

**BOARD OF SELECTMEN
EXECUTIVE SESSION MINUTES
APRIL 15, 2014**

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

Mary Redetzke was absent due to illness.

The Chairman called the executive session to order at 10:28 p.m. under MGL Chapter 30A, §18-25, Paragraph #3: To discuss strategy with respect to collective bargaining or litigation; not to reconvene in open session.

Fire Chief David Zinther – Contract Issues regarding Staffing

Chief Zinther provided additional information regarding staffing proposals. He had been asked to find out what was going on with other area Fire Departments regarding their schedule and call volume, using the ten towns that the Town of Sturbridge usually uses for comparison. The information that he gathered bears out the fact that every town is using a 24-hour schedule. The other objective was to try and come up with a Plan B under current the parameter of 45 hours/week, with eight employees, over six days. He said that it is a mathematical impossibility for him to make any changes using those numbers, because he needs to have something divisible by 45. He said that it creates an imbalance and creates difficulties to be able to work during the day. The members have asked to be bumped up to 48 hours, and they have agreed to waive their raise for next year in order to achieve that. He said that once they are at a 48-hour work week, he could start to manipulate the schedule, provide better coverage and reduce overtime, initially by three hours/day because they will be on a 12-hour shift. Eventually, if the Board authorizes him to hire a 9th person, they could reduce the overtime that currently costs \$34,000-\$50,000 mandatory down to about \$15,000 because of the extra person being on duty for 24 hours. He said that he would still be able to have two people on duty and not have to pay mandatory overtime every time someone wants a day off.

The other thing Chief Zinther wanted to bring to the Board's attention was that four times over the past week he had to call mutual aid for a second ambulance call. He said that mutual aid is there for times when the Town's resources have been depleted because of a major type of incident. He said that it is not to be used to cover everyday business.

Chief Zinther said that there has been a low response to the paid on call ad, with only three people, and only one of those comes close to meeting the criteria that was set. He stressed the need for more staff, and said that by hiring a 9th person, they will have

at least one other person at the station ready to go for the next call. He noted that every new hire has to be a paramedic.

Chief Zinther informed the Board that the last four people who left had indicated that their reason for leaving was because of the schedule they worked. He stressed the need for Sturbridge to be competitive in the job market, and give staff a 24-hour schedule as other towns do. He said that with a 24-hour schedule, Sturbridge could get quality people to come in, and retain them.

M. Blanchard said that she supports the Fire Department and Police Department, but felt that this was too quick, and should have waited. She indicated that she was not amenable to both the scheduling change and hiring another person. She did not think it would cut down on overtime.

Chief Zinther said that with three people on duty, when someone wants to take a vacation day, he can have it, and it would not cost overtime to fill it. He said that in the last six months, there have been nine people with more than 20 years that have retired.

C. Moran noted that two EMTs have to be on the ambulance, and it can't leave without the second person. Chief Zinther said that multiple back to back calls have come in 47 times so far this year, and for five of those times they had to call mutual aid to get an ambulance out.

M. Dowling supported the Chief's proposed changes, and while she appreciated M. Blanchard's point about overtime, she said that the Chief is not going to be able to reduce overtime with minimum staffing. When someone takes a benefit day, the Chief must call someone in at overtime pay, and there is no way around that, given the contract. She added that having another employee would mean that there will be coverage for back to back calls.

Chief Zinther said that for a minimal amount of money (\$60,000) for the new employee, when you subtract the overtime, the employee would only cost \$34,000 more dollars. He said that by the time the hiring is done, it will be July 1st anyway, and he could put the two new employees through training together and be time better spent.

