

Cromwell Fire District

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FIRE DISTRICT OFFICE
WATER DIVISION

FIRE DEPARTMENT
FIRE MARSHAL'S OFFICE

BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
Special Board of Commissioners' Meeting
Wednesday, January 24, 2024, 5:30 PM
Coles Road Firehouse
105 Coles Road
Cromwell, CT

The Commissioners of the Cromwell Fire District held a Special Board Meeting on Wednesday, January 24, 2024, at 5:30 PM, at the Coles Road Firehouse, 105 Coles Road, Cromwell, CT, to conduct and act upon special Fire District business.

Commissioners Roger Rukowicz (President), Donald Smith, Charles Epstein, Robert McIntyre, Mertie Terry, Donald Goranson, Chip Darius, Steve Wygonowski and John Sokolowski attended. Also attending were Executive Director Julius Neto, Water Operations Manager Joe Palmieri, Communications Manager Justin Lonergan, and Fire Chief Jason Brade who was sick but dialed into the meeting from home.

- I. Call to Order. The meeting was called to order at 5:30 PM, by President Rukowicz.
- II. Approval of Agenda. A motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner Smith and unanimously approved to accept the agenda as submitted.
- III. Public Comment. James Rude, Highridge Rd., commented that during last week's special meeting the public had to wait in the hallway for well over an hour during Executive Session. He truly hopes that the public will be treated better during tonight's Executive Session. He also believes that an apology for less than reasonable accommodations would be in order. He is astonished and astounded that not one comment was made by the Commission at the meeting last week to thank Mr. Neto for agreeing to stay on after his long awaited retirement. Unbelievable. As the Commission moves into the transition period for the position of Executive Director, please remember that expectations have to be realistic as to what can be done in a 40 or 30 or 20 hr. work week. And to be prepared for the need for ongoing work week assignments based upon the realities and vagueries of the work tasks. He hopes that the Commission will properly and fully communicate the leadership changes being made at the District effective Feb. 1 to the taxpayers and water customers of the District.
- IV. Executive Session. There were no items for discussion under Executive Session.
- V. Discussion and Possible Decision on the Prioritization of Tasks to be Assigned to the Fire District Division Heads on an Interim Basis. The Executive Director distributed a document

suggesting various tasks that could be redirected to division heads. The Commissioners took a few moments to review the document.

President Rukowicz went around the table for comments from Commissioners. Commissioner Epstein had no comment.

Commissioner Goranson was looking for a breakdown by Division. He wondered if that would be helpful. The Executive Director explained that each division head will need to take on items 1 – 5 outlined in the document. If this document is approved, the next step will be discussions with the division heads.

Commissioner Wygonowski asked if the Division Heads had a chance to review the document before it was given to the Commissioners. Mr. Neto had waited until the document became public information at this meeting before distributing and reviewing it with the division heads. Commissioner Wygonowski was interested in feedback by the division heads. Administrative issues such as human resources will be handled by the division heads with consultation with the acting Executive Director on resolving the issue. In certain instances legal counsel is also available.

The Executive Director explained his prioritized list of tasks. Commissioner McIntyre thanked Mr. Neto for the document and appreciated that it was a more generalized description. He already knows that the division heads work hard. For them to be taking on more will be challenging, but they are all good decision makers. He knows they have taken these challenges on in the past and is confident they will continue to do so in the future. He hopes it will be as temporary a process as possible.

Commissioner Terry commented on the tasks outlined by the Executive Director. There was nothing noted in the document about interacting with the labor unions or their contracts. There was also nothing noted regarding workers' comp. injuries. She wants the applicants to be aware that there are union contracts to be followed. Also, it is noted that the person will be handling what is considered "HR" issues. That topic needs to be broken down more. Mr. Neto advised that he will be taking on the role of Acting Executive Director reducing his amount of work hours over the next couple of months. He will continue with the current practice of reporting injuries and working with the unions on all health & safety related concerns.

Commissioner Sokolowski commented that he is confident in the management team in place. They do their jobs very well. He believes the District can trust them to continue to do their jobs as well as the challenges ahead, as they have done in the past. He feels the Board needs to trust them to do their jobs. The document gives them a framework to work with, and he thinks the Board should move forward with it. He does not see any issues.

Commissioner Smith commented that he also feels the framework is what is needed.

The President appreciated the feedback from the Commissioners and agreed with a lot of the comments. He noted that regarding the managers that are in place, he refers to them as "the best of the best."

Mr. Palmieri commented that he has no issues with the document Mr. Neto has proposed and is agreeable to performing the duties as noted, most of which he is already performing. He currently has been working with Mr. Neto on the projects discussed. He appreciates the fact

that Mr. Neto will be available if needed for a couple of months. He noted that the Water Department would be applying for grants soon. He looks forward to working with the new Executive Director and acclimating him to the District and Water Division. His crew remains busy, and willing to get the work done.

