

History of Fire Services Leading to a Municipal Fire Department

Fire Services in the Town of Weathersfield has maintained a very proud, but ever divisive, existence. For over 50 years, two nonprofit fire organizations, located on the east and west sides of town, have provided services to the residents of Weathersfield. Collaboration and unity between the two organizations have ebbed and flowed over the years. While fire fighters have always responded to the immediate first response needs and worked together for the common good of Weathersfield residents, this effort has never maintained enough inertia to create lasting change beyond the immediate call for assistance. Many veteran fire fighters and residents have commented that a move to a municipal fire department should have happened 30 years ago. But, as is often the case, changes to long-standing traditions are difficult to implement; it appears less daunting to make changes around a situation before arriving at the solution that works.

The Select Board identified a potential solution in the development of the Weathersfield Fire Commission and brought it to the voters for approval in 1990. The Fire Commission's mission was to bridge the communication gap between the two departments and between the departments and the Select Board, in an effort to reduce or eliminate the sources of conflict, misunderstanding, and miscommunication. Voters approved the creation of this peace-keeping body, which was comprised of two community members, one Selectboard member, and the fire chief from each department. Two community members were supposed to be elected, but since no one showed interest in running for these positions during election times, the positions transitioned to public appointments.

While the mission was clear and dedication of the Commission members has been greatly appreciated, the actual results have been largely ineffective. In a special Select Board meeting, attended by 44 community members and fire personnel, former Select Board and Fire Commission member Patricia Daniels made this statement:

"As a former Fire Commission Chairperson, it was difficult having the Fire Commission be a facilitator between the Select Board and the two fire departments. It was not working. Because the Town pays for some vehicles, the insurances, and \$20,000 to each department each year, the two department should work together for the Town and communicate with the Select Board." (June 17, 2013 Select Board Meeting held at Ascutney Volunteer Fire Station)

It was at this June 2013 public meeting that the concept of an outside evaluation of fire services was introduced. According to the minutes, "Mr. Fuller said he thinks getting an outside entity involved to do an assessment may be a good idea." And "Mr. Cole and Mr. Clattenburg agreed an assessment from an outside person is a good idea."

A year later community member Michael Todd conducted an independent and unsolicited written-response exit poll at the November 2014 elections. His survey posed ten questions about varied topics concerning school and town services. Two hundred fifty-five (255) residents completed the survey.

Question #2 "Should Weathersfield support one unified Fire Department?"

- 159 residents (62%) responded YES
- 54 (21%) responded NO
- 35 (14%) were UNSURE
- 7 (3%) left the answer blank

Throughout the years accusations of safety and operational concerns had been lodged against each department by the other, and 2015 was no different. However, the Select Board addressed those discussions by hiring a consultant to conduct an independent review and evaluation of fire service and procedures. Mr. Wood's 33-year career, including 19 years as the Chief of the Hartford Fire Department, seven years as the Deputy Director of VT Public Safety, and three years as Deputy Commissioner of VT Public Safety, provided him with extensive knowledge to conduct the evaluation.

Within a comprehensive list of recommendations Mr. Wood stated, *"the single department concept is the best practice for fire protection in the community. The Select Board and the two fire Associations should move to identify*

the best approach to create a single department.” He concluded the report, ***“In summary, the most important reason for creating a single fire department is to reduce the risks of injury and death to firefighters, while enhancing fire protection in the community”***. The complete public report is available on the Town’s website and at the Town office.

In 2017 the Wood recommendations were brought to the forefront as Select Board members began prioritizing and ranking the recommendations for implementation. However, it became clear that most recommendations would be addressed or eliminated all together with the transition to a municipal department. In June 2018 the West Weathersfield Volunteer Fire Department held a membership meeting and voted to ask the Select Board to investigate what a municipal fire department would look like. In August 2018 the Fire Commission and Select Board held a joint meeting, attended by both departments with a diverse representation of volunteer fire fighter ages and experience, to discuss the recommendations from the fire consultant’s report. The firefighters quickly transitioned the meeting towards the possibility of a municipal fire department with a single fire chief. In September 2018 the Town Manager presented his report, recommending a move to a single municipal department under the direction of a full-time fire chief. The report showed that this move would solve or address every recommendation within the Wood report.

Shortly thereafter, the West Weathersfield Fire Department membership reaffirmed their commitment to a municipal department by voting to pass all of the organization’s assets to the Town, as well as use of the station in Perkinsville. In October 2018, the Select Board suspended the Fire Commission meetings so that the Commission members, fire department volunteers and community members could participate in ongoing, twice per month, collaborative brainstorming sessions for the purpose of forming the municipal fire department structure. At the November 5, 2018 public meeting, the Select Board enacted its statutory authority pursuant to 24 VSA §1951 by voting to create a municipal fire department, and at the January 3, 2019 meeting a unanimous vote confirmed a full-time fire chief would be necessary to successfully implement the transition.

When a financial analysis of the Town’s fire expenses and the two independent departments’ expenses was conducted, the total cost of fire services for **fiscal year 2017 was \$265,960.46**. Despite the addition of a full-time chief, the **proposed budget for fiscal year 2020 is \$265,070**; eliminating redundant operating expenses among three separate budgets for one overall program and identifying efficient practices allowed the reduced budget figure to be achieved. Although the transition to a municipal fire department shifts the burden of maintaining operational costs to the Town, it also addresses a resounding complaint from the volunteer departments. In addition to the time volunteers must spend training, running their stations and responding to calls, they are also required to devote a considerable amount of time to fundraising for operational costs. This one factor is also a significant reason volunteerism is down across all volunteer fire departments on a national basis.

While there’s been great misinformation circulating within the community, we cannot dispute the fact that the idea of having a municipal fire department is not new, not unexpected, and not without a significant history of conversations, heated debates, meetings. This topic has dominated discussions at public meetings, private organizations, and the dinner tables of our town’s residents for over 30 years.

15 years ago, outspoken voices in the community condemned merging our Perkinsville and Ascutney schools, never imagining the consolidated and successful Kindergarten through 8th grade Weathersfield School of today. Now we could never imagine going back to the days of two separate programs. Fire services is no different. We’ve navigated years of alternatives to a direct solution. The time has come for a unified and collaborative **Weathersfield Fire Department**, in which the daily operations are consolidated and streamlined for effectiveness and efficiencies and the fire fighters are empowered to focus solely on what they love to do...serve their neighbors in their times of great need.