

**EMERGENCY SERVICES EFFICIENCY COMMITTEE  
SPECIAL MEETING  
TOWN OF WILLINGTON  
TOWN OFFICE BUILDING  
September 11, 2019**

Members present: Peter Tanaka; Board of Finance, From Willington Fire Department #1 (WFD#1): Alex Moore; Chief, Tyler Millix; Vice President, Stuart Cobb; Assistant Chief (Alternate), Trevor Gantick; Deputy Chief; (Alternate), From Willington Hill Fire Department (WHFD): Tom Snyder; Chief, Bobby Knight; Assistant Chief, Mike Makuch; Lieutenant, James Knight; President (Alternate) and Tom Smith; Member (Alternate). Members Absent: Ron Gantick, President (WFD#1).

Others Present: First Selectwoman Erika Wiecenski and several members of both fire departments.

**1. Call to Order.**

The meeting of the Emergency Services Efficiency Committee was called to order at 6:30 p.m. by Chairman Peter Tanaka.

**2. Moment of Silence in Remembrance of 343 Firefighters**

At this time, Chairman Tanaka asked everyone to stand for a moment of silence in commemorating the 343 firefighters who lost their lives at the World Trade Center.

**3. Seating of Alternates.**

Chairman Tanaka stated that the next order of business is to seat alternates.

**Chief Moore moved to seat Alternate Trevor Gantick for Ron Gantick, seconded by Chief Snyder.**

**Vote: All yes.**

**4. Present to Speak**

Sam Wheeler stated that he likes and respects everyone on the committee and has known some of them for many years. His main concern is a structural concern. He believes that after his experience with being Chairman of the Board of Education and in negotiations with the teacher's union, which were not public, that if he were in that situation again, he would be very worried about getting into a frank discussion if he knew this could be on social media tonight or tomorrow. He thinks making it a negotiation rather than essentially a Town Board would be the way to go.

Jeremy Chartier stated that he has been a member of WHFD for 17 years and he is here because of his general interest in these negotiations. He believes that a single department will work if it is all volunteer. He doesn't believe a combination department will in the end work well for the Town. He stated that his observations of the Town of Mansfield and other surrounding towns that have combined into one department, he doesn't believe it is good for the longevity and the fiscal viability aspect. He wholly supports the theory of starting a full paid ambulance corps. He believes that would be a bargain for the Town, especially if it could be turned into a tri-town ambulance corps shared with other towns without a corps, or merge with Stafford's ambulance corp. He thinks that would be a good thing to explore and he would support that. He will depart as a member if the decision is to combine the two departments to become one department. He was the third highest responder at WHFD and he thinks that should speak for something, and he believes that sentiment will be shared by many of his fellow members.

Gerard Chartier stated he has been a volunteer firefighter for about 45 years of his life mostly at WHFD. His concerns are that he is sensing the only option on the table is consolidation. He stated if they are

talking about efficiency he thinks there is a far greater area to discuss as well as what this committee thinks is necessary is consolidation. His concern is the conservation of the 110 percent volunteer department at WHFD. He would hate to see the disbanding of the volunteer operation. He would hate to see this and he is the top responder for WHFD, and a few years back he was top responder at WFD#1. He is committed to volunteerism.

Dave Varle stated he has been a member of WHFD for nine years and is against the consolidation. He stated that in the long run the career firefighters will run the volunteers out. He stated they don't want WHFD at scenes specifically a couple of them. He bought his house close to WHFD because he wanted to be more involved and he has been probably in the top six to eight responders regularly. If this goes in the direction against preserving the volunteers, he will be departing the department and leaving town.

Nolan Pierce stated he is with WHFD and not a resident of Willington. He believes that WHFD should remain separate under the guise that WHFD has fostered an environment that is unlike anything else that you could find in departments and that would be taken away. He stated that he easily puts in a 60 hour work weeks at WHFD on top of his full time job with no cost to the townspeople. He has advocated setup and administered emergency incident reporting software that both departments use as well as the Fire Marshal. He has dropped everything to come in for tornado warnings, blizzards, thunderstorms, etc. For the past three years he has gone to Center School for fire prevention week. He stated that is just him, but if they talked about everyone in their department and their actions like these, they could go on all night. Everyone has put in countless of hours at no cost to the Town within the environment that WHFD has fostered. He stated while WFD#1 has some very admirable members and they do amazing work in the fire service, what WHFD has is a separate environment that facilitates and encourages the growth of actions like these that can only benefit the Town at little to nothing.

Helen Sauter stated she is also not a resident of Willington but is a member of WHFD. She will be a member of WHFD a year next month. WHFD is like a second family to her. She does feel the tension going to scenes with WFD#1. She will stand with Jeremy Chartier and Dave Varle and if WHFD goes she will be departing from the fire department.

