

MINUTES OF THE SEPTEMBER 18, 2024 SELECT BOARD MEETING

MEMBERS PRESENT: Board Members Chair Mike Houghton, Vice Chair Allison Knab; Joe Anderson.

ALSO PRESENT: Town Administrator David Moore, Finance Administrator Christiane McAllister, Fire Chief Jeff Denton

Mr. Houghton opened the meeting which was being held to review options and determine a path forward in response to Exeter Hospital's termination of their advanced life support services. Addressing Fire Chief Denton, Mr. Houghton acknowledged that although the situation isn't as urgent as it originally appeared, it is still an emergency that requires a solution. He asked Chief Denton to provide his insight as to the situation and how the Board could provide support. Chief Denton reported that the dissolution of these services happened rapidly. He is grateful for support from town and state. Many paramedics have already found new employment, the rest are looking. He feels that Exeter Hospital is going to have a hard time supporting services due to lack of staff. He recalled that prior to this happening, they had discussed initiating a paramedics program. To do this, we will need at least two experienced medics on staff. They need at least a year to be considered experienced by the State. Mr. Anderson confirmed that our ambulance is licensed through Exeter Hospital, that wouldn't change and paramedics working in Stratham would still be licensed under Exeter Hospital. Chief Denton confirmed, they operate under the license of the senior medical officer at the hospital, as do our EMTs. We could change to Portsmouth Hospital but that would take time. He has been in communication with area chiefs with whom we have good relationships and good support with a longstanding history of mutual aid. All involved understand it will be a strain on services, but they are willing to assist. Every other town (except Newfields) has either part or full time paramedics. There was some interest in taking over the ALS contract with other affected towns or possibly creating a county based system. Executive Councilor Janet Stevens informed them that approximately \$375 million was put into the hospital to be used for community services. The state is looking to garner some of those funds and possibly use them to fund a county based service.

Mr. Anderson had questions about the number of cars / people /units on at one time. Chief Denton replied two trucks, two paramedics on truck, two in hospital. There have been many discussions, but nothing concrete. Mr. Anderson said we had approximately 600 medical calls last year but only 59 calls needed ALS. Chief Denton said we would provide more mutual aid if we had paramedics. If we did have paramedics, they would also go out on other calls, not just ALS calls. Chief Denton said that we would need to attract qualified fire/medics to build the program. He foresees issues if a medic is out on a fire call and a call comes in for a medic. Various staffing models were discussed. He would like to see at least 3 on a shift, especially during the day. We need to hire more people. Currently, we're understaffed. Mr. Anderson advocated for hiring medics quickly. He sees a joint community response as a positive step. Chief Denton said it will be challenging to set up. We do it informally now. They talked about surrounding towns and the assistance they could provide.

Chief Denton informed them that you have to be cautious when hiring full time staff; doing so sometimes alienates your call force. He has seen it happen in Exeter, Hampton and North

Hampton. It is important to keep a vibrant and engaged call force. We have one and have been fortunate to retain it. They provide a lot of support to the community.

Ms. McAllister asked if there was any discussion of using private ambulances. Chief Denton responded that although private ambulances seem like a good idea, in practice, they have been disappointing. Most places that have used them have not continued with them. He has heard of issues with trucks not being available when needed. In addition, the EMS personnel are not of the highest quality because they are not paid well. They are set up to be a transport service from hospital to hospital. He would not recommend them being the first choice option.

Mr. Houghton thinks the ideal solution is a regional service. It would be complex to navigate through and not accomplished in 90 days. However, we need to think about it from a long term, strategic point of view; we should continue to pursue that option. Engaging in discussions with other communities is the best way to move it forward. In the interim, our next step should be to implement a medic program as soon as possible. Chief Denton advised that two medics would be needed to get state certified. We would also need to certify the ambulance as a medic unit. This would involve outfitting the ambulance with a drug locker, initial medications, a medic bag, etc. which would be an investment of approximately \$3,000 or \$4,000 per ambulance. Ms. Knab asked about the timeline for obtaining certification. Chief Denton feels the biggest challenge would be to get paramedics onboard and obtaining certification from the state medic licensing board, then building our program. Our ambulance would be licensed as paramedic level units advanced life support. Ms. Knab wondered if we might get political help to advance this quickly as this situation is not our fault. Mr. Houghton asked if we could apply for certification before hiring medics. Chief Denton said that the state requires experienced medics on staff before they will consider your program. We need to act quickly. EMS Captain Peggy Crosby knows more specifics as to what is involved at the state level.

