

City of Keene
New Hampshire

FINANCE, ORGANIZATION AND PERSONNEL COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Thursday, January 23, 2025

6:00 PM

**Council Chamber,
City Hall**

Members Present:

Thomas F. Powers, Chair
Michael J. Remy, Vice Chair
Bettina A. Chadbourne
Bryan J. Lake
Kris E. Roberts

Members Not Present:

All Present

Staff Present:

Elizabeth A. Ferland, City Manager
Amanda Palmeira, Asst. City Attorney
Jason Martin, Fire Chief
Gregory Seymour, Deputy Fire Chief
Don Lussier, Public Works Director
Bryan Ruoff, City Engineer
Beth Fox, Asst. City Manager/HR Director
Andy Bohannon, Deputy City Manager

Chair Powers called the meeting to order at 6:00 PM.

1) Donation - Brian A. Mattson Recreation Center - ADA Ramp - Parks, Recreation and Cemeteries Department

Deputy City Manager Andrew Bohannon addressed the committee regarding a \$10,000 donation from the Savings Bank of Walpole. Mr. Bohannon provided the Committee with the background on the CDFA grant for the Brian A Mattson Recreation Center. Mr. Bohannon noted that excepting for the ADA ramp that would lead from the parking lot to the war memorial, the CDFA grant has funded the other parts of the project. He continued that the ADA ramp has been bid twice because the quotes have come in higher than anticipated. The ramp was redesigned for a different location so that it would be more cost-effective. The bid came in at \$180,000 which is higher than what was staff had originally anticipated. Mr. Bohannon stated that in order to deal with the deficit he has been reaching out seeking donations. The \$10,000 donation from the Savings Bank of Walpole is the first of those donations.

City Manager Elizabeth Ferland thanked Mr. Bohannon for his efforts in trying to raise money to bridge the gap. She noted staff is likely going to be coming back for the shortfall.

Councilor Chadbourne made the following motion, which was seconded by Councilor Lake.

On a 5-0 vote, the Finance, Organization and Personnel Committee recommends that the City Manager be authorized to do all things necessary to accept the donation of \$10,000.00 from Savings Bank of Walpole and that the money be used for the construction of an ADA ramp at the Recreation Center.

2) Executed George Street Bridge Final Design Change Order - Public Works Department

City Engineer Bryan Ruoff addressed the committee and stated the City is currently under contract with DOT and McFarland Johnson for the design and replacement of the George Street Bridge project. As part of this project, the design engineer is required to perform an environmental review as required by the DOT and Federal funding standards. One of the items that was recently completed was a Soils Management Plan completed for the project. Part of this project includes documented DES hazardous materials plan which is on file with DES for a hazardous materials site at the Peoples Linen property. The limits of the contaminated material have been defined to the road right of way, but not into the right of way, river and adjacent properties that are involved with the project. As part of DES review, they have asked that this scope of testing be added to the City project to confirm or ensure that there is not contaminated soil on the property.

Mr. Ruoff stated the City has collaborated with McFarland Johnson to develop a scope that would be agreeable to all parties and so that DOT would participate in these project costs. \$42,000 of the project costs would be reimbursed by DOT and the \$10,586 balance would be the City's responsibility. At the end of the project, they may be under budget, and this could be a moot point, but he was seeking the change order so that they could track these costs.

Councilor Lake made the following motion, which was seconded by Councilor Remy.

On a 5-0 vote, the Finance, Organization and Personnel Committee recommends that the City Manager be authorized to execute a change order with McFarland-Johnson and DOT in the amount of \$52,931.81 as part of the additional scope of work required for the George St Bridge Project (75M020A).

3) 2024 FEMA SAFER Grant - Fire Department

Fire Chief Jason Martin and Deputy Fire Chief Greg Seymour were the next to address the committee. Chief Martin stated this is a continuation of the presentation from the last FOP meeting and today they will show how their staffing compares to the national average. They will also address the possible increase to staffing levels with the help of increasing ambulance revenue as well as possible savings to businesses because of the ISO rating. He indicated they will also be discussing applying for a Safer Grant.

