

Wilmington Fire Department Input Into Fire Chief Report

June- August 2017

Facilitator: David Larsen

Introduction

In mid-June Gretchen Havreluk, interim town manager, approached me about facilitating a process to solicit, organize, and present to her and the Wilmington selectboard input from the Wilmington Fire Department regarding the selection of a new fire chief. At different times throughout this process the topic of a full-time chief versus a part-time chief was discussed, and the overwhelming consensus of those present was in favor of a full-time chief. It is important to note, however, that at no time were all members of the department present. Therefore, to conclude that the department as a whole favors a full-time chief would be premature.

The Process

*On June 27 I met with Tom Fitzgerald (chair, Wilmington selectboard), Gretchen, and two fire department officers, Scott Moore and Bobby Maynard. We discussed the process we would use to provide input and guidance to the selectboard regarding the selection of the next fire chief. We also discussed long-term goals for the fire department.

The minutes and details of this meeting can be found in the appendix of this report.

*On July 25 the group met for a second time. Present were Tom Fitzgerald (selectboard chair), Scott Moore, Keith Johnson, and Donnie Wilson (Wilmington fire department officers), Gretchen Havreluk, and me. Bill Spirka (department officer) was absent but sent via Gretchen his thoughts on a job description for the fire chief.

The focus of this meeting was the current job description for the fire chief. The group did not make substantive or policy changes in the document. Rather, it focused on eliminating redundancies, clarifying language, and making it more consistent with the views of those present. Gretchen took notes and will make the recommended revisions.

Detailed minutes from the meeting can be found in the appendix of this report.

*On August 8 I facilitated a meeting of the department membership. At least twenty-two members of the department, including officers, attended. It is notable that these firefighters attended the meeting immediately after returning from a two-hour fire call. They were eager to be heard.

I led a discussion on five questions:

- Would you like the fire department to have a **full-time or a part-time chief?** Why?
- What are some **personal characteristics** (e.g. good sense of humor, honest, etc.) that you would like to see in your next chief?
- What are some **skills, knowledge, or abilities** (e.g. mechanical abilities, experience as a chief, hazmat training, etc.) you would like to see in your next chief?
- What are some things in the **hiring process** you'd like to see (e.g nationwide search, firefighter involvement, etc.)?
- Do you have any **final thoughts** to share with the town manager or the selectboard as they move forward in the search and hiring process?

Responses to these questions can be found in the appendix of this report.

*On August 9 the group held its final meeting. Attending were: Gretchen Havreluk, Tom Fitzgerald, Scott Moore, Keith Johnson, Jeremy White (fire department officer), and Bill Spirka. We agreed that:

- The job description for the fire chief needs further revision. It should be detailed enough to be an accurate and appropriate itemization of his/her duties. However, it should not be so detailed and daunting as to discourage potentially good candidates from applying for the job. Gretchen will coordinate this process.
- I will write and present to Gretchen a report that accurately and completely describes both the process and the content of our group meetings.

Conclusions/Observations

Based on the discussions at these four meetings, I offer the following conclusions/observations:

Hiring a full-time fire chief emerged as a unanimous and top priority among all department members.

Department officers would like to have a system or a protocol where the fire chief is evaluated by and is accountable to the town manager, and where the two have an effective working relationship.

The job description for the fire chief needs to be revised to reflect the comprehensive nature of the position while not making it so detailed as to be onerous.

Department members recognize the importance of establishing and maintaining effective communication between and among: the chief and town manager; the chief and officers; the chief and general membership.

For various reasons department morale and participation have recently improved. The members of the department are very eager to see this continue.

It is important to the department members that the next fire chief be an inclusive leader, that the chief and members have an interdependent relationship. As one firefighter said, "It's not the chief's department, it's our (members and chief) department."

Department members would like to continue to be involved in the search and hiring process.

