

**MOUNT LAUREL FIRE DISTRICT #1  
BOARD OF FIRE COMMISSIONERS  
SPECIAL MEETING / WORK SESSION**

November 7, 2016

Fire Department Headquarters Station

Meeting Minutes #14

**IN ATTENDANCE:**

1. Commissioner DiPietrantonio
2. Commissioner Roura
3. Commissioner Shestack
4. Commissioner Hamilton
5. Commissioner Ridenour
6. Chief of Department Colucci
7. Deputy Chief Burnett
8. Administrator Jones

The meeting was called to order by Commissioner Ridenour at 8:00 PM.

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited and a moment of silence observed.

The Public Announcements were read by Commissioner Hamilton.

**APPROVAL OF MEETING MINUTES:**

Commissioner Roura made a motion to approve the 9/19/16 Regular Meeting minutes that was seconded by Commissioner Hamilton. The motion was unanimously approved with Commissioners Shestack and DiPietrantonio abstaining.

Commissioner Roura made a motion to approve the 10/17/16 Regular Meeting minutes that was seconded by Commissioner Hamilton. The motion was unanimously approved with Commissioners Shestack and DiPietrantonio abstaining.

**ADOPTION OF RESOLUTIONS:**

Resolution #2016-40            "Appointment of Ryan Hughes as a 'Junior' Member of the Mount Laurel Fire Department". Commissioner Roura made a motion to approve the resolution that was seconded by Commissioner Shestack. The motion was unanimously approved by the Board.

**OTHER MATTERS:**

2017 Budget Proposal Discussion: Commissioner Roura reported that the 2017 Budget workbooks were distributed to the Board several weeks ago for review. He added that we are proposing for the first time that the Board approve utilization our 2014 & 2015 "CAP" bank in order to increase our tax rate enough to cover our proposed expenses. He explained that "CAP" bank is an amount calculated by formula in previous years when we did not increase our taxes beyond the 2% Levy CAP. "CAP" bank amounts are available for use for 3 years and then expire and are no longer available. The "CAP" bank amount generated by the 2016 Budget would still be available to use in the future if necessary. Commissioner Hamilton asked why we needed to do this and Commissioner Roura replied that the Finance Committee felt that we needed to be in a better financial position to handle emergency apparatus or building capital expenditure issues and by adding another \$200,000 to our Capital Reserve Fund in 2017 we will be in a better position to do so. The recent discovery of Quint 3614's frame rail corrosion requiring its' removal from service is a perfect example of this.

Commissioner Shestack added that the 1.433 cent tax rate increase being recommended by the Finance Committee would increase the taxes on a home valued at the \$217,000 average by about \$29 annually or around 8 cents a day. He added that the County was anticipating the installation of a new radio system in 2018 that would require us to purchase additional portable and mobile radios and that this Capital Reserve fund could be as a revenue source to make that purchase if we needed to. Commissioner Hamilton stated that he understood and that he would be in favor of raising the tax rate a little more to be able to do some of these things. Commissioner Shestack stated that the Finance Committee looked at the impact of raising the tax rate by 5 different amounts to determine the amount of revenue raised and found that we have the ability to raise the tax rate as high as 2.056 cents in 2017. He added that the Finance Committee had picked the 1.433 cent increase (representing a 9.95% increase in the tax rate) because we wanted to keep the increase under 10%. Commissioner Hamilton felt that the proposed tax rate increase was modest and that we should consider going with the

higher amount because we will need the money over the next few years. Chief of Department Colucci felt that we should consider the highest tax rate increase possible and use less of our surplus, which will help us transition through the next few years. He did not feel that we should ask for a small increase this year and then have to go back to the voters again next year when we could do it all at once. Commissioner Shestack felt that Chief of Department Colucci's position of not going back to the well in back-to-back years is a good thought because we may have a greater chance of having budgets defeated and Commissioner Hamilton stated that he agreed with this also. Chief of Department Colucci stated that he wanted to avoid giving Township Council the opportunity of setting our budget if it is defeated by the voters and agreed that we need to come up with a good marketing plan if we decide on the higher amount. Commissioner Ridenour asked whether going for the maximum increase would leave us with any remaining "CAP" bank and Administrator Jones replied that it would not.

Chief of Department Colucci stated that since 2012 his property tax bill shows that the Fire District tax increased by \$31.95 even though we have been claiming that we have not raised it. He added that the only tax rate that was stable was the County Open Space tax, which Administrator Jones stated was because those rates are set and don't change each year without voters approving a referendum.

