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Linda Paradise
TOWN CLERK, ASST

**Fire Advisory Committee - Joint Special Meeting
with Representatives of the Board of Finance and Board of Selectmen
December 11, 2019**

Louis P. Faucher Community Center Meeting Room

Minutes (revised)

1. The Call to Order by Chair Kim Austin was at 19:01 / 7:01 PM

2. Roll call-

Members in attendance: Kim Austin, Chair

Kyle Cimochoowski, West Thompson (Station 82)

John Sharpe, Community (Station 81)

Steve Bodreau, Quinebaug (Station 83)

Matt Grauer, Thompson Hill (Station 84)

Jeff Sheldon, East Thompson (Station 85) at 7:25 PM

Christine Chatelle, Citizen

Roundtable members: First Selectman Amy St Onge

Selectman Ken Beausoleil

BOF Member Rob Mann

BOF Member Rob Werge

Finance Director Orla McKiernan-Raftery

Others in attendance: 24 members of the public including several from various

Boards/Commissions/Committees

Acting Recording Secretary Dotti Durst

3. Overview: Chair Kim Austin offers a welcome and thank you to the attendees, stating the purpose of the Special Meeting to be an exploration of ideas and the construction of a plan for the best way to fund fire services in Thompson, remain a volunteer organization and provide the resources which are needed to meet Thompson's fire protection needs into the future. The Fire Advisory Committee reached out state-wide for funding procedures used in communities similar to ours; special attention was focused on "the Woodstock Model" as well as the possible creation of a Fire Tax District concept, such as Killingly uses.

Chief Matt Grauer, Thompson Hill Fire Department, reviewed data from an extensive PowerPoint presentation which he created for the Fire Advisory Committee. Copies were available to attendees and the complete PowerPoint data is available on the Fire Advisory Committee website; he encourages the attendees as well as the residents of Thompson to examine the information. No matter the source, funding must be consistent, and allow fire services to be provided in a safe, OSHA-compliant manner, and structured to be able to provide uninterrupted service. Capital expenses are the greatest threat under the current

budget structure, which provides one annual grant per department, from which each tries to reserve funds for long-term needs.

4. Two models under consideration for funding Thompson fire services: The “Woodstock Model” was reviewed; it would be named the Thompson Fire Protection Association and as required by Connecticut statute, would be incorporated. Members of the *Woodstock* Fire Protection Association and their fire department chiefs have worked with the Fire Advisory Committee to examine the details of how the Woodstock system works to provide funding and how it is managed, as well as if/how it could be a fit for Thompson.

The “Tax District” model was reviewed; Dayville Chief Ide worked with the Fire Advisory Committee to understand how a tax district is structured and the legal requirements per statute as well as if/how it could be a fit for Thompson.

The advantages and downside of each as considered.

5. Roundtable discussion of the models under consideration: Chair Kim Austin noted that no one on the Fire Advisory Committee is an expert, but all have been diligent in reviewing the current funding structure and examining feasible options. The consensus of the 5 fire department chiefs is that the Woodstock Model, through the creation of a Thompson Fire Protection Association (TFPA), seems most appropriate. Several reasons were enumerated. She facilitated the roundtable discussion with members of the Board of Finance and the Board of Selectmen, whose questions were addressed by the Fire Chiefs.

6. Citizens’ comments:

*Jamie Seney, 27 Faucher St- asked about EMS and ambulance funding: Chief J. Sharpe- just as it is now, with that service a separate District, which submits its own budget.

*Steve Herbert, 122 Wilsonville Rd- asks about administrative staff requirements: Chief J. Sharpe confirms that no additional staff are needed in the TFPA concept.

*Jessica Bolte, 1081 Riverside Dr -asks about the fundraisers the departments conduct: Kim Austin- these would continue. Chief J. Sheldon- the events are primarily for public contact, to build familiarity with the fire fighters themselves, the equipment and the breadth of services. They do not generate significant monetary results but community response to them is the actual benefit.

*Susanne Witkowski, 12 Clarence Dr -asks if the funding structure would be stable enough to guarantee service, even in challenging budget-approval years. She observes that a Fire Tax District would function outside the annual town budget process. Chief M. Grauer- yes, it essential that a funding structure be in place that cannot threaten capital purchases or the other obligations that a TFPA might incur to protect the town.

*Justin Young, Fairway Drive- how would the current debt on equipment be handled? Chief S. Bodreau- the town would be liable, as is currently the case. The TFPA would own

the apparatus. Rob Werge- ownership and liability matters need to be explored. Chief J. Sharpe – debt service is currently part of fixed expenses.

