

**MINUTES
COVENTRY TOWN COUNCIL
MARCH 8, 2021
7:00 P.M. – SPECIAL BUDGET MEETING
TOWN HALL ANNEX & VIRTUAL**

1. Call To Order, Roll Call:

The meeting was called to order by Blanchard at 7:00 p.m.

Members present:

Julie Blanchard – Chair – remote
Lisa Conant - remote
Jonathan Hand – remote
Matthew O’Brien, Jr. - remote
Matthew O’Brien, Sr. - Vice Chair
Lisa Thomas - remote
Richard Williams – Secretary – remote

Members absent:

Also present:

John Elsesser – Town Manager
Amanda Backhaus – Finance Director

2. Pledge Of Allegiance:

Council members and Staff stood to recite the pledge.

3. Unfinished Business:

3.A. 20-21-56: FY 2021/2022 Budget

1. Fire/EMS/Emergency Management (7:00 p.m.)

Jim McLoughlin, Fire/EMS Administrator, and Bud Myers, Fire Chief, were present.

The department is presenting what they think is a fair budget in order to operate for the next fiscal year. McLoughlin began the presentation with the Mission Statement and Core Values from the PowerPoint document.

The capital requests of the Fire-EMS Department (FD) include a replacement ambulance, engine tanker, new admin car, funds for SCBA, PPE, Special Operations equipment, Fire equipment, a new generator for the station on South Street, funds for some bathroom work that is sorely needed at Station 418.

The next slide compared the departments capital requests and the Town Manager’s (TM) recommendation.

- The current ambulance is a 2010 model year; typical rotation of an ambulance is

eight years. A new ambulance would cost \$275k but through the work of D.J. Fogilea, Chief of EMS, found that we could reuse the back of the current ambulance that remains in good shape and replace the cab with a new one at a cost of \$175k.

- The new engine tanker at \$500k is a bare bones, no frills engine tanker. That piece of equipment is the wheel horse.
- The Fire Admin vehicle has been on the capital budget requests for a number of years and keeps getting pushed out or reduced. At some point it will have to be replaced as it is currently at 140k miles and is starting to show its age. Other considerations include the new state radios; McLoughlin did not want to start putting new items into the truck if a new truck was coming.
- The air packs request of \$24k was approved by TM.
- The FD asked for \$25k for Personal Protective Gear that was approved at \$20k by TM – that equates to one set of full turnout gear being removed.
- The Spec Ops equipment request by FD of \$20k was not approved by TM. Chief Bud Meyers has some concerns about the recurring costs are for rescue equipment that needs to get replaced, i.e., hydraulic hoses, hydraulic equipment to take cars apart, and air bags. Right now we have air bags that are 30 years old for equipment that should only be in service for 15 years. Hydraulic hoses have been in service for 30 years that are expected to be in service from eight to ten years. Three cold water suits were taken out of service by Meyers after the last cold-water rescue because they are leaking. When the dive rescue took place it was noted that some of the dive equipment was not working so that needs to be replaced. There has always been a line item for fire equipment, such as hoses and nozzles, but the FD has never had a line item for Spec Ops equipment so the FD can start replacing special operations equipment. The FD has not given the proper attention to replacing this type of equipment. Chief Meyers said that when thermal imaging cameras came out, used to find people in a burning building, the cost for one was \$30k; those are now down to \$2,500. Special Ops does not have sonar equipment, that costs \$2,500, to find somebody at the bottom of the lake. These are the types of equipment the Special Ops funding request was targeted for.
- The generator for sta318 requested at \$30k was not approved by TM. That generator dates back to when it was on Main Street; when the station on South Street was built the generator was moved there. It is currently working but because of its age the FD wanted to put that into the capital request.
- The \$38k request for Sta418 is for the bathroom rework and the whole interior painting/cleaning. The FD will try to break that down into two projects and \$30k was approved by TM.
- The service truck across the street was originally requested at \$60k was removed as it is in good enough shape to wait another year. It was also agreed that the engine refurb for truck 318 can wait another year but that is getting up in age, too.
- Every year there is concern about dry hydrant maintenance whether the FD establishes new hydrants or maintains the water pulls for water supply. That line item was requested for and approved by TM at \$10k.