Tammy Leach stated she is a former firefighter of WHFD and currently involved in their auxiliary. She stated that some of these speeches are hard to follow because she agrees that if the two departments are consolidated, the volunteer base will be lost.

Nancy Krivanec stated she is speaking for generations. Her father was one of the early members of WHFD. Traditions WHFD has started years ago are still being offered to this community at no charge (Easter Egg Hunt, etc.). Her husband was a member of WFD#1 for 23 years. He worked on the ambulance. He is now an over the road truck driver and is no longer active. A lot of the traditions that WFD#1 used to have are gone by the wayside. The two departments are like the commercial and the volunteer. She does not want to see the volunteer department go by the wayside.

Dan Leach stated that he is President of the Eastern Connecticut Sportsman's Club in Ashford. He stated that they are a very small club and they do all their work as volunteers. They are very different than most of the other clubs as they have a much higher participation rate in their club. At their meetings generally 60 percent of their people show up because it is volunteer and not paid. Everything at their club is done through volunteer work; it's a great atmosphere and seems to work. He is afraid if the two departments go to consolidation that will lose the volunteerism.

## **5. Approval of Minutes**

Chairman Tanaka stated that the minutes of the last meeting can't be approved tonight because they have not been filed with the Town Clerk

**Mike Makuch moved to table the minutes until the next meeting, seconded by Bobby Knight.**

**Vote: All yes.**

## **6. SWOT Analysis.**

Chairman Tanaka stated that they have been talking about the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats both internal and external to the fire departments and some of the efficiencies they have been looking at. He stated that at the last meeting Robin Knight did an excellent job of telling everyone why firefighters are firefighters. Firefighters have a need to go out and help people all day and all night. He stated that they should encourage that as much as possible. He stated that what he heard from WFD#1 was that the way of the world is heading towards consolidation and trying to get as many fire departments functions under one structure for the efficiency of the Town and that's the way things are generally moving. They can end up there through tragedy or careful planning and careful planning would probably be best. Tammy Leach asked Chairman Tanaka for an explanation on his statement as she wasn't at the last meeting. Chairman Tanaka stated that fire departments started out as private corporations and then eventually they started being funded by the towns. As they watch the towns around them consolidating it becomes less efficient for the Town to be paying separate departments and from a Town position it makes more sense. He stated that he heard from WFD#1 that in general nationwide the number of volunteers has been falling off, and then WHFD stated that even though the nation is going in one direction, WHFD is bucking the trend and getting more volunteers. He stated that the committee wants to make sure that even though the trend nationally is one way and the trend locally is bucking that, they do the right thing and keep the volunteers.

Tom Smith stated that what they have been hearing for years from the Town (he has personal knowledge as he was on the Board of Selectmen at one time) is that capital improvements, budgeting, has all been talked about before and these are the issues from a Town perspective. One plan for the whole town would be the best instead of two departments. He stated that they have talked about different forms of consolidation and he is getting the sense that everyone has a preconceived notion of total consolidation. He's wondering if they could accomplish the same things, address the town issues, the budget, capital improvement, planning, etc. but also continue with separate companies. He stated that the fire commission idea that was brought up a few years back and failed at a referendum would be one way to do this. Another way would be where you consolidate the management and keep their separate companies. He wanted to know if they could solve the problem by being creative, talking about it, and addressing everyone's concerns and move forward with something different than what they have now and answering all the questions everyone has. He thinks it can be done.

Chief Moore wanted to clear up a misconception by stating that he is not a paid Fire Chief. He is a volunteer.

After some back and forth between the audience and the committee regarding paid and volunteer, First Selectwoman Wiecenski reminded everyone that while this conversation is good, there is an agenda that the board has to take up, and that while they are meeting in public, it is not a public meeting so if they continue in the direction in which they are going, they may not be able to get to their agenda. She suggests adding a present to speak at the end of the agenda either at this meeting or futures meetings so people can speak as to what came up as they were discussing it and share their input.

Chief Snyder stated that the last meeting that the committee had, the volunteer/paid issue was a big concern of the committee, they wanted to know everyone's input and why, what their concerns are and what directions the committee should head and everyone is here to answer questions so he thinks they should make an exception either adding to the end of the agenda or continue on as they are because that was a huge topic of conversation.

Chairman Tanaka stated that they are all viewing problems and no one is coming up with solutions and he would like to see some creative thought on solutions so they don't destroy the volunteer base and that they do meet the needs of the town. They want to do both of those things at the same time.

