

## **Advisory Budget Committee**

### **Minutes**

September 28, 2021

This meeting was at the Barrington Town Hall with remote participation available.

Members Present: Steve Saunders, Peter Royce, Michael Houst, and Scott Shephard

Alternates Present: Dannen Mannschreck

Others Present: Conner MacIver and Fire Chief Rick Walker

Steve Saunders called the meeting to order at 4:30pm.

Steve Saunders moves to approve the meeting minutes from the September 21<sup>st</sup> meeting. The group agrees.

Steve Saunders introduced Fire Chief Rick Walker and asked him to review the group's prior questions and his answers.

Chief Walker presented his prepared materials (attached at the end of these minutes).

TA MacIver shared his support for the stated objective (of accomplishing 24/7 staffed coverage by two individuals).

The group inquired about the on-call model for coverage. Chief Walker explained that the difference is 12 minutes vs. 2 minutes for response. On-call staff must be within 12 minutes of the station.

Michael Houst asked how many firefighters should respond to a structure fire.

Chief Walker explained that minimum best practice is three inside and three outside.

Steve Saunders asked about what impact the additional multi-family housing units being constructed would have on the demand for services.

Chief Walker anticipates an increase in calls for medical aid.

Steve Saunders asked, if approved, how the positions would be filled.

Chief Walker explained that hiring firefighters is challenging which is part of the reason he is trying to transition to a 24-hour shift schedule which is preferred in the industry.

After discussing the details, the group unanimously supports the stated objective, but raised concerns about adding the two positions in one budget year.

TA MacIver and Chief Walker explained that current staffing circumstances have presented an alternative approach which they will ask the Select Board to consider on Monday (10/4).

They provided the following details: One of the current FT firefighter/EMTs is in the National Guard and scheduled to be deployed in March of 2022 for 9-12 months (anticipated). We are proud of this employee and humbled by his commitment to service. We are experiencing a decrease in the number and availability of part-time and per-diem staff which would be necessary to back fill the deployed employee's shifts. Even if the Select Board and community approved a new position, that new employee would not be hired until April or May since the budget is approved in March. As a result, we are asking the Select Board to consider authorizing the creation of one additional FT firefighter/EMT position with a goal to hire by December. This position would be budgeted at 100% for the 2022 budget. The Department would have three FT employees from January to March. Once the employee deployed in March, the Fire Chief would hire an additional new FT employee to cover in his absence. Expected hiring in April/May so the Department would operate with two FT employees from March through May (by May it would be back up to three). The second new FT position would be added to the 2023 budget so that when the deployed employee returns (January to March 2023, anticipated), the objective would be complete with a total of four FT employees.

The group asked how coverage would look with three FT employees. This would be the coverage from January to March 2022 and from May 2022 to Jan/March 2023. This coverage calendar is included in the materials prepared by the Town Administrator.

Scott Shephard asked about how this would impact the Default Budget. TA MacIver explained that the one new FT position hired this year would be included in the Default Budget similar to how the Working Foreman position established earlier this year will also be included.

Steve Saunders asked the group how they felt about the proposed implementation plan. Each member shared their individual support for the approach discussing the expected benefits.

Peter Royce shared his support, but asked how the next step for the department would be. The group agreed to ask Chief Walker: If the staffing objective is approved, what do you expect the needs to be in the future? What will be the next step from a staffing/services standpoint?

Dannen Mannschreck encouraged an emphasis on what level of service we want for residents (12 minute vs. 2 minute response time).

Michael Houst felt that the objective and stated plan brings us to where we need to be right now. He felt it was the right thing to do.

The group agreed by consensus that they have complete support for the additional hire in this year, and that there is support for the concept and need for the second additional hire next year, but that the group would consider a formal recommendation/approval of that second addition later in the budget cycle after more complete information regarding the full costs and revenue estimates for 2023 are available.

Meeting Adjourned at 6:35 pm.