O'Brien, Sr. asked Chief if no Spec Ops equipment was replaced in the past since this

is a new line item. Meyers said some of it was coming out of Fire Equipment and some was coming out of fundraising. McLoughlin said the Town paid for a LUCAS device and through the fundraising efforts of the NCFD the department was able to purchase a second LUCAS device. With the Associations going in another direction and the Town taking the forefront that comes at a cost.

Blanchard said she thought we had been putting aside money for the ambulance. Elsesser said we have money but it still has to go through the capital improvement fund. Technically, the ambulance was scheduled for a year from now and it is as old as it says. We do have enough money because the FD is saving \$100k by doing the retrofit and the reality is that has had a lot of maintenance this year. The Chief said last year there were \$12k in repairs. Elsesser said one thing to think about is the cab and chassis replacement for the ambulance is on a certain build schedule in the spring so if we miss the window this year it will have to wait until next year. We will watch that and may come back to the Council suggesting we order it now since we have the money to get on that build schedule. Meyers said while that ambulance comes out of service for the retrofit the FD can get a loaner ambulance as part of the build process. Elsesser said we are still trying to get pricing and some information so we are not quite ready to go ahead with this yet. It may be wise to move that along. McLoughlin said 70% of all calls are EMS calls so these ambulances are running quite often. Chief Meyers said when the older ambulance is out of service it is out for a month here and a month there so the newer ambulance is being beat up by having the other unit out of service and not being able to rotating them like the FD would like to. Elsesser said as a side note to capital the old red Suburban was given to Fire Police. We are going to try to outfit that for the necessary items, i.e., lights, cones, and flags, needed by Fire Police. Meyers said it will be used for Farmer's Market as we are taking the Forestry vehicle out of service to go down there to direct traffic. Special Events have their own vehicles now so we are not using the emergency response vehicles. Elsesser said at the end of this the old forestry truck will be auctioned off because that is a 1986/87 with electrical problems so it cannot be driven at night. That unit is out of service right now.

Williams asked when an engine or tanker is purchased is that something that goes out to bid or is there a company we purchase from? Elsesser said we have several pre-bid regional services. They are pre-bid in a bulk service. The chassis for the ambulance is only part of the cost; the remainder is for moving the body from the old chassis to the new and putting lights and radios in the new chassis. McLoughlin said it is about \$133k for the new chassis and to move everything over. There are additional costs to paint the chassis and body to match, radio work that includes the county and state systems, and lights.

McLoughlin continued the presentation by showing charts of annual: volunteer hours, event activity, training activity, and response activity before presenting the Operations Budget for Fire Marshall, Station Maintenance, Fire Ops, EMD, EMS.

Meyers said the Mission Statement and Core Values are newly created for the Fire Marshall. The Fire Marshall's budget was originally requested at \$18,250 with the TM

approving it at \$14,500. Reductions have been made in the part-time personnel hours, cut Training and Uniform costs in half, contractual services, and left Professional subscriptions at \$500.

Maintenance budget:

- Station 118 was requested at \$38,735. A new fire alarm monitoring contract (at \$420 per year per building) was entered into for the three stations when the fire dispatch center of Tolland County made the decision to end that service which was a free service. Public Works and the Senior Center were affected by this decision also. Chief Meyers said we did look at our police dispatch doing this monitoring but that would have cost more because of the needed software licensing and the amount of equipment that would have had to be installed.
- Station 218 was requested at \$37,550; after review and cuts the TM approved \$35,670.
- Station 318 was requested at \$14,415. This building has a sewer and water bill. TM approved at \$14,835.
- Station 418 was requested at \$6,920. TM approved \$6,350. This is the two-bay garage that needs the bathroom and interior work done. This is basically a response station.
- The Fire Operations (FO) budget is the second largest the FD has; the EMS budget is the largest. The FO budget was requested for \$433,420. This is the nuts and bolts of what the department does. Originally requested under Salaries for a mechanic was \$88k but \$66k was taken away. We are not going to cover a certified mechanic for fire apparatus. The balance is one portion of McLoughlin's salary. The FD was able to realize some reductions in the LOSAP contribution and eliminated the \$720 set aside for the Recording Secretary for the Transition Team because we hope that by July we will be seeing the Council for the last time with respect to the Transition Team's charge. In Insurance FD requested \$33,400 that included \$14k for an insurance premium on a critical illness policy that would cover heart attack, stroke, cancer, and kidney. Meyers said ideally that is additional coverage. Firefighters have a much higher rate of getting cancer especially the older ones. This is supplemental to cover our members. The officer stipends would be the number one concern to add back into the budget, then the Spec Ops line item, and thirdly this additional insurance coverage.

