

Minutes for March 5, 2023
Safety Committee meeting
Willowick City Hall
6:00pm

In attendance:

David Phares - Chairman
Charlie Malta - Committee member
Devon McFarland - Committee member
Theresa Bisbee - Councilwoman
Patrick Mohorcic - Councilman
Natalie Antosh - Councilwoman
Monica Koudela - Council President
Mike Vanni - Mayor
Fire Chief Bill Malovrh

Meeting began at 6:00pm

First agenda item was Fire Department staffing. Mayor Vanni began the discussion by referencing the Fire Study that was done by Cleveland State University and then talked about the two options for going to a hybrid department which would be either top down or bottom up. Hiring from the bottom would involve hiring 9 full-time firefighters or a combination of three full-time captains and six full-time firefighters. We have to figure out what combination we want to go with.

Mayor Vanni would like to go from the bottom up by building with young firefighters who want to stay and learn about the department. They would have a reason to stay and grow with the department. It will also help with staffing by having guaranteed full-timers on each shift. He is open to going to 12 full-time firefighters.

Chief Malovrh believes we need to hire three full-time captains which will set the foundation for the department and it will also give Council time to figure out how to move forward with trying to fund a hybrid department. It also gives the Chief immediate help in administrative duties.

Chairman Phares favors the Mayor's proposal of hiring nine full-timers - three captains and six firefighters. This would cost less because you are hiring at the lowest level. Councilman Malta would like to see the financial numbers first and Councilman McFarland believes the top down approach would be better to get the leadership in there. He feels the younger guys would be more flexible with the part-time hours and the older guys need the more stable full-time hours.
6:00

Mayor Vanni brought up the assistant fire-chief position and whether it would be part or full-time and whether it would help with the administrative tasks. Chief Malovrh feels that it would help somewhat and even though hiring the nine full-time positions might help with the staffing issues

there have not been too many staffing issues over the past year. One problem will be we won't have anything in place to train the new full-time firefighters. He also mentions that the fire study recommended the first step should be hiring captains.

7:22

Council President Koudela asked if both the Chief and Mayor are supporting the three captain option and the Mayor said he believes nine full-timers is the number we need to get to and even though the money is important, we should make this decision based on the staffing numbers. We need to build the department in the right way.

9:37

Chairman Phares clarified the discussion by saying we seem to have three options on the table - six full-time and three captains or nine full-time firefighters or just three captains. He feels that we need to have the Finance Director come up with the cost of each option before we make a decision.

9:58

Chief Malovrh brought up the fact that we don't have established pay rates. If we go low, we'll have constant turnover because the pay is higher elsewhere. He feels that we need to look at the pay rate for all of these positions. These rates will be part of bargaining. Mayor Vanni does not feel it is a good idea to try to get a levy on the ballot this November with everything else that is going on.

10:52

Council President Koudela stated that there is no bargaining unit because we don't have a full-time union but Mayor Vanni said there is still a contract. He mentioned maybe getting it on the ballot in the spring.

We would have to establish a whole new union to negotiate the new rates. Council President Koudela feels that Council could set a generic amount until the union is in place. Council would set the beginning pay and they would be bound to it until the new union is formed. Then negotiations would commence. Ms. Koudela hopes that they would accept the rate set by Council for that period of time until it is time to negotiate with the other entities. She feels that if we do not set a high enough amount they will go elsewhere.

Councilman Malta confirmed with the Chief that he wants to go with just the three captains and not go to the residents for money and let Council figure out the plan going forward. He wants a minimal effect on the City budget.

14:15

Councilwoman Antosh reiterated what the Law Director said about this being a long process. Chief Malovrh feels that the part-time union contract would not be dissolved since we would still have part-time positions. Ms. Koudela mentioned that this would be similar to other departments like police and service.

15:52

Mayor Vanni confirmed that the new captains would go on calls and Chief Malovrh agreed. The Chief agreed that he would still want a part-time assistant chief. The Chief also said that we would have to maintain two contracts, one full-time and one part-time like Mentor does.

