

Fire Territory Board of Directors

Meeting Minutes

February 6, 2025

The regular meeting of the Fire Territory Board of Directors was called to order at 4:04 p.m.

Members present: Ben Blohm, Michelle Harris, and Mark McCall. Also present: Fire Chief Chad Dutz, Territory Attorney Patrick Lyp and Local 1124 President Cass Rosinski. Member Robert Cotton arrived at 4:22pm.

Motion to Approve October 16, 2024 Executive Session Minutes and Regular Meeting Minutes

Motion Passes 3-0

Motion to Appoint Mark McCall as Vice President

Motion Passes 3-0

Update on Resolution 1-2024 New Fire Station

Chad Dutz, Fire Chief

Last time we met, we talked on October 16 about getting land for the 4th fire station. There's been some developments in that right now. The mayor has sat down and talked to Oltoff Homes. Bob Thompson, who's the City Planner has been talking to Oltoff Homes. They're still interested about annexing into the City and they will be going above the Plan Commission on March 4. We're in conversations with Ed Rockingtonwell. I reached out to him. His email keeps kicking it back so I'm going to reach out to Bob Thompson and see if I can get his phone number and we'll get some more information on that. But that's what we're looking at now. We can still proceed with the land, but we're trying to work with them to bring them into the City.

Patrick Lyp, Territory Attorney

Let me add as Chief mentioned Oltoff needs to have or wants to have their property and extend on the preliminary plans they gave the City Planner. It has the 2 acres already identified there. Hopefully it will just be a matter of conversation between the Chief, Territory Board and the Board of Works. Will have to get appraisals done and ultimately it will come down to a fair offer for the property and then move forward with that. Although we appreciate the township trustee's willingness to help us. It appears we will not need to go down the condemnation route. They'll be able to work it out which is the best way.

Ben Blohm

So if things move forward in the next meeting, how long is our timetable?

Chief Dutz: To get purchased? We don't really have a timetable right now. We're still waiting for an apparatus to go into that station and we won't receive that apparatus until 2027. We have

plenty of time but we'll start the process working with those guys, secure that land and then go look at building prints. So we have a little bit of time but that's where we're headed right now.

Michelle Harris

How long does it take to build?

Chief Dutz: That's a good question. I'm not sure to be honest with you. We could find that out. We are meeting with Mr. Delacruz who works for Abonmarche to talk with him and just kind of see what's going on with things and I'll let you know as we progress.

Discussion of the Merit Board

Chad Dutz, Fire Chief

For the merit board we went to the Board of Works. Though the Board of Works they put out 3 weeks as a timetable for the Election we have to have. Applications are out now. They are due February 7 at 4:00pm. They have to be submitted either by email, handed in or mailed. Right now, we have about 6 applicants. They've been posted at all 3 stations. They're on our scroll board to give everybody the information of where it's going to be which is 355 Evans. Once we get everything on the 7th we'll go through and create ballots. Then the Election is on the 21st. After the Election we'll move forward with the rules of the Board.

Michelle Harris

Who determines how many applicants are going to be selected?

Chief Dutz: One from each party.

Patrick: There will be 2 selected. Currently how the Board will be structured is a merit board of 5 individuals: 3 Board of Works members and then 2 that are picked by the active members of the fire Territory. My suspicion is that as time goes on, there may be some opportunities to have a hybrid in the sense that there may be certain things that may be more appropriate for the Fire Territory Board, and so that's something that may require a change to the interlocal agreement with the township and the trustees. I think to a certain degree, this is uncharted waters for us in terms of how the merit board is going to work. Whether this will be a short-term exercise and then we may go back to some other negotiated under the CBA or this is going to be a longer-term process. But I'm sure you guys are aware, under the interlocal agreement this body in large part is a recommending body to the City Board of Works. Different fire territories have different structures, and I think this will give us an opportunity to see how this will work. What amount of work the merit board is going to have to deal with: hirings, promotions, discipline and termination. There possibly could be a way in which those are divvied up between this body including the 2 folks that are appointed by them, as well as what might stay with the City's Board of Works. From my vantage point it's a work in progress and we'll see how it plays out.

Michelle Harris

Do you guys get to pick the people or is it Board of Works?

Patrick: The Mayor picks 2 people for the Board of Works. There's 3 there. Then by statute, the active firefighters are entitled to vote for 2.

Michelle Harris

Got it. You look at the 6 applicants and you guys get to vote on it?

Cass: Yes.