At this point, the general consensus of the committee was to put the agenda aside for the moment and address the issues that have come up at this meeting. Discussion included why people join the fire department in the first place, family ties, why it is automatically assumed that this committee just wants to merge the departments, why would people that are volunteering cease what they are doing now if a

merger happened, problems with the paid staff, can they do better and provide a more efficient service to the townspeople, etc.

Dan Leach asked how the paid staff came about in the first place. Tyler Millix explained that it was to man the ambulance at WFD#1; however if there was a fire they would take a fire truck. He stated that it started in 1968 due to a lack of people (not a lack of volunteers) qualified to operate the ambulance. He stated that it is the Achilles heel of any town running an ambulance, having EMT's riding an ambulance to dedicate an hour and a half at 2:00 a.m. to go to a hospital and no one wanted to do that. Dan then asked why not just have an ambulance corps with two paid people. Tyler stated that could be done, but the position back in 1968 was when the taxpayers are already paying them, why not have them bring a fire truck to the fire as well, why just limit it to an ambulance service. A discussion was had on bringing fire trucks to the fire and leaving the ambulance at the station, other ambulances being sent to calls, etc.

Tom Smith stated that the reason this committee is here is because it isn't a perfect system. The funding, the capital improvement, the planning, the training, etc. from a Town perspective especially, there are issues that need to be addressed. He stated that there are things the departments have been dealing with for years and the Town has been coming back to them for years to try to do it better. He feels the departments can do it better. He stated that there wouldn't be any sense to be on this committee if there weren't things they could improve on.

Tammy Leach stated that she doesn't understand what the benefit of consolidating the two departments is. Chairman Tanaka pointed out that this is the Emergency Services Efficiency Committee, not the Emergency Services Consolidation Committee. While they are considering consolidation as a serious topic, that is not the sole purpose of this committee. First Selectwoman Wiczenski stated that the reason they are here is because the two Chiefs of the two departments came together asking to sit down and have talks about consolidation/merger. She stated it was led by the two departments, not the Town. Chief Snyder stated that this issue is brought to the departments by the Selectmen year after year so they form a committee each time the Board of Selectmen (BOS) and the Board of Finance (BOF) come to them and say "if it was one department you wouldn't need two trucks". He stated that's why he agreed. Chief Snyder went on to say that one department in this town would be more efficient, but it has been proven that it is not going to save any money in the long run. It is forced on them by the BOS and the BOF, whoever they are at the time. Chairman Tanaka stated that he was appointed to this committee because he is a member of the BOF and they were looking for those efficiencies. The efficiencies he was looking for is if there are the same capabilities on a truck from each department, the Town doesn't gain, but if you have capabilities on those same two trucks that complement each other instead of duplicating each other, then the Town gains. Chief Snyder stated that WHFD takes into consideration what WFD#1 and the surrounding towns have for apparatus and equipment when requesting as to not duplicate everything they have or request unnecessary items. Chairman Tanaka stated that to the BOF it looks like two programs running concurrently instead of one program.

Tom Smith stated that the two fire departments are not doing a good enough job to coordinate their efforts with funding, training and everything else and that's why they are at this committee. He said don't try to make it anything else. The reason why the Town is after the two departments all the time is because the departments aren't doing a good enough job. He stated they should acknowledge that, move on and fix it or he isn't going to sit at this meeting anymore. He stated that they should just leave and not waste their time on baloney. If they are going to fix some stuff, move forward and let's do it. He stated if there isn't a chance of that, let him know.

Stephanie Summers stated that she has observed a lot in her 23 years as a neighbor to WHFD, and she thinks that there is a flaw to the idea that consolidation is the be all and end all first off. She is wondering about the premise. She would rather drop the words merge and consolidation and go with collaboration. She says collaboration because she thinks that the way trucks are purchased, training happens and working in the field is something that people could willingly work toward. She thinks the reason WHFD is so powerful getting a solid volunteer crew for years and decades is that they have a pride in ownership, they elect their own leadership, they have a buy-in, they are there, they show up, they see that their training happens, they are careful about it, they love it and it is family to them. She

understands why they feel that way. She doesn't think that the people at WHFD are there because they want to report to the BOS, they want to have one Chief; they want to have some part in the services to the Town. She thinks they feel they're building something all the time. She doesn't think it is the same as reporting to another Chief and the BOS will decide who the Chief is. She stated it is an incredible value to the Town. Chairman Tanaka agreed with Stephanie that volunteer firefighters in this town provide an invaluable service for way less than the Town could possibly pay them and nobody wants to undo that. Stephanie thinks that hierarchy is important at a fire scene, but as far as people losing themselves into one big hierarchy that they didn't really help build is very different and that is what is in the heart there. Chairman Tanaka stated that that is why he thinks they have this committee so they come up with some creative answers which are not going to be easy. He stated they have given themselves a 14 month timeframe to work this out in and they are not going to work it out tonight. He stated that they have to find those efficiencies that Tom Smith is talking about. Chief Snyder added without the loss of volunteers and Chairman Tanaka agreed.