Deputy Seymour stated the three organizations that over arch the Fire Department are NFPA (National Fire Protection Association), the NIST (National Institute for Standards and Technology), and the ISO (Insurance Services Office).

The Deputy shared a PowerPoint and a short video about Industry Standards for Career Fire Departments and what it means for a community. In three minutes, a fire could grow 16 times larger than when it started and continue to grow bigger and faster than when it started. Once the fire starts there is a short window of opportunity to save lives and property, and it is necessary to have a full crew of fire fighters to put the fire out. The Manager stated the reason for the video is because of a comment from a citizen as to how we staff the department and if other ways could

be looked at to fill staffing needs. She stated this video would show why fire fighters are necessary as requested.

There is an internationally recognized industry standard referred to as NFPA 1710. During a fire there is a lot that needs to be done; stretching a hose, hooking the hose to a hydrant, searching for people, venting hot gases etc. NFPA 1710 recommends dispatching 15 fire fighters for the first alarm, for a shopping center 20 fire fighters and for a seven-story high rise a minimum of 43 fire fighters. Additional fire fighters should be dispatched if the capacity exceeds the initial alarm. The standard also recommends the first engine arrive at the scene within four minutes of the fire. These standards are based on scientific evidence not on opinion. The common goal is to for everyone to get out of the fire alive. The quicker the response time the better the outcome would be.

Deputy Seymour stated they are currently four fire fighters short of meeting the 15 minimum standard. He explained at the present time the initial arriving companies, what the City has is Engine 1, Ladder 2 and the two ambulances. Area towns are too far away to be able to provide timely response to Keene. According to US Fire Administration, today's fires are faster and hotter due to the synthetic products used in furniture. It takes approximately three to five minutes for fires to grow out of control. He added it is difficult to arrive at a fire in less than five minutes.

He referred to another video which illustrates fire growth. The room in the video on the left depicted a legacy room (room from 50 years ago) and the modern room on the right which consists of synthetic material. The video showed smoke production comparison for two rooms – the smoke is more dangerous than the fire itself. The fire in the modern room was much more intensive. The Deputy stated fire fighters go to the second floor as soon as possible as this area is much more dangerous.

The Deputy referred to 22 Fireground Functions that need to be completed regardless of the size of a fire. Obtaining water from the water source, positioning apparatus correctly, conducting scene size, locating ladders for people to exit the structure as soon as possible, letting ventilation in as soon as possible, gaining entry through barred windows or doors, conducting primary search, and checking for fire progression.

The Deputy next addressed the ISO Rating. ISO is a company that grades fires (1-10) and uses that grading system to set insurance rates. Keene is rated at three, which the Deputy stated was average. He indicated that in the areas of company and personnel, Keene is ranked below average.

The Deputy went on to say it takes four to five fighters to remove an unconscious victim from a home. He continued cancer and heart disease are the leading cause of death for fire fighters. This is complicated by over exertion, high stress and dehydration. At times firefighters don't have a moment to rest when they come out to change a tank and have to go right back in. Most fire fighters go beyond what is healthy for a human being which decreases productivity.

Deputy Seymour went on to explain when they respond to a building fire, in district one, (the downtown) – Engine 1 with three personnel start getting the pump ready. If the ambulance is available, it will accompany Engine 1. Ladder 1 will also assist Engine 1. Th Shift Commander coordinates fire attacks on the perimeter and coordinates additional resources.

In terms of how Keene compares to other communities, the Deputy noted the shift of ten personnel responding to 6,348 incidents a year. This number compares to the Derry Fire Department with 15 personnel responding to 5,389 incidents. Portsmouth has 15 personnel responding to 6,359 incidents. Salem has 17 personnel responding to 6,340 incidents and Londonderry has 13 personnel responding to 4,444 incidents.

So far in 2025, Keene has responded to 465 incidents to date. 48% have been over-lapping incidents, four building fires, two appliance fires, one chimney fire, 314 medical emergencies, five car crashes with injuries, three carbon monoxide incidents, four cardiac arrests, 29 call backs for coverage. The busiest day so far was 36 calls.

