

Select Board Members

Peter Hood, Chair

Mary Just

Skinner,

Vice Chair

Phil Hyjek

Steve Martin

Liz Scharf

MIDDLESEX SELECT BOARD
Tuesday, April 13, 2021
SPECIAL MEETING
REMOTE VIA ZOOM
Middlesex Town Clerk's Office
5 Church Street
Middlesex, Vermont 05602
(802) 223-5915

MINUTES.

PRESENT: Peter O. Hood, Chair, Mary Just Skinner, Vice Chair. Members Steve Martin, Phil Hyjek and Liz Scharf. Treasurer Dorinda Crowell. MVFD Chief Doug Hanson, President Jeff Koonz, Treasurer Eric Metivier and Firefighter Scott Isham. Waterbury Fire Chief Gary Dillon. Montpelier Fire Department Chief Bob Gowans and Assistant City Manager Cameron Niedermayer. Moretown Fire Chief Stefan Pratt and Winooski Fire Chief John Audy. Middlesex residents Randy Drury, Mike Rouelle, and Diana and Luther Putnam. Select Board Assistant Sarah Merriman took the minutes.

Call to Order, Welcoming Guests, Agenda Amended

Peter called the meeting to order at 5:01 PM and asked those present to introduce themselves. The agenda was amended to include the FY22 TA 60 approval.

Addressing Concerns about the MVFD

Peter provided background, noting the Select Board has become concerned about the MVFD's ability to provide fire protection in the town and also mutual aid with neighboring towns. He said the Board appreciates the MVFD's situation and that many members are working during the day. The question is whether the MVFD can rebuild and restructure to get up to speed or should the Board seek alternative systems. He urged respect for the MVFD members who have volunteered their time and efforts. However, there is broad concern about the MVFD's level of function, especially after the February 24, 2021 fire that destroyed the Middlesex United Methodist Church on Church Street. Bob Gowans said he was at that fire and, afterward, reached out to help the MVFD with training and other ways to get the MVFD to rise to the level they needed to be. However, Montpelier cannot continue to be the Middlesex's de facto fire department. He reached out to Peter Lynch, chief of Fire Training at the Vermont Fire Academy in Pittsford, and Chief Lynch told Bob he is willing to help, but the request must come from the MVFD itself.

Gary Dillon concurred with Bob's assessment. Waterbury has offered help in the past and has responded to Middlesex's calls. The issue for Waterbury with respect to calling Middlesex for mutual aid is that there aren't a lot of people from the MVFD around during the day. Waterbury usually requests mutual aid from Stowe first. There is no formal run card and Waterbury is pretty selective. Gary said he doesn't feel like he can call on Middlesex during the day because they don't have the manpower. He noted the Waterbury Center Fire Department – now since merged with the Waterbury Fire Department - faced similar issues years ago. As a result, norms and standards were established. As a result of that, more people became interested in joining the Center Fire

Department because they were eager for training. Gary said the Waterbury will go wherever called, no matter the town.

Mary asked Chief Dillon about number of times he's called Middlesex. He said in 2017, out of 198 calls, four mutual aid requests were issued to other towns. One would have been to Middlesex, but because of the time of day they knew Middlesex would not be available and, in fact, there was no response from Middlesex. In 2018, Waterbury had four incidents requiring mutual aid and responded to four in Middlesex. However, again he did not call Middlesex for one fire because it was at 2:00 in the afternoon. In 2019, there were no calls either way. In 2020, Waterbury responded five times to mutual aid requests from Middlesex.

Liz asked about the 911 process and who decides who is called for mutual aid. Gary said it depends on the dispatcher, what the department requires and also how the department is structured. It also depends on the needs. For example, if they need tank trucks, they would call Middlesex. But a fire in the middle of the day requiring air packs, Gary said he was not confident Middlesex could provide that.

Bob Gowans noted Montpelier has hydrants and has a good working relationship with Barre, a "first-alarm" town. Middlesex, East Montpelier and Worcester are "second-alarm" towns. Liz asked if Middlesex were a more robust fire department and 15 people could be on call during the day, would Montpelier start calling the MVFD? Bob said if they went to a second alarm, they would love to call on Middlesex provided the people were trained, could wear an air pack, and had passed fitness testing.

Gary said, for example, firefighters with facial hair cannot wear air packs, according to National Fire Protection standards. That's a decision he has to make as the primary responder who, being the primary responder, becomes responsible for the safety of all the firefighters on scene, no matter their town. Cameron Niedermayer noted as an example the Middlesex United Methodist Church Fire. Though it occurred in Middlesex, Montpelier was responsible for safety at the scene because it was a primary responder. MVFD Chief Doug Hanson agreed with the assessment of chiefs Dillon and Gowans. He said there are 12 people on the MVFD department, the majority of whom are not interior qualified (meaning they can't enter burning buildings). And most members are working. Jeff said perhaps the Town should up the annual stipend to an hourly minimum wage. Maybe that way you could get volunteers. Other than conscripting people, how do you get people to volunteer for the fire department? He welcomed suggestions to get more fire fighters.

Gary said Waterbury is a volunteer department where employees leave their jobs and come to calls. This means they have to weigh the seriousness of their calls. For example, they have no idea if triggered smoke detectors are real fires or not. It's a little more problematic for these working people if they're covering other towns, Gary said. No one is sitting in the Waterbury fire department. As far as pay, that's a Town Manager's issue. Waterbury covers 90% of Duxbury and part of Route 2 and 100 in Moretown. Moretown doesn't pay as much as Duxbury – it's all based on the individual town's grand list. Gary said he doesn't handle this aspect; that part is handled by the Waterbury Manager and Select Board.