17:07

Councilwoman Bisbee feels that we need the leadership at the top for each shift. This would give us more stability. Councilman Mohorcic asked if we would not have any other full-time people below them. It was explained that the full-time captains would be grooming those below them to become full-time captains in the future. Chief also stated that he would not want to get rid of the nine part-time slots because the current firefighters have been loyal to this department and hiring the three full-time captains would allow the process to start slowly.

Chairman Phares asked if the pay rate would increase for the full-time captains and it was agreed that it would in order to be competitive. Ms. Koudela asked the Chief if he feels his current budget could cover the captains full-time salaries and he said the budget might be able to but he was not totally sure.

Captain Brian Bittner stated that the three captains option would be the most favorable to them. They felt that hiring nine new full-time firefighters and trying to train them with a transient officer staff would be nearly impossible. They feel they would find a higher paying job in 3-6 months. The bottom up approach would be very difficult to get off the ground. The three captains would be a seamless transition. Brian is a Battalion Chief in Mentor and has experience with this type of hiring in Mentor. He stated that the hybrid model is very difficult to staff and he gave some examples of this in Mentor. He feels the supply of workers does not exist any more for this type of model. People stay in Willowick because they know it's a part-time department. The good thing about Willowick is that when people get full-time work they stay here in Willowick in a part-time status. But it will be more difficult to staff the part-timers in a hybrid department.

28:26

Councilman Mohorcic stated that the onset of this discussion was about staffing issues and wants to know how hiring three full-time captains fix the staffing issue? Chief Malovrh responded by saying that we are building a foundation for the future. Councilman Mohorcic wonders what happens if the levy fails? We will have three captains and nothing else. Chief Malovrh stated that at least he will have consistency with his day-to-day duties.

30:20

Councilwoman Antosh asked how the current new hires are getting trained? Chief Malovrh said that Capt. Heinz does the training. He stated that the new full-time captains would be overseeing the training. She asked about the assistant chief also.

Chairman Phares feels that even though the staffing issues are good now, they could be a problem later and Chief Malovrh won't be here forever which is why we need to get the full-time process going and stop kicking the can down the road when it comes to staffing.

Councilman Mohoricic asked what the benefit was for hiring nine full-timers? A discussion ensued about the City being able to afford full-time firefighters and what three new full-time captain positions will cost in a general sense.

Council President Koudela asked who is in charge on each shift. Chief Malovrh answered that it depends on who is working. The most senior person leads the shift. Officers only make their rate of pay when they are in charge of a shift. Blueshirts get an additional \$2.00 per hour if they are in charge of a shift.

Councilwoman Antosh asked if testing for the fire department is county-wide or just for Willowick. Per their union contract, they have to test and hire from within. If the Chief and Mayor determine that none of the applicants are eligible, they can test and hire from outside the department. Chief feels we would fill these roles from within in the beginning and as years go by we would exhaust the list.

53:52

The second item on the agenda is the Fire Chief position and Civil Service. Mayor Vanni stated that we do not have to change the Charter. We have to offer a test within the departments to captains first. If two captains do not qualify, then it will be cancelled and a test rescheduled for the lieutenants. If none qualify, then we can go outside the department. This means the current chief would retire and can come back but would have to take the test. This would be a third test for chiefs. An acting chief would fill in for the meantime. Civil Service would remain in place. No recommendation from the committee is needed for this.

The third item on the agenda deals with the Do Not Knock ordinance. Councilwoman Bisbee had a resident ask her about people knocking on doors and being very aggressive. Other cities limit the number of permits given out to persons or groups who can canvass the city. The Mayor does not feel that it is legal to limit the number. Maybe we could get the word out to residents but we just need to get the word out about the ordinance. Councilman Malta stated that you cannot have a list limiting who can canvass the city.

Meeting adjourned at 6:40pm