Chairman Tanaka stated that in regards to the SWOT Matrix, he had asked each member to bring a couple of comments so they weren't hearing from the same voices and he asked each member what they are bringing to the table tonight.

Stuart Cobb stated that they collectively show up at a call together, they don't know each other (because of us vs. them) so when WHFD members show up, WFD#1 don't know them and they can't assign a task for them because they don't know if the WHFD member would know that task and vice versa. Training together could greatly improve that, however, they don't do that. Nolan Pierce Training Officer for WHFD stated that he has organized joint training with Trevor Gantick (sitting down, planning it together, bringing assets like Lifestar, etc.) and the paid personnel sat in their vehicles. Chief Moore stated that it was not brought to his attention and he would have done something about it if he knew about it. Nolan stated that WHFD has also come to WFD#1 regarding people's comments on the WHFD's incident reporting software and nothing has changed. Nolan stated that WFD#1 doesn't know them, and that's fair and understandable, but joint training would be a great way to make this happen, but it is hard to do when both parties aren't doing it on both sides. A discussion was had on not knowing each other's members, etc. Not knowing each other's members was put as a weakness on the SWOT Matrix. Mike Makuch stated that this is an easy fix and can be solved with joint training.

Mike Makuch stated that their personnel (both volunteer and paid) are their strength. There are a lot of dedicated people and there wouldn't be this angst, frustration or concern here tonight if they didn't care about the service. Now they have to figure out how to get it all working in the same direction.

Trevor Gantick added a weakness to the SWOT Matrix of interoperability. They should open their doors to each other and members could respond to the closest station to them and get a piece of apparatus if needed.

John Pritco, a member of WHFD stated that the reason WFD#1 doesn't know who is going to the calls from WHFD is because they don't use the same app/software which would be a weakness for the SWOT Matrix. He stated that it would be nice if they could all work together. Chief Moore stated that he does have that app so he does see who is responding from WHFD, but he is the only one. Stuart Cobb stated it would also save money, because they both pay for software, but use different brands.

Tyler Millix passed as he had a lot of suggestions at the last meeting.

Chief Moore added communication (administratively and operationally) was a weakness. He stated it is definitely better than what it was, but it can always be better.

Chief Snyder added the communication, the radios and the channeling, software issue, etc; they both have agreed in the past that it needs repairing and it hasn't been done. They haven't done it because there are so many other things going on and they are getting by. They have discussed it between the departments and the system is going to change anyway.

Bobby Knight passed.

Tom Smith stated paid personnel as a plus and minus. It is both a big strength and a big weakness.

James Knight stated for an internal weakness administration. He said it isn't that they are all doing it wrong, it is just that what one department could see as a real issue and is brought up to their department as a real issue, but the other Chief might not think it is as big a deal, and he could see that being a big problem.

Chief Moore stated that a weakness would be separate Standard Operating Procedures (SOP's). A discussion was had on accreditation and SOP's.

Mike Makuch stated that he thinks that something that is strength and a weakness is cultural difference that has developed over the years between the two departments. The strength is hearing people say this is what works great at my place and this is why I am worried about change. WFD#1 is accustomed to working with paid people and it is a part of their culture. WHFD is a different culture with a high volunteer base there, and there is fear of that cultural change. He stated that you could also say that culture is a threat to this whole process. Chairman Tanaka stated that the culture of WHFD is so strong, the fact that members came up with money to buy that land is indicative of that level of commitment to their department.

#### **7. Next Steps/Agenda Items.**

Chairman Tanaka stated that he would like to get the SWOT Matrix list out to the committee. He stated that they need to take a two week break and think about some solutions. He thinks the solutions are going to be a lot harder than describing the problems.

Mike Makuch stated that he researched combination departments and challenges, etc. and sent it to Chairman Tanaka. Chairman Tanaka stated that he would forward that email to the committee. As a matter of procedure, if anyone has information they think the committee might be interested in, they can send it to Chairman Tanaka and he will forward it to the committee at his discretion.

#### **8. Good and Welfare.**

None.

#### **9. Adjournment**

**Bobby Knight moved to adjourn the meeting, seconded by Tom Snyder.**

**Vote: All yes.**

Chairman thanked everyone for coming out and sharing, and the meeting was adjourned at 7:51 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

*Eileen Smith*

Eileen Smith  
Recording Secretary