Commissioner Ridenour asked the Board which way they wanted to go and whether they agreed with the recommendation of the Finance Committee for a 1.433 cent increase in the tax rate for 2017. Commissioner Shestack felt that this was our best option and Commissioner Ridenour felt that we could market it because as a percentage increase it was under 10%. He didn't believe that we could sell the idea of a 2+ cent tax rate increase to the public like the Chief of Department wanted. Chief of Department Colucci felt that we could get voter support for either amount because when we ask for support we have always gotten it from our residents. We have been fiscally responsible with our apparatus purchases and the maintenance of our buildings and felt that the public would be supportive. Commissioner Ridenour agreed that it wasn't good practice to go to the well with tax increases too many times, and if we're projecting a need to buy more new apparatus in 2018 we need to have an increase now. Commissioner Hamilton agreed that the Finance Committee did a heck of a lot of work on this and asked whether they had considered something between the 1.433 and 2.056 cent increases. Commissioner Shestack replied that we could raise the tax rate by 1.5 cents, which represents a tax rate increase of 11.25% and which uses up all of our available "CAP" bank except \$321,946 from 2016. He asked Administrator Jones if that amount would be available for use in 2018 if we needed it and he replied that it was the last year that it would. Commissioner Ridenour asked him how concerned he would be in using it all in 2017 and he replied that he would advise strongly against it because you will have nothing available to draw from if we find it necessary in 2018 to exceed the 2% limit (or about \$165,000) and the only option at that point would be to hold a referendum. He reminded everyone that the 2% increase that we propose to voters without a referendum is barely enough to pay for annual staff salary increases under the new CBA agreements and if we get hit with a big health benefit premium increase, we could have some real problems.

Administrator Jones also pointed out that the Board should probably discuss the merits of only having the 2017 Budget proposal on the annual February election ballot and if we decide to move forward with a plan to replace apparatus we should probably do that at a special election sometime later in the year. He felt that it was a bad idea to put 2 tax rate increase questions on the ballot at once because it increased the likelihood that one and maybe both would be defeated. Commissioner Hamilton felt that based on previous discussions, the longer we wait to purchase new apparatus, the higher the cost will be and Commissioners Shestack and Ridenour concurred. He asked if we were capped on the amount that we can have in our Capital Reserve account and Administrator Jones replied that we are not capped in how much we can put in or how much the account can contain but in order to use it the voters have to approve the expenditure via ballot question. Commissioner Shestack stated that we can use a little at a time or all of it at once as long as it is for something that qualifies as a capital expenditure and that we have asked the voters to approve large tax increases in past budgets, but not recently. Commissioner Roura stated that he has a hard time supporting the 2.056 cent increase because it is hard to justify this year. Administrator Jones agreed that it can be difficult to explain to voters why you are increasing taxes that much and not be able to point to one significant need or another. He felt that providing voters with a really good explanation in the annual newsletter would be key to getting their support for either increase. Commissioner DiPietrantonio asked when the budget was last defeated and Commissioner Shestack replied that it was in the mid-2000's when there was some competition for seats on the Board.

Commissioner Ridenour wanted to bring the issue to a vote. Commissioner Hamilton was in favor of the largest tax rate hike. Commissioners Roura, Shestack and DiPietrantonio all were in favor of the 1.433 cent increase. Chief of Department Colucci stated that although he favored the larger increase, he could support either. Commissioner Ridenour agreed with the majority of the Board but cautioned that we need to get serious about development of a new long range plan for apparatus and other capital intensive projects that we know are coming up in the next few years. Administrator Jones felt that we could make do for 2017 and most probably 2018 with the 1.433 cent increase and that we can promote the tax rate stability that voters have enjoyed over the past 7 years and the improvement in services that they have been provided. Chief of Department Colucci agreed that during the last 7 years of stable budgets, we have made many improvements in the service that we provide to residents that we should be proud of and that we should make our residents aware of them.

Commissioner Ridenour asked Administrator Jones when we need to formally vote on this and he replied that the Board can vote on it now informally so that we all know what we have agreed to and he can prepare the budget documents, but the formal adoption vote on

the 2017 Budget is not required to be done until the 3<sup>rd</sup> Monday in December. The budget statute then requires a public hearing to be held in January, not less than 28 days after adoption, which puts us on target for our regular meeting in January. In the meantime, we can work on getting the marketing done and begin to introduce it to our stakeholders. Chief of Department Colucci suggested that we have dialog with the Union, our volunteer staff and maybe even Township Council about it, because we will need to make sure we have our people on board to support it. He felt that if Township Council understands what we are trying to do, we stand a better chance of getting their support because we were upfront with everything. Commissioners Ridenour and Roura both agreed and wanted to have some kind of plan and timetable available for discussion at the next meeting. Chief of Department Colucci asked Administrator Jones if that would be enough time to make any adjustments in the budget and Administrator Jones replied that we can make adjustments if necessary but a solid deadline needs to be set so that he can prepare the final version of the DCA format documents that the Board has to approve. Chief of Department Colucci repeated his belief that we need to begin explaining the reasons behind the tax rate increase to our membership as soon as possible so that they understand why it is necessary and get their support. Commissioner Ridenour wanted to have a game plan for this by the next meeting in 2 weeks. Administrator Jones suggested that this be done initially in a small working group with maybe 2 Commissioners, the Union Shop Stewards/Officers and the Fire Company officers, who could go back to their constituents and share the information. He felt that doing it in a room of 75 people would reduce the ability for participants to ask good questions and have a good exchange of information. Commissioner Ridenour suggested that the Finance Committee should represent the Board. Chief of Department Colucci agreed with the Administrator's suggestion and that we should maybe add the Township Manager to the working group list. Deputy Chief Burnett thought that it would be better to have a separate meeting with the Township Manager since she would be the only one outside of our internal stakeholders. Commissioner Hamilton suggested that we be clear with participants that the meeting is informational only and not meant to develop a budget plan from scratch. Commissioners Roura and Shestack stated that they would sync up their calendars to see when they would be available for meetings.