Elsesser noted on page 5-20 of the Proposed Budget binder this budget as it stands now is an increase of \$91,600 which is 22% of the entire Town's proposed increase.

McLoughlin said the volunteer incentive was earmarked at \$80k. The members of the FD vehemently opposed a pay by call incentive as it would be a reduction to the benefits the volunteers are currently receiving; the officer stipends should be something that is a separate additional cost as a result of the merger. Therefore, the FD is asking that \$14k be added to address the officer stipends. Backhaus said it is important to note that this change (\$14k) is not in the TM's proposed budget. Elsesser said last year the members got \$13 per call so that is where we started from using the same amount of calls. This is not a reduction to members and it frees up money to offer stipends to officers. Meyers said they feel it is a reduction to members. Officer stipends was

discussed as an incentive during the talks about the merger. For 80% of the volunteers this is an incentive that is getting members to calls. Meyers can't say if the members coming up will be disturbed by funds being removed from this line item should the officer stipends have to come from this line item. Meyers said the officer stipend amount on the Fire Operations side was \$21k that they were able to get down to \$14k. This budget has an overall reduction by \$5,600 and approved by TM. The joint department financial implications were talked through by McLoughlin.

- Emergency Management is requested at \$49,925. \$1,700 was reduced after the TM's review.
- EMS Budget is requested at \$754,580. The service contracts include the one with Vintec. We are trying to continue that for 24/7 coverage of 2 people at \$28 per hour x 365 days is \$490,056. That is a significant increase from what we've had in the past. One of the issues with having volunteers cover in 12-hour night shifts is scheduling and commitment. The volunteers felt 12 hours was too much and when broken down to two 6 hour shifts people did not want to commit to that so we went back to a scramble system. The tones would go out, people are not at a fire station, so it would take time to get to the firehouse and get the ambulance out. The response time increased. Vintec offered their scheduling system on a free three-month trial to try a different approach; after a month we decided that would not work for us. The I Am Responding app was then used. The bottom line is that we had to pass emergency calls to Mutual Aid because we could not get personnel into the ambulance to respond. The policy is the call goes out and if there is no response within three minutes a retone goes out. If no one responds within an additional two minutes they then send the call to another municipality. That means a crew from out of town is responding after five minutes. It becomes a significant response time. This is the justification from a managerial standpoint that there are two people to respond at a moment's notice at all times.

O'Brien, Sr. asked how the revenue track is when we've gone to 24-hour service? McLoughlin said the revenues go directly to Finance. Elsesser said the volunteers are doing an excellent job when Vintec is already out on another call. It is important to note that the volunteers are not abandoning us; they are there when we need them the most for that second call. Elsesser said we don't get paid what we should get paid because Medicare and Medicaid give us so little per call, probably 20%-25% that we bill so we lose a lot of money. McLoughlin said with self-pay with uninsured we've only collected 14%. McLoughlin gave the example that for last year Medicaid calls were billed at \$141k which was reduced to \$43k of which 100% was collected. For Medicare the billed amount was \$237k which was reduced to \$150k. That is set by the government; there is nothing we can do about it. Backhaus said those make up 68% of the call volume. The majority of calls we are going on are the calls that are being cut to such great lengths. The stipend money was for \$42k when we were operating with the scramble system. With Vintec that will offset some of that money. It does not mean that line item can be taken down to \$0 as stipend money is needed for getting the second ambulance out and the officer stipends.

Thomas thanked McLoughlin for being as thorough as always and to the volunteers

who provide fire and EMS services without pay. Other Members offered their thanks also.

2. Public Works (7:45 p.m.)

Bill Watkins went through the budget and keyed in on a few items. Backhaus shared the materials that were submitted.