Mr. Lonergan commented that he has had a good working relationship with the Executive Director. He has been able to run the Communications Center in his own way without a lot of interference by anyone. He has been able to rely on Mr. Neto as a resource when there are issues that are a little more than management level intervention. Mr. Lonergan stated that a lot of the tasks on the document are things they already do with the assistance of Mr. Neto. He mentioned that all three managers work very hard and have a lot on their plates already. He has no problem with the document moving forward but stressed that he would hope to see a new Executive Director sooner rather than later.

Chief Brade commented that he wanted to thank Director Neto. It has been a pleasure working with him. Mr. Neto allowed the managers to run their own divisions. The Fire Department has come a long way in the last year. He reiterated that he has additional help with two assistance chiefs but they are both part-time. It had been noted earlier that Mr. Lonergan and Mr. Palmieri do not have assistant managers. The Chief feels that the District should take into consideration the HR component to the ED position. A lot of the issues he consults with Mr. Neto about are HR related. The Chief had not seen the task list provided by Mr. Neto so he did not comment on them. He noted that he like the other division heads step up when times get tough. Their plates are full as well, but other things may need to be set aside to accomplish the temporary tasks.

Commissioner Darius commented that he first wanted to thank Mr. Neto for all his hard work for the District. His term of office has been unmarked by controversy, scandal or investigative journalism. He has done outstanding work. It is extremely unfortunate that despite two years of notice the District is in the position to have to triage the ED duties. He feels that the document should be left as is without specifics about who will do what. He thinks it is appropriate to leave that in the hands of Mr. Neto as he transitions out. He agrees that the District has an extremely good team. Human Resources departments would say this District is a High Reliability Organization, an HRO. In an HRO just the right people are in just the right place with just enough resources. There is no fat or fluff. There is never enough time, money or talent, but in an HRO organization, things get done, and people rise to the challenges. He feels that the document distributed is a starting point. Rather than focusing on the tactical, they need to agree on the strategic with Mr. Neto.

Commissioner Darius introduced a diagram that represented the Eisenhower Matrix and requested to the division heads and Mr. Neto to use the Eisenhower Matrix as a guiding principle in the next two months. Hopefully the timeframe will not be longer.

The brief explanation of the document is a 4 quadrant square diagram. On the left side the two quadrants are categorized by how important the issue is. One quadrant is more important, and one is less important. Across the top the two quadrants address urgency. Quadrant one is high-value tasks with severe consequences; medical, legal, human resource, public relations, freedom of information, district management. These will clearly be handled by the acting ED who is carrying on the duties of the ED. They are also things that a person with the title of CEO would be responsible for.

Referring to the matrix, the quadrants on the right are things that are also important but have more time. They are strategic things such as ordering the next ambulance soon because there is a two year wait for delivery. It is relationship building, long-term planning, interconnection, etc. These items don't have to be done today, but cannot be put on hold for 6 mos. to a year. These are senior management strategic, senior executive roles and responsibilities.

In quadrant 3 were things that can and should be delegated. In a higher liability organization there are things that end up on the plate of the CEO or Executive Director because there aren't other resources to do it. Quadrant 3 are things that can be delegated, must be delegated, i.e., getting bills mailed, routine inquiries and reports. Who will it be delegated to in an HRO where everyone else's plates are already full. The acting Director and next ED can use this matrix to ask the division heads to use this matrix to create some room on their plate. Stop what can be stopped, park what can be parked and delegate. He has full confidence that these things can be worked out between the division heads and the ED.

Quadrant 4 are low value tasks. Things like unnecessary meetings. Unnecessary time spent. They are routine things that should have been in quadrant 3, but made it into 4. They need to be executed and removed from the calendar. There are timelines to consider. The end of the contract will be Jan. 31. During the month of February there will be an acting Director for 40 hrs./wk. max. The hours per week will go to 30 in March. If the acting ED role is continued into April, he does not feel that the Executive Director duties can be performed at 20 hrs./wk. At that point a contingency plan should be considered. He feels that the Commissioners were not elected to run the District. They were elected to hire someone to run the District.

With the remaining time left to recruit someone, Commissioner Darius feels that a professional organization needs to be hired to deal with hiring municipal senior executives. A.R. Mazzotta is not one of those. He recommends that they change their tactics immediately. He is presenting the matrix to use as a tool with the department heads and the ED. There will be common language, and it gives the Commissioners the opportunity to not be a quadrant 4 person. The Executive Director does not need unnecessary meetings, phone calls or visits. The Commissioners' jobs are to see and review reports.

A motion was made by Commissioner Darius, seconded by Commissioner Sokolowski and unanimously approved to take a brief recess in order to relocate the meeting to another room at 6:21 PM.