Mr. Anderson asked for clarification from Mr. Houghton regarding his thoughts on a regional service. Mr. Houghton feels that a regionally developed service governed by a body and cost allocated to towns would be a highly successful venture. Currently, communities are being forced to take on cost above and beyond their needs. We're in the same situation. Conversations break down if people feel the cost-sharing is inequitable. Chief Denton agreed, and compared it to annual dues saying there are different tier levels, based on population. He believes it to be fair but acknowledged that generates a lot of discussion. He continued, advocating for both hiring paramedics and for being involved in a regional system. Ms. Knab thought the program might start small and gradually build to include other towns. She expressed concern with who would take leadership of a joint regional program. Chief Denton said that the Chief in Rye (a Stratham resident) was involved in a similar situation in Massachusetts and has experience putting this together. He has offered his assistance to organize the program.

They discussed regionalization, acknowledging it has a negative connotation as it involves giving up local control. Mr. Anderson offered the suggestion of a local joint venture with 4 or 5 towns, saying it would be easier to stand up than a county wide system which would take well into a year. Chief Denton felt the long term plan should be to incorporate all three programs so they work as a complimentary plan. No one system provides enough coverage.

Mr. Anderson asked proposed a hypothetical coverage scenario. Chief Denton spoke about the struggles of scheduling. Flexibility is key. We need to start with two paramedics. We will put together a schedule then compare with surrounding towns to see where they can fill the holes. They discussed hiring part-time and full-time paramedics. There is now a demand for full time paramedics. We would have to pay top dollar. Mr. Moore asked for clarification regarding standards for licensing. Chief Denton said that to start the licensing process, you need to have two medics on staff. They can be per diem or part time or full time. It will be difficult to attract full time paramedics. Ms. McAllister asked if we can port their certifications and licenses and operate from here. Chief Denton said no, they are licensed to the hospital.

Chief Denton said the first step is to communicate that this is the path we are taking. We need to put together a job description. The Board expressed a desire to cast a wide-net to include full time paramedics as well as part and per diem. Chief Denton felt that they would have to have a dual cert if they are going to be full time. In the future, we might want to hire part time medics who could be dedicated to just doing that. We could fit them into the day shift. He emphasized that we want to remain flexible. We do have some personnel that just do EMS. We have good night coverage with our call force. During the day, we are limited in that we don't have enough people on staff.

Mr. Anderson observed that we are expanding people greatly and asked the Chief if he needed administrative help. Chief Denton said an assistant would be helpful to do payroll, accounts payable and other administrative tasks. We need to advertise for the Fire Inspector position soon. There are a lot of open projects. Contracting out the Inspector position is an option. Consideration should be given to funding for equipment. Gear is expensive, \$6,000 per set. We need to purchase at least one set for every person. Mr. Houghton felt the need for these items are understandable from a budget perspective. He said to move ahead with posting for the medic and inspector positions. Mr. Houghton was inclined to hold the Admin Assistant position until next year. Mr. Anderson felt it should be advertised now.

Mr. Moore said that we have that we have money in the budget. He, Chief Denton and Ms. McAllister will meet to prioritize. Rates will be discussed at another time. Ms. McAllister had prepared some draft budgets. She budgeted the admin at \$23, which is comparable to the other starting admins and the paramedics (for next year) \$32/hour at 34 hours a week (two paramedics). Chief Denton, suggested \$35 - \$42 is more comparable to what other communities are offering. Initially, they would be serving as program managers to get the program running. They would be unable to work as paramedics until we become certified. If they were to go out on a call, they would be unable to use their skills until we are licensed. He feels potential paramedic candidates will be wary of getting in to this situation. We don't know how long it would take to get certified but it seems likely that the State would fast track this. This issue will be brought up during the interview process. It will also be discussed with legal counsel. Mr. Moore spoke about managing expectations as to frequency of coverage with the public.

Chief Denton would schedule medics to be on during the busiest times. Mutual aid would continue to be called for times we do not have coverage. On average, he felt we are doing ok covering the day shift.

Ms. Knab wanted to provide guidance on wages to ensure competitiveness. Mr. Anderson wanted to be as flexible as possible. They decided to advertise the positions, casting a wide net. They discussed shift coverage. Chief Denton will collaborate with Ms. Crosby to determine the best course of action. He expressed a desire to continue to hire for all other positions too.

Chief Denton appreciates and thanked them for their support. The Board urged him to keep them informed and let them know if they can be of assistance.

At 4:02 pm Mr. Houghton motioned to adjourn. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Respectfully submitted,

Karen Richard
Recording Secretary.