- Snow removal – will be purchasing 200-300 tons of additional salt and 100 ton of white salt to mix with sand for next year. If there is more money in that line we always need more money for tree work. Elsesser said we are shooting for buying for the contractual obligation that will fill the shed. Watkins said if we have the ability he would like to have the shed full this year to be ready for next season.
- Facility Maintenance – there is a payroll increase per bargaining agreements.
- Administration – increases in payroll per bargaining agreements; a couple of minor decreases in advertising and subscriptions.
- Fleet Maintenance – there is a slight decrease in the regular payroll; we filled a vacant Mechanic’s Helper position which prior was a Mechanic II. Truck and equipment parts lines have increases. Gasoline or diesel – gas was locked in at \$1.51 per gallon through December 30, 2021. Elsesser said that was done by renewing the bid rather than go out with a new bid as he saw prices going up.
- Other Equipment had a \$1k increase to replace some outdated equipment that is needed in the shop.
- Cemetery Commission – this has a couple of increases for salary. Elsesser said the Sexton is underpaid for the number of hours. There has been a lot of work this year. COVID-19 may be part of that but our cemetery is also aging. Backhaus also said we are looking to increase service contracts \$1k. Previously we only had tree money in there but we need to look at fertilization and grub and mole work. Our Members are very active in trying to handle that on their own but it has gotten to the point that a professional service needs to be brought in. The headstone repairs that were requested was removed from Major Maintenance last year when we were looking to finish the survey of Grant Hill. We are having significant problems up there when it is time to bury people with certain graves having been wrongly placed. They are looking to finish that survey this year.
- Tree Warden – We had asked for \$90k for contracts; the current year’s budget is at \$70k. TM approved that at \$77,500. There is always the need for more money in the tree account. There are dying trees all over. O’Brien, Sr. said we have added to that budget every year. Watkins said we are consistently overbudget in that account. Elsesser said we are hoping there is some snow money left. Elsesser said Mark Owen has done a good job in working with Eversource.
- Engineering – there is a small increase in the salary line and we are keeping the temporary intern. Elsesser said it is in motion with the union so we can talk about restructuring the Wetlands staff and whether the intern is in or out will be part of the discussion.
- WPCA – is referenced on pages 12-3 through 12-7 of the Proposed Budget binder – there is an increase in the regular full-time payroll. WPCA is assuming 100% of the Maintainer. Previously it was 50% out of WPCA and 50% out of COVRRRA.

That person will work 100% at the plant. Elsesser said there have been some things that have been done that require two people. On the COVRRA side we will hire a part-time person which will be more cost effective. Other Equipment has a decrease; there is money there to purchase a zero-turn mower this year. COVRRA – there is a reduction to coincide with moving the person to WPCA and showing \$22,800 for the part-time employee.

- Capital Budget, Equipment – Mr. Watkins said this year we are looking to replace a 2008 Mason dump truck for \$38k. It has 87,700 miles; it is not at the end of its life but if we do replace it we will move it into a spare and retire something that is older. We'd also like to replace a Toro fine-cut mower that is a 2007. Backhaus said the TM's budget has those in as leases so there is minimal dollar impact to this budget. Elsesser said they had asked for another small dump truck because we have a Navistar truck that has a design flaw – the engine is bad; we've already had to replace the engine once. They are hoping to trade it in. Elsesser said it is a gamble as the engine could go again but the public would see us selling off a truck that is still relatively new with no body rust. It is hard to say what it is worth at auction as people know it is a bad design. That is one of our primary trucks around the lake because it can handle the hills and is still small enough for that area.

Watkins also came up with a road list for this year. There are a couple of minor changes. We have to identify the roads for crack sealing. South River, Trowbridge, and Carpenter are the new roads on the list for paving. This is a straight line up so we've got a cost-effective project and we are scheduling that now. We will work in conjunction with the contractors on the drainage and to do some of the prep work.

Bill Watkins was thanked and welcomed by Members.

3. Human Services (8:30 p.m.)

Annmarie Sundgren said her presentation is geared to focus on the people for the work that has been done since she came on board almost a year ago.