Ben Blohm

Patrick, what else do we need to do now as a board to keep that moving:

Patrick: Nothing really. As Chief mentioned, the statute requires the Board of Works to adopt a resolution that went through the process to establish a date, establish a deadline for applicants, and the nomination form for those interested. What's the deadline for the nominations?

Chief Dutz: the 7th, tomorrow.

Patrick: So by tomorrow, you'll know how many folks have applied and then I think Chief will work the active firefighter representatives to get the ballots. I think there may be a forum for the candidates to talk to the active members. But ultimately, there'll be that vote and then the top 2 votes (1 of each party) will then be appointed to the board.

Chief Dutz: Like Patrick said, per statute we have to supply a bio once we get those all done then we'll have to submit the bio. I know Cass, Local 1124 president, is talking about maybe having a candidates night. Once we get everything done, we'll supply their bios to all the firefighters.

Michelle Harris

Someone, I think, had asked me this. Is this the board you have to have lived in city limits for 3 years?

Chief Dutz: Correct.

2024 Year End Review

Chad Dutz, Fire Chief

Just real quick, I just want to kind of go through the calls with you real fast. Last year we responded to:

Total calls 5,932 – increased about 4%

EMS calls 4,125 – increased about 141

Fire calls 92 – decreased about 16

Vehicle Accident calls 133 – increased about 56

The most calls VFD responded to was 606 Wall St (nursing home). Most of the properties VFD responds to are one and two story dwellings.

VFD Inspections last year:

Total Inspections 1171

Citations about 1400

Fire watches about 9

Cleared Violations about 1300

Out to Alarm Valpo – VFD program that installs smoke detectors for Residents within Territory limits.

Visited 58 homes

Reached 155 people – increase of about 25 people

Installed about 80 detectors

As far as 2024, like we talked about before with the budget last time, is we're doing really well. We have purchases and we'll be waiting for 2 ambulances in 2026. We just purchased 2 more ambulances. Then we purchased 2 fire engines that won't be here until 2027. So financially the territory is moving in the right direction.

So for 2025 we're looking to position ourselves in 2026 to start a new ambulance so this will be our 4th ambulance. We'll be looking to budget that and also a public educator that will work in the schools, solely in the schools. That is something that will be new for us. We'll also do some upgrades to stations this year. Station 2 is going to get a new bathroom. Station 3 is going to get a couple new upgrades as well. Besides the Merit Board, we have the contract coming up this year that we will be working on. That's kind of where we are. It's going to be kind of a busy year, but there'll be a lot of good things that are coming and really positioning ourselves for 2026.

I know we talked last meeting too about possibility of expansion. We're putting that on hold right now and we're going to be focusing on Center Township and improvements that we can do in Center Township that comes back around. We do have the numbers to see if it would be feasible if anybody wanted to join us. But right now we felt like we're going to pull back a little bit and we're just going to focus on the upgrades, make some improvements to the stations, and upgrade the equipment. We just bought a new boat and new ice rescue equipment so we are just going to focus on that and then prepare ourselves and wait to see what the County is going to do with the ambulance.

Ben Blohm

Any insight on that?

Michelle: I know we have to make a decision on that this year.

Michelle Harris

Actually, that's what I was going to ask you. I know that we talked about this at the last meeting but for dual knowledge. How many calls outside of Center, I think you said over 500 that you were picking up that you guys pick up every year outside of Center Township?

Chief Dutz: Outside of Center Township, we did mutual aid with the ambulance last year I think it was about 186. With fire calls on top of that, we may be pushing 200. I'd have to check the numbers.

Michelle: Can you send me that information? That is mostly like Liberty Township and Union Township?

Chief Dutz: Mostly Washington Township but sometimes Union Township. Shorewood Forest is probably the primary spot that we go out there. Liberty, not so much. We've gone a couple times last year but it's more going to Washington, maybe a little Morgan or Union.

Michelle Harris

What would the school educator be doing?

Chief Dutz: We supply education, really to 3rd graders as our target audience. We also educate the 6th graders. Robert does the health class. He does CPR and fire training for them. So we'll be looking for somebody to do that. Also our COP program which is if we see people that have called multiple times, we'll send that person out there to see "Hey do you need help? Is there a reason why you're calling? Can we assist you with something?" We call it a COP program and so they would also do that as well. But really focusing on tours and getting in the school. We used to just supply books to the students and then they did Fireman Phil for a long time. A puppet show would come in and do that. Now we're really looking as the Fire Department progresses, really 3rd grade is, they've been kind of noticed that that is really the target. So we really want somebody that has a teaching background, maybe that can talk to the kids a little better than maybe we can, even though they do do a good job, it's not what we're designed to do. That's what we're looking for. But we'll see in 2026 how the budget works out and all that.

