

# Final Minutes Fire Department Preliminary 2022 Budget

## January 28, 2021 Discussion with Chief Lentini

The meeting was called to order at 7:04 PM by Phil Rooney Chair of the subcommittee

Members present were David Coffey, Bill Grome, and Chris Resmini. Absent was Jerry Pierce.

Chief Lentini had previously responded to questions submitted to him prior to the meeting and they are detailed below. At 7:05 Chief Lentini began the meeting by providing an overview to his responses.

### **Response to FINCOM Questionnaire**

1. The pandemic created quite a challenge for me. My management of the department quickly focused on 3 main concerns. First was do we have enough PPE and is it adequate for our needs. Second was how do we respond to the needs of the public in a manner which keeps us and the public safe. Third was how do we conduct our business with stations closed to the public. These were difficult tasks considering we had little information and what we did have changed almost daily. In March of 2020 when this began, we didn't know how many people would be affected or how long it would last. We certainly had more questions than answers. Although we were prepared to a certain extent, we obtained what we felt was an adequate supply of PPE through purchase, donation and stockpiles from state and local organizations. We have been able to maintain those stocks. Policies were put in place through efforts from my command staff and dedicated paramedics to ensure all stayed safe. Those policies changed sometimes weekly as new information came in. Considering all the difficulties, we have had only 3 positive test results since the start of the pandemic.

The budget impact can be seen in increased spending for PPE along with increased overtime due to an abundance of precautions taken by employees to quarantine when they felt they were exposed. All employees were asked to stay home if you were sick. All who reported a possible exposure were sent to be tested and asked to stay home until a negative test result. Obviously this created increased sick time.

2. I did actively participate in the budget process. My requests for 2022 were based on advice from town administration. I have been asking for 4 additional firefighter positions for the last 2 budget cycles. I have been turned down by administration in the past and all departments have been advised that the 2022 budget forecast is bleak due to Covid 19. With that said, I did ask for 1 position in 2022 in the hopes I could get at least 1 a year over 4 years. If that can be accelerated by a favorable budget outlook, then I would

ask to do so. The reason for the added positions is staffing for the new WNFS and overtime reduction.

3. My biggest challenge has been controlling overtime. This is a challenge every year, but it has been more challenging in 2020 due to vacancies, extended illnesses, necessary surgeries, and the state shutdown in the spring. I also have 3 members on administrative leave due to disciplinary reasons pending investigation by town counsel. The state shutdown put the hiring process on hold for almost 4 months, along with the shutdown of the fire academy. The civil service entrance exam was postponed until November and a new list will not be established until spring of 2021. The academy started back in late August, but class sizes were cut in half. This moved all available classes out by months. Needless to say filling vacancies is an issue. I am hoping to get back some of the personnel out for long terms back in the late winter/early spring. I am working closely with the finance team to keep the budget in check.
4. I currently have 8 vacancies from 6 retirements in 2020, 1 firefighter death, and 1 member who transferred out. I have outlined the reasons for the delays in hiring in the previous answer.
5. I have requested 1 additional firefighter this budget with the hopes of 1 each over the next 4 for a total of 4 over 4 years. It is my hope to staff an ambulance to run from the WNFS. We currently maintain a minimum staffing level of 17 personnel. Staffing must increase to 18 to safely staff an ambulance from the WNFS. The growth in west Natick over the years has been well documented. Over 60% of our calls are EMS calls and 40% come from the west Natick area. This makes sense from a response perspective. This was also one of the main reasons for the construction of a new station.
6. My salary increases are all per the CBA, with the exception of 1 new firefighter position at an increase of approximately 100K, all in. I also have 1 admin under the Personnel Board and 1 admin under a separate CBA. My expenses are level funded with the exception of a new initiative ask for 25K for training of a basic EMT to the paramedic level. It has been increasingly difficult to hire new paramedics.
7. As I have stated previously, I have made it clear to administration we need more positions to staff an ambulance to run from the WNFS. I do not see any immediate expense needs as the new station will be fully equipped and operational upon completion. I will reevaluate those needs over the next year and adjust for them in the 2023 budget.

Chief Lentini provided the following additional clarifications and information.

- Covid 19 is still impacting the department. Since responding to our questions, there have been two more positive tests in the department. The chief believes four of the five exposures may have been from on duty activity. There is no regular timetable for testing department members. Testing is based on exposures.
- Positive testing is having a budget impact because of increased use in overtime and sick time.
- The chief referred to 3 members on leave due to disciplinary reasons. He informed us he could not elaborate further concerning this matter. It is in litigation.
- One of the eight vacancies referred to has been filled since his responses The Firefighting Academy cut classes and class size due to Covid. This has an impact on how quickly staff can be added. New staff must go through the academy before the can be added.
- Similar to last year, the interest in department open positions is not strong. Finding qualified candidates is difficult. It is a problem not isolated to the Natick Fire Department.
- The impact on ambulance runs due to the closing of Leonard Morse Emergency Services is about 20 minutes of increased time from receipt of call to return to station. It has not created problems for the department. The new station coming online will be of help and there is a mutual aid agreement in place with other towns.
- There has been some loss of revenue when we ask for mutual aid. It has not been significant.
- The chief indicated the budget included the needs he identified for the department. He feels the community is safe with this budget. He likes the Fire 2022 Capital Budget.
- Facilities has budgeted for support of the new fire station.

The chief completed his discussion at 7:45.