Respectfully submitted by Conner MacIver.

## 2022 Advisory Budget Committee Fire & Rescue Budget Questions & Answers

Q: Can you provide a picture graph of staffing coverage for what it is currently and what it would look like if this staffing coverage is approved?

A: The Town Administrator prepared calendars which show our current and proposed coverage levels.

Q: Succession management is mentioned in this presentation. How What does this have to do with this proposal?

A: We currently use a mix of Full-time, Part-time, Per-diem employees and On call members to cover 376 staff hours a week. 2- people 24-hours a day, 7 days a week and the Chief 5 days a week, 8 hours a day. As the Chief I currently average around 55 hours a week covering my shifts, open On call shifts at night, and open weekend shifts that need to be covered as well as Emergency response to fill a crew. It is highly unlikely that the town will be able to hire a new chief that will work the hours that I do. To make sure we can fill the position with a qualified candidate we must have enough coverage so that the new chief can come in and work the assigned hours and not have to fill shifts on a weekly basis. Our current Assistant Chief has indicated that he would not accept the job if it was expected that he must work the hours I do. This position is a salaried position. 2 people on duty 24 hours a day seven days a week will greatly alleviate the number of hours required on the Chief of Department.

Q: What are the types of day calls vs night calls and the Statistics behind them?

A: The day calls vs night calls are not what is driving the staffing need, daytime calls are a little higher because people are moving about more meaning more likely to have motor vehicle crashes, on the job injuries, brush fires, alarm activations. Staffing needs are based on available willing responders. Many responders are reluctant to get out of bed to cover calls especially if it is at a time that they may not be able to get back to sleep. While I agree that for the most part many calls can be handled by 2-3 people it falls back to getting 2-3 people to get out of bed when we need them when they are a call member. Many call members are away at work during the day and cannot respond. Typically, we will get more responders to come out before midnight and they drop off after midnight.

Q: What are the type of calls you are responding to?

A: Medical aid calls make up about 65 percent of our call volume. The other 35% is Fire related calls, alarm activations, motor vehicle crashes, wires down, trees down, structure fires, mutual aid requests etc.

Q: What are the 5 year trends?

A:	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Emergency Medical	655	687	660	705	715
Motor Vehicle Crashes	77	97	96	90	78
Trees down w & w/o wires	32	82	48	43	50
Commercial Fire Alarms	44	35	33	31	37
Structure Fires	32	20	17	13	17
Mutual Aid To other communities	53	42	32	32	39
Mutual Aid From Other Communities	24	9	31	31	28
All other calls	134	134	146	118	195

The trends show that EMS continues to be the overwhelming response requests.

Q: Where is the staffing need based on the data?

A: During the day we currently staff a F/T Chief M-F 7a-5p, (1) F/T FF/EMT 6a-6p 7 days a week. (1) Per-diem employee 6a-6p. 3 days a week, and (4) Part-time shifts Thursday-Sunday for a 24 hour shift. Typically, during the day M-F we get no one to come in and assist with an EMS call and for a fire call we currently have 3 people that are retired who come in to do what they can, which is mainly drive. I expect to lose 2 of them within the next year. During the day on Saturday or Sunday call member response averages 1 or 2 people depending on the call. People are busy and for many the weekends are family time, so we don't get a huge response. At night we will usually 4-5 people before midnight after midnight it drops to 2-3 people and I am usually one of them.

Q: Based on the presentation it appears you are looking to add 2 2/3 staff?

A: I made an error in budgeting the 2 current and 2 additional full-time positions. I budgeted them as an average of 48 hours a week per position when in fact over an 8 week cycle, they work an average of 42 hours a week. There are 168 hours in a week staffed at 2 positions 24/7 that is a total of 336 staff hours a week. Not counting the Fire Chief. Currently we are staffing at 264 hours a week, I need to add 84 hours to full-time staffing and 12 hours to part time staffing. As proposed, I would staff 2 people 7 days a week 24 hours a day and the Fire Chief M-F 7a-5p as a third. My ultimate goal would be to add a third person on Saturday and Sunday.