*Justin Young- communication with the townspeople is essential regarding all aspects of the proposal, including the status of the various pieces of equipment/apparatus. Chief J. Sharpe- we must provide the information so the community can see the broad geographic service area in Thompson and the associated challenges related to response time; there is no equipment redundancy but rather the ability for the departments to support each other as a situation develops.

*Frank McGarry, 255 Chase Rd- asks if the tax abatement program for first responders would remain in place. Kim Austin- we will research to be certain that it does. Orla McKiernan-Raftery- tax abatements are not a payment to personnel, but rather a reduction in the taxes they owe, per the IRS and state statutes.

*Jamie Seney- fire tax districts are known to have collection and/or control problems, so are not ideal. Kim Austin- the ideal structure for a Board which oversees fire services is a broad cross-section of members of the community, and not of fire chiefs. The role of the chiefs is to make the fire services needs known to the Board, who then make decisions.

*Charlene Langlois, 369 Lowell Davis Rd- it is time for a change in fire services funding; it looks like the community is coming together around this. She cautioned about public perception as the plan rolls out. She asks if one model is selected, can it be modified as we see how it works out. Chief S. Bodreau- yes, we are constantly looking now and a new structure must provide for adjustments and the ability to adapt.

*Jessica Bolte- confirms that there are no paid responders in the current fire services program; should some pay be required in the future, given that volunteerism is down, Thompson's fire services funding system should retain some flexibility.

Chair Kim Austin asked for a straw poll to determine the first thoughts of the members of the audience. Overwhelmingly, the Fire Protection Association was favored, with a few audience members not yet ready to make a choice.

7. Committee and Board Member comments: Chair Kim Austin asks the Board of Finance and Board of Selectmen for their initial thinking about the proposed funding options

*Rob Mann- we have to provide stable funding from year to year. The costs of operations are basic, then add a provision for equipment replacement so as to address the long term. The TFPA model seems favorable, as the town collects taxes; administrators provide oversight and handle distribution among the departments. Chief K. Cimochofski- this option evens the playing field for the 5 departments. Rob Werge- will the change make fire services more efficient? Chief K. Cimochofski- yes, among other things, volume purchasing through the Association will offer savings. Chief M. Grauer- the cost to outfit one new firefighter is about 1/3 of the total annual budget for one department.

*Ken Beausoleil- in the TFPA model, there would be a single budget line item proposal from the Board of Directors, with capital expenses identified, sent to the BOS and the BOF for their review. He is supportive of this model.

*Amy St Onge- supports the concept of the TFPA, as we need to change the town's mind set regarding fire protection services. We can look to see how it fits into the budget structure. Orla McKiernan-Raftery- the formal budget process begins in January and develops over the subsequent months; the TFPA can be established as soon as feasible.

*Rob Werge- the total current budget proposal will be whatever it is whether or not the TFPA is in place yet. He supports the concept of the TFPA but needs to ask more questions and learn the details. He requests a list of the benefits/ positives for each model under consideration. Perhaps the next Fire Advisory Committee can prepare this.

Kim Austin-will help create the requested data. The Fire Advisory Committee should bring this new approach to the BOS and BOF immediately. We will need to create a document which combines the five departments into one budget request. Amy St Onge- use the fire services budget format already established but present it as though the TFPA is in place. Board of Directors members need to be found now. Kim Austin will work with the Finance Director on this. Chief M. Grauer- the legal and technical aspects will need to be handled by professionals. Amy St Onge- this will need to go to the town attorney for a document review then to a town meeting. Ken Beausoleil- the Woodstock documents are available to serve as a template.

*Rob Mann- since the TFPA would have lower administrative costs, not needing a separate tax collector/billing system, it seems to be the preferred option.

Kim Austin- all five Thompson chiefs do support the TFPA concept. Chief M. Grauer- fire services in town are at a point in time where we face a problem, and the time is at hand to do something good for Thompson's future.

Kim Austin- the next Fire Advisory Committee meets Thursday, December 19 at Station 84, Thompson Hill; they will move ahead as directed.

8. Motion Chief J. Sharpe seconded by Chief M. Grauer to adjourn carried unanimously.

Chair Kim Austin adjourned the Special Fire Advisory Committee Meeting at 9:13 PM

Minutes submitted by D. Durst, Acting Recording Secretary *DD*

*These minutes have not yet been approved by the Fire Advisory Committee
Please refer to next month's meeting minutes for approval of and/or amendments to these minutes.*