Respectfully submitted,

Dave Larsen

August 14, 2017

APPENDIX

Minutes from Fire Department Meeting June 27, 2017

Present: Tom Fitzgerald, Chair, Wilmington Selectboard; Scott Moore & Bob Maynard, Wilmington Fire Department; Gretchen Havrelek, acting town manager; Dave Larsen, facilitator. Bill Spirka (absent) sent his thoughts via Gretchen.

Dave briefly explained how he got involved in this process and then described the agenda for the meeting.

He distributed a two-question survey. Participants then shared and discussed their responses. Dave recorded and displayed them on a large piece of poster paper.

Dave explained that we'd focus on question number 1, but as we did so, we should try to keep in mind the answers to question number 2.

Question #1: What would you like to have us agree on at the end of this process?

Responses:

- Town manager will take an active role overseeing the department.
- Solid communication between the department and the town manager & selectboard.
- Full-time fire chief with control.
- Town manager does a 6-month and annual evaluation of fire chief.
- Keep the position of full-time fire chief.
- The direction we'd like the department/chief to go in.
- Identifying the strengths and weaknesses to be used in the hiring of the next chief.
- Maintain and improve the recent trend of increased interest in the fire department.
- The importance of collaboration between the fire department and other town departments.

- The overall plan to move forward on the fire department/chief issue.
- Need a foundation from the town with the Fire Chief having set hours and duties well-defined and held to by the town.
- Define duties through the spreadsheet list (to be created).
- More members need to put more skin in the game.
- Mechanics- some of the fire chiefs have had some experience in this and others have not. This will need to be defined for the future.
- That a proper process is put in place, with enough checks and balances, so that the current situation does not occur again.
- That the Town's yearly evaluation process becomes something that is an accurate measuring tool, not just an automatic 3% raise paper.

Question #2: What is your long-term goal(s) for the fire department?

Responses:

- Synchronize teamwork within the department and with the town.
- Continue and improve excellent service provided by the department to the town.
- High quality safety and training for the department.
- Relocation of the fire department.
- Recruit and retain personnel.
- Continued oversight by and involvement of town government in department matters.
- Determining what the department excels in and what it lacks - maybe involve a consultant in this process.
- Open communication vertically (rank-and-file members - department officers - chief - town manager - selectboard) and horizontally (among all members of the fire department - the public).
- Keep townspeople happy and safe.
- Improve relations between department officers and fire chief.
- Better communication between town manager, chief, and members.
- Improved public relations between chief, schools, and townspeople.
- Recruit younger members.
- Proactively involve the department members in discussions of future development in the town (e.g. real estate development, large buildings, etc.)

Comments:

- We need a fire chief who can make decisions, oversee the maintenance of the vehicles and the equipment.
- There have been fewer members, and people have less time these days to devote to the fire department. However, in the past month there has been renewed interest in the department among former and current members.
- Having a chief from the current ranks of the department would have its advantages. This person would know and be known to the current members. He would know the area, its people, its history, its traditions, etc. If he wasn't current on latest trends in firefighting, he could receive training.
- A new chief from outside the community could bring in new ways of doing things, recent developments in firefighting, public safety, equipment, etc.
- The role of the current department officers is and will remain crucial to the future success of the department.
- A new chief should understand the importance of good communication with: the department members, the town manager, police department and other town departments, with the general public, etc.

The new chief should be consistently and directly involved in all department activities, and do so with the officers and rank and file members of the department.

Either before or after a chief is hired, it might be helpful to have a consultant work with the department and the town to develop, establish, and maintain a healthy, working relationship.

A regional approach to (merging) fire departments has been discussed and is not a feasible alternative to having our own department.