Michelle: Actually, I just had an idea. Let me talk to you about it.

Mark McCall

Why do you think Washington Township was more than any of the others?

Chief Dutz: Why do we have more calls out there? Really because the ambulance is out of station 2 here so we usually go on ambulance calls. They cover the east portion of town right there, Porter EMS. They've had difficulty staffing ambulances and so if they go down, they usually pull from that station first. Usually they're going to cover a big area but they'll do Washington, the east side of Valpo, they'll do Morgan. They are there quite a bit but if they're going to cut anything, they're going to short that station. So we're going to be responding out there as a mutual aid to them. And they've mutual aided with us I think 6 times last year.

Board Comments: None

Public Comment: None

Ben Blohm

Alright. Anything else? Next meeting is going to be April 8, 2025.

Patrick Lyp, Territory Attorney

In terms of time, do you want to keep it at 4:00pm? Do you want to move it to 3:00pm? What's best for you guys?

Ben: Do you prefer 3:00pm?

Michelle: I will accommodate whatever is easiest for you.

Ben: Let's keep it at 4:00pm just so it's standard. If that's alright with everyone?

Robert Cotton arrives at 4:22pm.

Ben Blohm

We were just about to adjourn. Do you have any comments?

Robert Cotton: Yes.

Ben: We are at public comment.

Robert Cotton

Well as a member of the public and as well as the Board, it would be nice to understand the dynamics of the merit board should it be established as it relates to who makes the appointments and how many will be represented from the rank and file, the City and elsewhere.

Ben: Yeah, we just discussed but Chief, do you want to break that down real quick?

Chief Dutz: Sure I can do it and Patrick can help me whenever he wants.

Patrick: Sure, as you're aware state statute required the fire territory to have a merit board unless both this body and majority of the active members said no. It was a close vote but the active members chose to have a merit board so now we're in the process of starting that board. Under state statute, 3 of the 5 members will be the City's Board of Works and then the other 2 are selected by the active members of the Fire Territory. It was mentioned to us there are 6 current applicants or nominated individuals. The deadline for nominations is tomorrow so we'll know how many candidates there will be. There'll be at least 6, possibly more. The Chief will get to Sam and I the names and applications. We have to make sure that their residency is there and once that's done the Chief will work with Cass and other members of the active members of the Fire Department to put together the election. There's also going to be a candidate's night and so those who are interested, who are candidates, can come in and talk to all of the active fire fighters about why they want to be on the Board or things of that nature. So there will be a merit board. We have to have it fully functional by March 1 of this year. Which they were well in line to do that. Then going prospectively, as I mentioned, to the Fire Territory Board, in large part the

Fire Territory Board is a board that makes recommendations but my suspicion is that as the Merit Board moves forward and if everyone is in agreement, the Board of Works, Center Township Trustee and this Board as well, there might be an opportunity to maybe carve off some of the responsibilities of the Merit Board as it currently is constituted and possibly bring it to this board here. But that's thoughts being thrown out there at this point. At this point, everybody, all Merit Board matters will be in front of a five-member body, 3 Board of Works and 2 appointed and approved by the active members.

Robert Cotton

It is my understanding that it would be equanimous where there would be two, two and two and I'm not certain if that was what the State default called for but there seemed to be a bit more parity in what arrangement I thought I was aware of. But you're saying that it would be 3 of the 5 Board of Works, correct? And 2 nominated by the firefighters?

Patrick: Anybody can run for the position.

Robert: Anybody meaning in the ranks?

Patrick: No, anybody who lives within this Fire Territory so basically all Center Township and a little Washington Township. So if you're served by the Fire Territory and you've lived in that area for at least 3 years you can nominate yourself, somebody else can nominate you and then right now we have 6 individuals. Those 6 will then be voted upon by the active members and of those 6, 2 will be selected on the Board. One from each party.

Robert: Yeah, I'm surprised it isn't from within the ranks. I thought it was.

Patrick: No, in fact, you are explicitly excluded. So if you are an active firefighter or any way you are contracted with the Fire Territory, you cannot serve on the Merit Board.

Chief Dutz: Yeah and I think they said any active firefighter in the State of Indiana.

Patrick: You're correct.

Chief Dutz: And you could have up to 2 retirees, I believe that can serve on the Board.

Robert Cotton

Again, if you could just simply review the officers?

Everyone: Ben is President, Mark is Vice President and Michelle is Secretary.

Ben Blohm

Any other comments?

Chief Dutz: The meeting that will be the election is February 21 from 9am – 4pm. Everything has been posted at the stations and everybody knows about that but that the last thing with Merit Board.