Q: What are the offsetting costs with additional ambulance transports?

A: This budget is not based on anticipated increased revenue due to additional transports; I anticipate due to 24 hours staffing we would see an increase of about 10% in call volume primarily as mutual aid response. The average transport nets the town roughly \$400 Conservatively speaking I would anticipate about \$25,000 in increased revenue the first year. The second ambulance will not have a huge impact on income, staffing it at night with On Call staff would likely add conservatively another \$8-\$10K. I anticipate increased operational cost's from running the second ambulance more frequently will have a minimal impact on the operating budget.

Q: Can we use some of the ambulance receivable income to offset the costs?

A: I am happy to look at that, but I am not a huge proponent for using ambulance revenue to pay for some of the costs to operate the department. The reason is all indications are that we can expect to see Medicare payments to get lower, It is likely that commercial insurers will follow suit and pay a maximum of a patient bill forcing a drop in revenue. I am a strong supporter of gross budgeting to provide our services and putting a percentage of fees collected away for the replacement of the ambulance and increase the money being returned to the general fund.

Q: Can you give us statistics on mutual assistance?

A: Sure, the numbers listed above represent the number of times the Fire Division has requested assistance, sometimes it is only one community, sometimes it is multiple communities. In the EMS division it is a little harder to figure out. Over the last few years, we have been able to cover all of our single resource calls, mutual aid has been requested when our duty crew was already tied up on a call or if we had an incident with multiple patients needing transport. Adding staffing will not change the mutual aid numbers for EMS unless the town commits to a model that always staffs our second ambulance.

Q: Have you thought about soliciting other towns for per-diem employees to help fill positions, for one of the full-time positions?

A: We currently share approximately 7 part-time or per-diem positions with other communities in which they are currently full or part-time. The problem is many full time employees have ample over time opportunities, so they lack desire to work per-diem. Most part-time and per-diem employees are currently doing it for two reasons. 1. To get by while waiting to get hired full-time somewhere or they have not passed their CPAT test yet, so they are not eligible. It is a very tight market right now we are all trying to be creative with staffing. The other reason is most full-time Firefighter/EMT's want to work 24 hour shifts twice a week not 12 hour shifts. Barrington has lost employees due to staffing schedules.

Q: What impact will staffing increases on other parts of the budget? i.e., uniforms, training etc. Is this included in the budget?

A: Budget lines likely to be affected include FT hourly wages, benefits, overtime, earned time, holiday pay, uniforms, and training. All have been included in this proposed budget.

Q: How many ambulances are you running? What is the expected revenue increase for increased staffing?

A: We currently have 2 ambulances available, generally we can only staff one ambulance at a time. Assuming that we would be able to keep our On Call staffing in place I see increased activity for the second ambulance on the overnight. I anticipate revenue increases to be minimal, any increased revenue would be from either mutual aid to other communities due to increased staffing hours or call members covering second due calls.

Q: How much is the town stipend compared to other towns?

A: The most recent survey showed a range of \$10-\$20 per hour many in the \$13-\$15 range Barrington currently pays \$18.06 per point. A point equates to an hour. While our responders appreciate the stipend payments very few cares about the money, hence the issue of getting adequate response late at night or during the day.

## **Conclusion**

It is very important to understand this staffing request is not based on call volume, or types of calls. It is absolutely based on the need to adequately staff our department to meet the demands of our community. Every year we see a decline in volunteers which leaves us with no choice but to replace them with full-time or part-time staffing. In a perfect world we should be staffed with the equivalent of 5 full-time staff members 24/7 two assigned to the Ambulance and 3 on an engine company. At the end of the day, we are fortunate to still have the number of dedicated volunteers that we do, there are communities around us that have none.