- For the Town Offices & Zoning Office to be more in tune with the impacts and hardships that development does to the Fire Department. The Zoning Laws need to define "Development" and need to address the constant concerns that the Fire Department faces for every plan Review. It seems that we have to re-invent the wheel every single time and we, as volunteers, do not have the time to continue to do that.
- It's important for the selectboard to have a thorough understanding of the department's roles and contributions to the community.
- The next steps for the group will be to "set the stage" for a meeting with the selectboard at which time a process for selecting and hiring a new fire chief will be established.
- To move forward with the relocation of the Fire Station. We have outgrown the current 47+ yr old station. Also, it is still currently located in the Flood Plain which puts it completely out of service to the Town in the event of a Flood. It is supposed to be our Emergency Operations Center for use in disasters. If it's flooded, it's of no use. It is also our "home away from home". It would be nice to have a bunking area so that members could actually cover the station at night. It would open up new avenues for the department going forward.
- To have younger people "want" to volunteer and to be able to keep those volunteers.
 - To have the Department continue to be touted as one of the Best in the State of Vermont. We are well known amongst our peers in a Tri-State area and, I would like to see that continue. We are a very proud and well trained bunch.
 - To increase Training opportunities to accommodate a multitude of subjects. Currently, members have to travel long distances to get certain trainings. I know that Vermont Fire Service Training is working on this problem right now. I'm in hopes that it can flourish.

Next Steps

1. Gretchen will email to all participants in the meeting a copy of the most recent job description for the fire chief.
2. The department officers will gather information (narratives, anecdotes, examples, personal experiences, spreadsheets, etc.) on how and how much they and/or the department does to assure the safety and well-being of the community .
3. Gretchen will invite the other department officers to our next meeting and will confirm with everyone the date at which we'll meet (July 25 @ 7 p.m. in the fire house).
4. At our next meeting we will review (and amend, if appropriate) the job description for the fire chief. Gretchen will email to the meeting participants the fire chief's job description.
5. We will discuss what the hiring process for the next chief should involve.
6. We will discuss how to involve the rank-and-file members of the fire department at our August 3 meeting

Minutes from Fire Department Meeting

July 25, 2017

Present: Tom Fitzgerald, Chair, Wilmington Selectboard; Scott Moore, Keith Johnson, Donnie Wilson, Wilmington Fire Department; Gretchen Havreluk, acting town manager; Dave Larsen, facilitator. Bill Spirka (absent) sent his thoughts via Gretchen.

Dave began the meeting by summarizing the June 27 meeting. He then identified the three priorities identified by the group at that meeting: (1) hiring a full-time fire chief, (2) establishing a system or a protocol where the fire chief is evaluated by and is accountable to the town manager, and where the two have an effective working relationship, and (3) improving communication within the department and between department and town manager.

He then reviewed the agenda for the evening's meeting:

1. review and modify (if and where appropriate) the job description for Wilmington's fire chief.
2. determine the agenda for the fire department meeting scheduled for August 3 (**postponed to August 8 due to a fire call**).

For most of the meeting the group read, discussed, and, where appropriate, amended the job description for the fire chief. We focused on eliminating redundancies, clarifying language, and making it more consistent with the views of those present. Gretchen took notes and will make the recommended revisions.

Gretchen also distributed to the group copies of a document prepared by Bill Spirka in which he described his thoughts on (1) the qualifications of and (2) the job description for the next fire chief.

The group also discussed how to most effectively solicit from the department membership their views on matters related to selecting the next fire chief. The group agreed that at the August 3 meeting Dave will lead a discussion among the membership on: (1) their preference for a part-time or full-time chief; (2) what characteristics they would like to see in their next chief; and (3) suggestions for what the hiring process should include.

After the August 3 meeting with the members of the fire department, the small group will meet for the final time on August 8 at 6:00 in Gretchen's office to process the information gathered at the August 3 meeting. Dave will then write a final report and submit it to Gretchen for her consideration and submission to the selectboard.

The purpose of the report will be to (1) consolidate and organize the data from all meetings and, (2) based on the data, information, and opinions from group meetings, to provide conclusions or observations to the town manager and the selectboard as they begin the process of searching for and hiring a new fire chief.