The food bank was moved from the Community Center to the Town Hall which allowed people to drop off donations in the vestibule. There has been a generous outpouring of donations. Residents make appointments to pick up pre-packed food boxes. The donations are sorted and marked for distribution. Sundgren said it is important to note the amount of work needed for donations to be checked for expiration dates, making sure that items are stored properly, and adhering to the COVID-19 distribution guidelines. Scouting For Food donations came in; 6,000 non-perishable food items were donated from the Boy Scout drive. Twenty-five Salvation Army donation boxes came in every other week and distributed to families in need. USDA's Farmers To Families and the Salvation Army donations allowed the department to serve over 250 families. That is above and beyond the general food bank requests. Holiday meals 2021 Thanksgiving meals went to 40 families with 127 family members. Christmas meals went to 49 families with 146 members. We also delivered, with interdepartmental staff help, to Orchard Hills 71 units for Thanksgiving and 73 units for

Christmas. The Coventry Police department was given a shout out for the Stuff a Truck event for holiday gift giving. Forty-six Coventry children received toys. Human Services did distribute gifts to Coventry schools and to learning programs to make sure no little one was without that holiday. The department implemented donations and curbside pickup which increased a bit of traffic at Town Hall. Over two events 77 residents were serviced with the curbside pickup. We are looking to continue that this year as the USDA's program has been continued. The Girl Scouts donated cookies to be distributed. There have been some improvements to the Senior Center building – the air ducts were cleaned, the floors redone before getting recertified to open for one-on-one appointments. Tiffany Lazur was hired for the Senior Center programs and has recently been certified in Nutrition. Ms. Sundgren said she couldn't be happier to have the team that she has working with her.

Backhaus said in Section 7 for the Human Services budget there are no big increases other than salaries based on bargaining agreements and a small decrease for the grant they get for the Dial A Ride program.

Hand thanked Ms. Sundgren for the presentation.

Elsesser directed the Members to Section 7-4 for the proposed budget for the Human Services department.

Conant said there seems to have been quite an uptick in the need for food distribution. Have you been noticing any uptick in any other services? Sundgren said due to the moratoriums on evictions and electric shut offs we just started seeing an uptick in requests for energy assistance. And those have been for larger amounts than normal because for arrearages. For emergent situations we have Clergy Fuel donations that have been generously provided. Elsesser said we've already had our first two evictions come through the office. The energy work is going to be intense because he does not think people made the progress payments and now people will be getting cut off. Conant said the rate increases are not going to help either. Ms. Sundgren said there are State programs in place to assist, each of the utilities have programs in place. It is important to note that the first thing a resident has to do is check with their utility provider. The Town is not going to pick up the ball for energy shut offs; people have not paid a dime in a year. There are programs in place and Human Services will work to counsel and educate to find a plan that fits the resident.

O'Brien, Sr. thanked Annmarie Sundgren.

Thomas is wondering if there has been an increase in people coming to the department for mental health support and what has been able to be provided. Sundgren said she can't tell you if there has been an increase from past years. The department has had collaboration with the PD on several mental health issues with residents, particularly elderly and homebound, having some issues. The collaboration with the PD was amazing. Some situations can be delicate. We did give staff Mandated Reporter training because no one had that. We've also taken Mental Health First Aid training.

Thomas said her question was geared toward seeing if we needed any additional resources. Sundgren has asset mapping on her agenda for this year because she is new to the area but with additional resources we are set with United Services. She does think we can increase our collaborations with area resources such as HAS, CRT, and maybe she can become more familiar with counseling providers in the area. She does not see the need for additional staffing at this time.

O'Brien, Jr. looked at the program activity indicators - are those dollars? Backhaus and Conant said those are number of visits. Sundgren said the only one listed as dollars is Salvation Army.

Sundgren was thanked for attending.

4. Discussions/deliberations

4. Adjournment:

Motion: I move that the Council adjourn at 8:48 p.m.

By: O'Brien, Sr.

Seconded: Hand

Voting:

For: O'Brien, Sr., O'Brien, Jr., Hand, Blanchard, Williams, Conant, Thomas

Against: None

Abstain: None

Respectfully Submitted,

Yvonne B. Filip

Yvonne B. Filip, Town Council Clerk

PLEASE NOTE: These minutes are not official until approved by the Council at the next Council meeting. Please see the next Council meeting minutes for approval or changes to these minutes.