

Minutes for December 5, 2023
Safety Committee meeting
Willowick City Hall
6:30pm

In attendance:

David Phares - Chairman
Charlie Malta - Committee member
Theresa Bisbee - Committee member
Tom Loncala - Councilman
Patrick Mohorcic - Councilman
Natalie Antosh - Councilman
Fire Chief Bill Malovrh
Police Chief Rob Daubenmire
Finance Director Cheryl Benedict

Meeting began at 6:30pm

Changing the age requirement of Fire/Police hires

Mike Lazor is Chairman of the Civil Service Commission. He gave the committee some background on how the issue of changing the hiring age arose. The Police Department had two candidates who were over the age set by the State Civil Service rules. Civil Service Commission members realized that the age is set by state statute but did find that a city council could set their own age requirement. Mr. Lazor agreed with Mayor Vanni that raising the age to 45 is a good idea.

Jim Tobin of 383 W. 285th Street addressed the committee. He is a retired Willowick Firefighter. Years ago it was proposed that an age limit be set but Jim felt that there should be no limit. Jim talked about the DROP program and PERS in the past. He feels the question needs to be asked of how old can you be to be a police or fire employee? He feels the police and fire pension is the bigger issue that needs to be addressed.

Bill Whittlinger of 29360 Cresthaven Dr. He feels that we can burn out our safety forces by not raising the age limit. But if we do raise the limit, then we might get people who can't physically do the job. There could also be a financial liability. He feels the age needs to be raised to give chiefs the ability to compete for good candidates.

Willowick Police Chief Rob Daubenmire addressed the committee. He feels that the department still has the discretion to hire who they want to hire. They are looking for people that are already invested in the pension system. He is not looking to hire the 45 or 50 year old right out of the academy.

Willowick Fire Chief Bill Malovrh addressed the committee. He feels that he needs the latitude to hire older candidates to build the foundation of his department if it will be going to full-time employees. He and the Police Chief would like to see the age limit to be unlimited.

City Councilman-elect Devon McFarland addressed the committee. He feels the two Chiefs have the responsibility to hire the best people and having a set age limit hinders them in doing this. If we trust them to run our departments then we should trust them to make these decisions.

Councilman Mohorcic asked Mr. Tobin to clarify his pension concerns about new hires coming in from other departments. He also had a question for Chief Malovrh about his previous comments.

Mike Lazor addressed the committee. He brought up the issue of ex-military who try to get hired at higher ages to safety departments. The age limit affects them also. He also said that most people going into the DROP program are not patrol officers but in administrative positions. He feels that raising the age broadens the pool of potential candidates.

Chairman Phares stated that the goal of this committee is to make a recommendation to Council on whether the age for new hires should be changed and if so, to what age. He asked the question to the Chiefs of whether there were other cities that changed their age to unlimited and what were the results? Chief Daubenmire said Cleveland is unlimited and Eastlake and other cities raised it to 45 and it has worked out well for them.

Chairman Phares state that raising the age to 45 is something that should be considered. Councilman Malta feels that since communities are struggling to hire and since he trusts both Chiefs that they will hire the best people possible. He feels the age should be unlimited.

Councilwoman Bisbee stated that she was leaning toward the age of 45 but she feels that we should leave it in the hands of the Chiefs and make it unlimited.

Mayor Vanni feels that an argument can be made for the age of 45 or unlimited. He feels it needs to be raised from what it is now.

Councilwoman Antosh feels it should be unlimited in case candidates come in that are qualified but over the age limit then we won't be able to hire them. She also brought up the military personnel issue that was brought up earlier.

The committee will make a recommendation to Council to make the age limit unlimited.

Fire Department study

Chief Malovrh began by saying that his recommendation mimics what the study says about hiring captains. He feels that setting the foundation of the department is critical no matter what we do. Hiring an assistant chief would give the Chief some help but hiring the captains would also take some of the work load off of him. He feels that having six per shift is where we need to be.

Chairman Phares agreed with the Chief but stated that the financial aspects need to be reviewed and worked out. He stated that there is about a \$200,000 difference between the current fire budget and what would be needed to hire the full-time captains.

Chief Malovrh stated that this was about a 12% increase.

Mayor Vanni stated that Cheryl will have to go over the numbers. Chief Malovrh said there will be six part-time per shift. He feels that we will be able to maintain shift attendance.

Mayor Vanni asked about the SAFER grant program. Would we still be eligible? Chief Malovrh stated that you have to get approved for that program and he would like to do that as the second step in the restructuring process after hiring the three captains. He stated that this would be an immediate need and then give Council a full year to plan out the next steps.

He hopes that hiring the captains won't disrupt the current financial environment but the Finance Department will have to determine that.

Chairman Phares brought up union contracts and Mayor Vanni mentioned his desire to build a new fire station and how all of these things are coming up at once.

Mayor Vanni asked Chief Malovrh about the federal program for money for building new fire stations and whether there has been any movement in that. Chief stated he has not heard anything.

The Mayor stated that we can't go to the people with two different money requests, a new station and restructuring, but we need both.

Councilman Mohorcic stated that we have to be aware of union negotiations and raises and it might take 2-3 years to implement all of this, not months and he does not like the idea of using grants to fund the fire department salaries. He doesn't want to staff up too fast and then have to let people go when the levy fails.

Finance Director Cheryl Benedict asked Chief Malovrh about the part-time firefighters salaries for this year and how they are different from hers. She questioned the hourly rate and how many of the hours will be taken up by the full-time captains so she can't compare them.

She is seeing a difference of \$300,000 which is higher than what the Fire Chief came up with.

Chairman Phares stated that more discussions need to take place between the Finance Department and Fire Chief. This can be done at future meetings.

Meeting adjourned at 7:20pm.

David Khan