Minutes from Fire Department Meeting with Full Membership August 8, 2017

Members of the fire department were asked to respond to the following questions:

1. **Question:** Would you like the fire department to have a full-time or a part-time chief? Why?

Unanimous Response: Full-time. many responsibilities (supervision of personnel, recruitment, grant writing, training, maintenance, budgeting, record-keeping, meetings, etc.) - too much work for part-time - full-time presence at fire station - increasing number of responsibilities due to state and federal mandates - increasing number of calls - 24/7/365 coverage demands it - department members are volunteers with full-time jobs - ISO rating is lower - improved opportunities to recruit and retain firefighters.

2. **Question:** What are some **personal characteristics** (e.g. good sense of humor, honest, etc.) that you would like to see in your next chief?

Responses: good communicator - computer literate - detail oriented - effective with the public and with children and older students - good listener - willing to look at both/all sides of an issue - hands-on - takes command of situations on and off the fire ground - proactive - personable and professional - honest - disciplinarian - dedicated - committed to Wilmington and the fire chief job - flexible - self-motivated - can resolve personnel issues - involved in town events and affairs - open-minded - team player - involved with trainings - good sense of humor - trustworthy - willing to delegate - innovator - represents department in a professional manner.

3. **Question:** What are some **skills, knowledge, or abilities** (e.g. mechanical abilities, experience as a chief, hazmat training, etc.) would you like to see in the next chief?

Responses: experienced & knowledgeable fire-fighter/fire service - experienced w/ fire command (ICS) - experienced leader - mechanical - hazmat training - able to teach - computer skills - able to multi-task - can arrange for trainings - experience as an officer - experiences recruiter - a learner - experience in management/administration, budgeting, & grant-writing - physically capable of doing the job.

4. **Question:** What are some things in the hiring process you'd like to see (e.g nationwide search, firefighters involved, etc.)?

Responses: focus on New England area - background check - have at least one (preferably three) fire-fighters/officers on hiring committee - Vermont preference - include someone with experience in hiring a successful chief - wide publicity for

the opening - emphasize the importance of what it's like to live and work in a small town - include member of selectboard, chief from mutual aid department, citizen of Wilmington - re-examine and possibly revise pay scale to attract the best candidates - don't hesitate to re-post if necessary - arrange for department members to meet finalists - don't hesitate to seriously consider local candidates.

5. **Question:** Do you have any final thoughts to share with the town manager or the selectboard as they move forward in the search and hiring process?

Responses: no one will be perfect for the job - we must be ready to give our new chief the most help we can - we need someone who cares about the community - we need a chief who gets involved with the other members of the department - communication between chief and officers is critical - we should consider hiring a consultant to facilitate hiring and promoting from within - the chief's job description and expectations must be clear - the ad/posting should be done in a creative manner to attract the best possible candidates - do not hesitate to re-post the job if necessary.

David Larsen
Facilitator

Addendum

Gretchen Havreluk, Interim Town Manager met with Peter Lynch, Chief of Training for the Vermont Fire Academy prior to this process and was given advice to move forward. With her own research on merging departments or share purchasing arrangements it was determined not feasible; however, fire department trainings should be reestablished as well as to continue to work with Keene Mutual Aid.

The Wilmington Fire Department has very unique, long term volunteer firefighters with their main priority being public safety. These volunteers are well trained and committed to the department and their community. The comradery amongst them is that of a family, with loyalty and disagreements; however respectfully and has each other's care and safety as their number one priority. These members work well on an emergency and respected by other departments for their training, equipment, and member attendance at fire calls. This bond could be lost by a merger with other local departments. Public safety is the main priority of the department.

There would not be a cost saving to merging, as we would still need to maintain individual firehouses for responses to emergency situations. The same amount of apparatus, equipment and gear would be needed as well. Fire Chief's in individual towns would also need to stay for fire and emergency command at calls in respective towns due to the distance between the towns.

Respectfully Submitted,

Gretchen M. Havreluk
Interim Town Manager