Councilor Roberts talked about his neighbor's house fire and the time it took to put out that fire, which he indicated was long and how fast his neighbor's house burned down. He also talked about the work that went into containing that fire and the distance of the fire hydrant and the effort that went into containing the fire.

Councilor Remy talked about a fire on Elm Street and how fast that fire spread. He stated it took about four attempts to get a hydrant working due to the cold weather. He stated he appreciated the presentation.

The Manager stated at the last meeting there was a focus on the growth in the number of calls and where the increase in numbers were coming from. She continued that the nursing facilities in Keene as well as the loss of Diluzio Ambulance, and access to other Fire Departments were contributing to the difficulty in filling positions. She stated when the conversation started this time around she was looking at increasing Paramedic and EMT service instead of creating fire fighter position, because the majority of calls was for EMT services. However, there is a need to having appropriate numbers of fire fighters to fight fires. Keene can't rely on its neighbors to assist as they once could. All of this has convinced her that there is a need for fire fighters as well. This brought up the conversation of the Safer Grant. Safer Grants only fund fire fighters, and the City would learn by September if they qualify for the grant or not and then staff will be back to look at other options.

The Manager added that that City has hired a grant writer to help write this grant who has been successful with Safer Grants in the past.

Chief Martin stated the number indicated has been justified by the need for the extra fire fighters. He indicated they meet the 1710 Standards 0% of the time now because of the lack of personnel. If they get to 15 the number would go up to 100%.

Councilor Remy felt this is the right thing to do but added that he would like the City to get creative about how the City is dealing with repeat calls (people who misuse the system). He suggested working with the 911 system to get the information so perhaps two people could be sent instead of ten for each call. He also suggested working with large corporations to see if any of their employees could be trained as volunteers for larger events.

Mayor Kahn felt the case presented is compelling. He encouraged looking at the total call volume and looking at the many variables that could help with the budget. He added the need to make sure there is minimum impact to the taxpayer.

The Manager agreed there is a lot of work being done with Medicare and Medicaid rates and the City will be involved in that legislative process. She stated the reason everyone is struggling is because 911 is not a money maker and it is difficult to collect on services provided. This is why communities are relied on as they are subsidized by taxpayers but she added the City will definitely be looking at all options to increase revenue. The Manager complimented the administrative staff at the Fire Department for making sure billing is properly billed out.

She went on to say they are looking more into where the revenue is coming from now and where the shortfall is and this work will be completed before September.

Councilor Roberts reiterated what the Mayor stated about the impact on tax payers but added the City could have issues if it doesn't meet the required minimum level. He noted if the insurance companies feel the City does not have enough firefighters to meet its needs those rates would go up. The Councilor felt a proper balance is necessary.

The Mayor stated what needs to be looked at is how to increase the number of firefighters, but also reduce the overtime costs per shift. He felt this is part of the staffing equation that needs to be addressed.

Robert Skrocki President, Professional Fire Fighters of Keene addressed the committee next. Mr. Skrocki stated the grant is still a "maybe." He stated the numbers are projecting to be well over 7,000 calls this year. He felt waiting until September to take action might not be the best option. Mr. Skrocki questioned how long the Council is going to wait to direct the Manager to increase staffing level at the Fire Department.

Chair Powers stated this is an expense we are going to have to bear as a community and he hoped the City would be successful with the Safer Grant. He noted many in the community don't understand what it is to work 24/7, which is what the firefighters are doing right now.

Councilor Remy made the following motion, which was seconded by Councilor Roberts.

On a 5-0 vote, the Finance, Organization and Personnel Committee recommends that the City Manager be authorized to do all things necessary to apply for, accept and expend the 2024 FEMA SAFER Grant and if successful maintain this staffing level.

The Manager introduced the city's new Finance Director, Keri Chamberlain. Ms. Chamberlain comes to the City from Cheshire Medical Center where she worked as a senior analyst and has experience in auditing.

4) Adjournment

There being no further business, Chair Powers adjourned the meeting at 7:07 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Krishni Pahl, Minute Taker

Edits submitted by Patty Little, City Clerk and
Kathleen Richards, Deputy City Clerk