A motion was made by Commissioner Darius, seconded by Commissioner Sokolowski and unanimously approved to reconvene the meeting at 6:31 PM after a brief recess.

Commissioner Darius clarified that he was offering the matrix as a tool to the Board, the Director, the acting administrator and department heads to have a common language to discuss how they are prioritizing their work.

A motion was made by Commissioner Darius, seconded by Commissioner Goranson and unanimously approved to accept the Executive Director's recommendations as outlined in his document submitted to the Board at this meeting until they have a need to revisit the issue.

Mr. Neto noted that a timeframe was not discussed as far as how long the individuals would be doing additional duties and also if there will be any recognition for the extra work.

A motion was made by Commissioner Darius, seconded by Commissioner Smith and unanimously approved to revisit the recommendations at the February Commission meeting. It is hopeful they can receive feedback from Mr. Neto to determine what is being transferred, who it is being transferred to, what the load shift is to determine compensation and recognition.

- VI. Discussion and Assess the Future Role of the Present Employment Agency for the Executive Director Search. President Rukowicz explained the process for advertising for the Executive Director position. He discovered the job description was not published in its entirety. He noted all the websites being used to advertise the position. He had several discussions with the employment agency and ended up getting nine applications at the end of last week. He distributed the application information to the other members of the Personnel Committee. Interviews were scheduled with the committee as well as the Division Heads. The President is willing to do the interviews that were originally scheduled. If there are no qualified candidates, he is willing to go another route by hiring a professional municipal employment organization. He asked the Commissioners to forward any contact information they may have on those types of organizations.

Commissioner Darius noted there are multiple agencies that specialize in executive municipal position recruiting. They are not necessarily restricted geographically. He recommended that the District give Mazzotta until next Friday. If there is not enough confidence that they have a winning candidate by next Friday, cut ties with Mazzotta. This coming Monday begin to initiate the process of taking on search firms. He emailed some links from his internet search. He clarified that this Monday there needs to be contact with and setting up an account with the search firms, but not have them start working yet.

Commissioner Sokolowski did some research and found ICMA. It was a free account. Information was available once an account was established. As a non-member it would cost the District \$800 for them to do a search for the District. As a member, the cost would be a percentage of the salary of the vacant position. He has also been in contact with someone from Municipal Solutions in Phoenix, AZ. They are sending Commissioner Sokolowski a proposal. He noted that this recruiting process will take several weeks. He explained the process the organization has in place. He was quoted \$22,000 for their search services.

He also spoke with Municipal Resources, Inc., from New Hampshire. They have basically the same procedures in place. He noted the Town of Cromwell used this group when searching for the last Town Manager. They have clients in other parts of CT. Commissioner Sokolowski did not receive a quote for their services. He explained that the professional organizations not only do the search, but also do the interview process until the final stages. It will be a significant cost. It is recommended that the District pick only one recruiter because of the cost. This is a short timeline for this whole process. This process should have been started a while ago. Commissioner Sokolowski will get the information out to all the Commissioners as soon as he receives it.

For now President Rukowicz will be scheduling the interviews for the six remaining candidates. There was discussion about the job description and the Commissioner's input in the process. The President noted that they agreed to give Mazzotta's until next Friday. He will also be scheduling interviews during that time. If they do not find any qualified candidates, they will be looking to contract with a professional municipal recruiting organization.

A motion was made by Commissioner Darius, seconded by Commissioner Sokolowski and unanimously approved to authorize the Executive Committee to terminate the contract with AR Mazzotta, effective next Friday, February 2, 2024, if the Executive Committee is in agreement.

A motion was made by Commissioner Darius, seconded by Commissioner Sokolowski and unanimously approved that following the termination of the contract with AR Mazzotta, if the Executive Committee agrees, the Executive Committee will decide which municipal search agency is in the best interest of the District and engage the search firm.

A motion was made by Commissioner Darius, seconded by Commissioner Sokolowski and unanimously approved to amend the previous motion that upon termination of the contract with AR Mazzotta, if the Executive Committee agrees, the Executive Committee will decide which municipal search agency is in the best interest of the District and negotiate with the search firm. A special meeting of the Board of Commissioners will need to be scheduled to review contract costs.

A motion was made by Commissioner Sokolowski, seconded by Commissioner Smith and unanimously approved to amend the previous motion that upon termination of the contract with AR Mazzotta, if the Executive Committee agrees, the Executive Committee will decide which municipal search agency is in the best interest of the District and negotiate with the search firm the cost of their services which are not to exceed \$25,000.

- VII. Adjournment. There being no further business, a motion was made by Commissioner Epstein, seconded by Commissioner McIntyre and unanimously approved to adjourn the meeting at 7:10 PM.

ATTEST:

Charles R. Epstein, Secretary

Nancy Deegan
Recording Secretary