Administrator Jones advised the Board that they should be aware that, per discussions previously held at several Board meetings, the 2017 Budget proposed contains funding for 1 full-time Training Officer instead of the 2 part-time positions in the 2016 Budget. Chief of Department Colucci added that Civil Service has informed him that they will not create a new Training Officer title that includes the eligibility requirements that we requested because we are the only ones that have asked for it. They did recognize that none of the titles that they currently have meet our needs and could result in a list of individuals that have no experience in our area. They stated that they would look at adjusting the existing Training Officer title to include a requirement for fire service experience and certifications if that person is applying for a municipality or a fire district position. He felt that this would be acceptable if it could be done because it would allow us to pursue a full-time employee for this post instead of 2 part-timers, which have been difficult to fill and get the necessary number of hours worked out of them. If they can't make the changes, then we can continue with part-timers filling the posts or go back to our previous practice of promoting someone from within the ranks and trying to keep them in the position longer.

Regarding the replacement Business Manager position, he stated that we will have to request that this job title be created for our agency and they will post the announcement and announce the testing date. He cautioned, however, that if we don't follow through with hiring someone from the eventual list, we will be billed for the administrative costs that they incur. The Board needs to adopt the Business Manager position creation resolution on 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> readings and then Civil Service will post the announcement and the process will begin. He did not believe that it was a good idea to hire someone provisionally for this position because if they are not one of the top 3 on the list after testing is done, we won't be able to keep them and it would be a shame to have wasted months of training. Administrator Jones agreed that it would be a huge waste of training time to hire provisionally and just hope that they allow us to choose from a list of resume's like they have for other positions. Chief of Department Colucci stated that he is not optimistic that we will have a list for at least a year based on past Civil Service performance. Administrator Jones stated that in the meantime he was going to start cross-training Deputy Chief Burnett on a number of things in the event it takes a long time to hire a replacement so that there will be somebody that can take over when he retires. Chief of Department Colucci felt that no matter which way we go, we are likely going to struggle while we get something worked out.

Establishment of new Business Manager Position (1<sup>st</sup> Reading): Administrator Jones distributed the resolution for the establishment of the new Business Manager position. Commissioner Shestack asked whether there were other related titles such as Controller or Comptroller that we could choose from. Chief of Department Colucci replied that there are a number of titles, but none of them are even close to including what Administrator Jones does. Most of them are geared toward financial responsibilities and we would need to hire several people to take over all of Administrator Jones duties. Administrator Jones added that we spent some time researching the titles available to us and this is the only one that remotely fit. Chief of Department Colucci hoped to redistribute some of the things he was doing to other employees, but that will only help so much. Commissioner Roura clarified that this title still exists in the Civil Service list and because it was not an existing Fire District position, we are required to have 2 creation resolution readings. He also asked if this position would be a "confidential" position outside of the CBA's. Chief of Department Colucci replied that it would be outside of the CBA's and that we would be able to offer the person an employment contract.

Resolution #2016-42 "Establishment of a Paid Position Business Manager with the Mount Laurel Fire District #1 - First Reading". Commissioner Shestack made a motion to approve the resolution that was seconded by Commissioner Ridenour. The motion was unanimously approved by the Board.

**COMMENTS OF FIRE COMMISSIONERS:**

Commissioner Shestack reported that the MLFD softball team finished up their winter league schedule last week, finishing the season 7-7 with the playoffs starting next weekend.

Commissioner Roura reported that a new mobile app was rolled out to the staff on a trial basis to facilitate internal communication between management and staff and that he felt that it could be very beneficial. Chief of Department Colucci stated that IT Specialist Lupan would be the focal point for adding members along with maintaining the event calendar.

Commissioner Hamilton thanked the Finance Committee for all of their hard work on the 2017 Budget and Commissioner Ridenour echoed his sentiments.

**PUBLIC PARTICIPATION:**

None.

Resolution #2016-41 "Closing of Meeting Pursuant to Open Public Meetings Act". Commissioner Roura made a motion to approve the resolution that was seconded by Commissioner Hamilton.

**THE OPEN SESSION ENDED AT 9:19 PM.**

**A CLOSED SESSION BEGAN AT 9:20 PM.**

**THE CLOSED SESSION ADJOURNED AT 9:41 PM.**

Commissioner Roura made a motion to adjourn the meeting that was seconded by Commissioner Shestack. The motion was unanimously approved by the Board.

**THE MEETING ADJOURNED AT 9:42 PM.**