Waterbury compensates at three different hourly pay depending on the firefighters' level of qualification: \$16.50/ \$15/\$14 per hour. They're also paid \$20 per training night

(twice a month) and \$20 per maintenance night (twice a month). The fire call pay is paid out quarterly.

Liz asked if they've seen hybrid models of volunteer fire departments. For example, Middlesex has a nice building and equipment. Could the Welch Park station be a satellite station for one or both of the other fire departments? Bob said it's something the three towns could work toward.

John Audy, a former MVFD firefighter and resident of Middlesex, said in Winooski, there are 8,000 people and 480 fire calls alone. There are three fulltime firefighters who work Monday – Friday. There is an incentivized pay plan starting at minimum wage. Every step up in training gets a bump in pay. Three nights a month are devoted to training. Part-time firefighters also participate in a 72-hour training program each year. Peter asked if Middlesex were to institute a compensation plan similar to Waterbury, could that bring back the ten or so people who've left the MVFD? Doug said he doesn't believe money is the answer; you have to motivate people to give to the community. Doug said there are only two Middlesex residents on the service. The others are from Duxbury, Montpelier and Moretown.

Peter said the Town needs to explore other options, including having a town-run fire department versus a 501C3 organization, which is what the MVFD is.

Jeff discussed the FAST squad. Per the contract with Montpelier, as soon as Montpelier arrives, they are in charge of the FAST squad scene. Bob said they bill for ambulance calls, not fire calls. Gary said Waterbury does not run a FAST squad, a separate private service does. They contract with individual towns and charge insurance companies.

Diana Putnam said she grew up in Middlesex and then moved back in 2008. Her husband, Luther, wasn't well received when he then tried to join the MVFD despite 20 years of firefighting experience. He disagrees with how the MVFD operates. In Middlesex, if there's a fire, the firefighters first go to the station to get on their gear and then ride out to the fire. He said in his 20 years of experience, he's never seen that anywhere else. The firefighters should go to the scene where their assigned gear will be waiting on the truck if they don't have it with them. He said the MVFD treated him like an alien, as if he didn't exist after being invited by another fire fighter in Town who later left himself.

Mike said he was treated the same way. No one wanted to talk to him when he wanted to join the department. For two months he attended every meeting but no one voted on him and he would be available during the day. He said he wanted to help recruit and build the department back, but no one wants to talk to you when you're there.

Peter said he's heard similar stories from others as well. People don't feel welcome when they volunteer.

Jeff said he's not going to discuss Mike, but said he never met Luther Putnam and he's been there since 2004. Jeff said he felt welcome when he arrived. He said they do take awhile voting on people because they want to see if they really want to volunteer. Others have joined and felt welcome. There were people existing on the fire department when he joined who wanted to make some changes "that benefitted them" and when they didn't get what they wanted, they left, Jeff said. Firefighter Scott Isham said he has always felt welcome and received lots of support.

Peter asked the Select Board how to move forward. Mary said the Board should explore what other options would cost. Steve said there's a lot of information that's come to the

surface tonight. He would like review his notes since there are several directions the Town could pursue. He said the Town definitely has a problem with the department. Gary said Waterbury is a Town fire department with 44 members. There is also an association separate from the department. The money from the association does not go to the department -it goes to scholarships and other community service programs.

Phil said the Board needs to look at contracts Waterbury and Montpelier have with other towns and pay scale. Does the MVFD need to work harder soliciting membership or is it a governance issue? Also, the Board needs to consider if the MVFD should be a Town fire department since the Town provides 95% of the funding, if not more. Liz concurred. She said the neighboring fire departments should be compensated, especially when it comes to mutual aid.

Gary said he'd talk to Bill about Duxbury and Moretown's contracts. Peter told the MVFD the Board was not against them and appreciates what they do. Within a month, the Board should hold a special meeting again and invite Peter Lynch from the Vermont Fire Academy. Dorinda asked if whether the Town could move forward with changes if the FY22 budget has already been approved by the voters. Peter said yes, possibly by holding a special meeting to amend the budget. He said he's not willing to put this off for another year. John Audy offered to help in any way possible. Doug thanked the chiefs. Chief Gowans said if there's a fire, Montpelier will be there. All the above then left the meeting aside from the Select Board, Treasurer and Select Board Assistant.

OTHER BUSINESS

MOTION: Mary moved and Phil seconded approving the April 6, 2021 Middlesex Select Board minutes. The motion passed.

MOTION: Steve moved approval of a FEMA subgrant in the amount of \$102,000.00 under the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program for disaster DR-4330 to acquire and demolish the property located at 28 Rich Road, Liz seconded noting Peter should sign. The motion passed.

MOTION: Phil moved the approval of the FY22 TA60 – the Annual Financial Plan for Town Highways giving Peter the authority to sign on the Board's behalf, Steve seconded. The motion passed.

The Board discussed what should be on the upcoming agenda for the April 20 meeting.

All orders were signed

The meeting adjourned at 6:30 PM.

Respectfully submitted by Sarah Merriman, Town Clerk/Select Board Assistant

THE ABOVE MINUTES WERE REMOTELY APPROVED AS A WARNED AGENDA ITEM AT A REGULARLY SCHEDULED MEETING OF THE MIDDLESEX SELECT BOARD ON APRIL 20, 2021.

PETER O. HOOD, CHAIR

MARY JUST SKINNER, VICE CHAIR

PHILIP HYJEK

STEVEN MARTIN

ELIZABETH SCHARF