trying to run the operation with two personnel at night. He said that just having one extra person on duty at the station will be an improvement.

M. Dowling said that the Fire Department has taken an incredible amount of criticism from the Town. She was critical of the Horn report, but noted that there has been the need for change in the Fire Department for quite some time. She supported the idea of hiring another paramedic.

P. Gimas requested information on ambulance calls at night over the past month.

M. Dowling said that Memorandums of Understanding happen all the time in labor relations to address changing needs, and is a tool that is used regularly. She said that the fact that they are willing to forego their raise (in 2015) is a strong indication that both the call people and the full-time people have reached a consensus.

M. Blanchard suggested the possibility of looking at contracting out ambulance service. P. Gimas noted that it has been brought before the Board before. M. Dowling said that she did not support the idea of contracting out ambulance service. M. Redetzke noted that some of the other towns in Massachusetts pay their firefighters more than they pay

their paramedics, because the fire station was put in place to fight fires. P. Gimás agreed, and said that there has been more focus on ambulance service than on firefighting service.

Chief Zinther stated that having that third person on the fire engine would increase their ability to get to the scene of a fire and go to work right away. He cannot condone having two firefighters go in to fight a fire without a third person watching their backs. He explained that the third person would give them the ability to start more quickly and be more aggressive. He said that Sturbridge can't rely on the neighboring towns to do our work. P. Gimás said that the mutual aid towns sometimes can't leave their jobs to help Sturbridge out.

Chief Zinther said that another concern is the back-to-back calls, of which there have been 33 calls this year. This occurs when the ambulance is out, and they get another call for ambulance or fire, resulting in a significant delay in getting the second ambulance out, sometimes as long as 12 minutes. He noted that the majority of those calls are daytime calls. He said that the data will bear out exactly why they need three people on duty during the day, which is the busiest time.

P. Gimás requested information on the call volume progression over the last two years, with fire calls and ambulance calls listed separately. She also requested information on other communities, listing ambulance and fire calls, the number of people on duty, and shift information, to be able to compare Sturbridge to them.

M. Redetzke asked about how the training budget would be affected. Chief Zinther said that with three people, they would get on shift training more consistently than they are now. M. Redetzke asked about how Chief Zinther would get another inspector up to speed, so that there isn't just one person to do inspections. Chief Zinther said that the opportunity could be offered to the two officers to get that education. M. Redetzke said that she didn't want to see a situation where only one person knows it all, because if that person becomes ill or decides to leave, it would put the department in a bind.

M. Dowling said that during her years on the Finance Committee, hiring another person for the Fire Department had been discussed again and again, and members questioned whether adding personnel would reduce the overtime cost. Chief Zinther said that as it stands right now, when someone wants to take benefit time, it requires paying mandatory overtime. He said that it would reduce the overtime expenditure by 50% by adding another person.

P. Gimás said that the Board needs to take time to digest the matter and get the necessary reports.

DPW Contract

S. Suhoski informed the Board that Steve D'Amico, the labor representative, is reviewing the MOA.

MOTION: To adjourn, by M. Blanchard.

2nd: P. Gimas

**Roll call vote: P. Gimas in favor; M. Redetzke in favor; M. Dowling in favor;
M. Blanchard in favor.**

The meeting was adjourned at 11:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Judy Knowles

BOS Clerk

Date