Ben: Would it be helpful or discouraged for us to attend that? Or neither?

Chief Dutz: Sure if you guys want to.

Patrick: It's public,

Robert: And that takes place on Evans?

Chief Dutz: Yes, 355 Evans. The little station is out there right by the bridge.

Patrick: It will be rolling. It won't at 9:00.

Chief Dutz: We'll start off at 9am and then since the guys with a shift come in and out. We'll be open until 4pm so they can come in when it's convenient for them.

Robert Cotton

This meeting started at 4pm and it's 4:26. We've got to liquid this a little bit.

Chief Dutz: We're quick.

Robert Cotton

The new fire station. Is that fully funded within the district or is that something that requires outside funding?

Chief Dutz: We'll that's something that the Fire Territory would have to fund so we're just looking to secure the land and then we'll go through that process. We're waiting for apparatus. We have a couple of ambulances on order that won't be here until the middle of 2026, we hope, and then engines won't be here until 2027. So the soonest that we could even start on this is going to be at the end of 2026 into 2027. Just due to the apparatus and the personnel we're going to need about 15 additional personnel to staff that station. And so it will be a little bit. You won't see it here until probably 2027 or 2028.

Robert Cotton

With respect to the budget, which comes about later in the year, has there been any discussion about how, in fact, this board gets involved in the budget process at all?

Chief Dutz: Sure, so we bring it to you guys and then you guys recommend our budget to the City Council and the City Council is the one that approves our budget.

Robert: We make a recommendation based on something that we are presented in August?

Chief Dutz: Yes, we'll present it to you guys before the City Council meeting when you usually do it in September/October. So we'll submit that and go over our budget line by line with you guys and then you guys either recommend it or ... hope you recommend it.

Robert: But you guys won't start working on your budget in August, you'll start working on it now as it relates to the ongoing process of building that budget, I think some interaction or engagement with this body might be helpful.

Chief Dutz: Like I told everybody here today, for 2025 we're looking to start a fourth ambulance next year. That's something that we're going to be looking to budget. So we are looking at that right now to see how that's going to fit in with our budget. We'll come back to the next meeting in April and kind of give you an update on that. But we won't meet with the City until probably around May or June is usually when we meet to start talking about everything on that so we'll keep you up guys posted. Also we're looking for a public educator to go to the schools and teach the kids at the schools so that's something that we'll looking at as well to budget. But again that's just ideas. We'll have to sit down and go through the budget and depending on the raises and everything with that. I know there is a new pension thing coming out that the percentage may go up as well so just all those things we'll tie those in so in May and June we'll start working on. But that's some of the ideas that we're looking at right now to increase the Fire Department.

Robert: What's causing the pension to go up? Is that something with the longevity numbers?

Chief Dutz: No that's something with the State. They're raising our percentage that we can collect. So it's starting at 53 and then we max out at 78. So there'll just be a little conviction and I think it's 1% that the cities are picking up. Right now it's in the State House and it's moving pretty well.

Ben: It'll probably pass.

Chief Dutz: That's where that's at now with the pension base. We won't see a pension base increase probably until 2026 in our budget, but that'll be something we'll have to budget as well. All those things come into play with personnel and pay. Every time you move that personnel is about \$120,000 a person and just keeps going up like that. So the 6 personnel is going to cost us well into \$700,000.

Robert: The new station won't require additional staff?

Chief Dutz: It will require additional 15 but it'll be about twelve. The fourth ambulance is geared to service that area as well. We'll look for an engine company out there that'll be about 12 personnel for that. Our idea is in 2026 we'll put a safer grant in like we did for the firefighter fires that will help cover that for about the 3-4 year period and then we'll go from there.

Robert Cotton

One more point to clarify with Attorney Lyp is that in the founding of this entity, it was the initial round of appointments that would be staggered and subsequent to that each appointment would be for 4 years. Currently the City Council makes an appointment that was 2 years but it really should have been 4 years. How do we make that correction?

Patrick: So he'll (Mark McCall) will be for 4 years. So everyone's appointed. The confusion was the staggering for the initial appointments for this Board. But you are correct. Everyone's 4 years.

Robert: So were you aware of that Mr. McCall?

Mark: No other than what I saw on one of these papers that we got, maybe the one in September when it said 2 years. But again, it's not a problem to do another two. And if you want to change that in writing somewhere.

Robert: As long as I've been on the Council, said it was a two year appointment and it should have been actually a four year appointment.

Ben Blohm

Anything else folks? All right, we're out of here. Motion to adjourn?

Meeting Adjourned.