M. Dowling did not see why these discussions needed to be in executive session, and noted that every possible blemish in the Fire Department had been put out for scrutiny. She said that now the town has a new Fire Chief trying to move forward with a proposal. Collective bargaining executive session is there because management typically disagrees with the union, and management doesn't want to show its hand, so convenes in executive session. She said that now there is a situation where the Chief and Town Administrator are on the same page, and in the interest of transparency, there is no reason not to have these discussions in open meetings. C. Moran said that the Board would have to open the contract. M. Dowling said that the typical reasons to be in executive session are not present. She said that residents should know what the Board

thinks. She noted that it is a highly unusual situation, in which the Chief has a plan which the Town Administrator and the rank and file agree with.

S. Suhoski said that he also didn't want to move quickly, but in looking at the totality and the net cost, the service benefit and the safety benefit outweighs that. The Fire Department needs the 9th person to make this work. He suggested engaging the Finance Committee and get a sense of whether they would be supportive of the budget actions needed. M. Dowling said that it would be within the Finance Committee's discretion to increase a line item to account for an additional employee, even if the Board of Selectmen hasn't supported it. She added that changing to 24-hour staffing is within the collective bargaining agreement, and would have to be negotiated.

M. Blanchard asked whether there was a proposal reducing the overtime line item. Chief Zinther said that would be part of it, and he would be able to reduce that overtime number. He noted that it is well over \$100,000.

C. Moran said that there have been some instances with 24 hour shifts, the dispatchers work 8-hour shifts, the shifts run 24 hours. A dispatcher comes in fresh every 8 hours, and they keep running the crew until they drop, rather than calling in another crew to give them a break. There would need to be a built-in stopgap with the management keeping an eye on the personnel.

Chief Zinther said he could do a recall, and there could be a program where if they have a long hard day, another crew could be brought in. He said they could have an automatic recall.

MOTION: That the Board adopt the staffing and budget adjustment proposal for the Fire Department as set forth in Fire Chief Zinther's memo dated April 8, 2014, by M. Dowling.

2nd: C. Moran

Roll call vote: M. Dowling in favor; M. Blanchard opposed; P. Gimas opposed; C. Moran in favor; M. Redetzke was absent.

The motion failed.

M. Dowling said that she believed that Thomas Creamer had raised issues that could have been held in executive session, and his advice was that it was discretionary. He could choose to bring it up in open session, and that is why it was not a violation of the Open Meeting Law.

S. Suhoski said that the Board had taken a vote to convene in executive session. M. Dowling said that the residents have a right to know, including the Finance Committee, who for years had questioned the former Fire Chief as to why the overtime was so high and suggested hiring another person to reduce overtime. She said that when the Government Services Study Committee wanted to study the Fire Department, overtime was big, and studies said that staffing could be changed. She noted that the public has

the right to know that the Chief had come forward with a staffing proposal which the Board did not adopt. P. Gimas added that it looks like the Board doesn't support the Chief. M. Dowling said that it looks like the Board doesn't want to hire an additional person and does not choose to open up the contract nor move to 24 hour shifts.

S. Suhoski suggested that the Board let the Chief revisit the 9th person and look at whether it is under the Board's authority or under the contract to look at that. Chief Zinther said that the 24 hour shift requires an adjustment of the hours, and employees are willing to forego a 2015 contract raise to get to there. He noted that phase 2 is the 9th person, and each of these items, excepting the total number of personnel, is appropriate for executive session, as they are contract terms.

M. Dowling said that the overtime cost avoidance comes by hiring that extra person. Chief Zinther offered to come back with additional information and persuade the Board to consider the 9th person.

MOTION: To adopt a 24-hour staffing as recommended by Chief Zinther given current staffing, by M. Dowling.

2nd: M. Blanchard

Roll call vote: M. Dowling in favor; M. Blanchard in favor; P. Gimas in favor; C. Moran in favor; M. Redetzke was absent.

MOTION: To adjourn, by M. Blanchard.

2nd: P. Gimas

Roll call vote: M. Dowling in favor; M. Blanchard in favor; P. Gimas in favor; C. Moran in favor; M. Redetzke was absent.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Judy Knowles

BOS Clerk

Date