

Volunteer Fire Department Study Committee Report

January 2015

At Town Meeting, March 15, 2014, Fire Chief Loren White moved to "...establish a committee for the purpose of seeking ways to increase and preserve volunteerism on Greenfield's Fire Department so we can provide an adequate level of Fire and EMS services." To that end, a committee of resident volunteers was established by the Selectboard.

The Committee met 9 times from April 21, 2014 to January 5, 2015. The size of the committee and attendance at committee meetings fluctuated over time. The final committee consisted of 6 members.

Following an organizational meeting in April, the committee began with a region-wide meeting of Town Administrators, Fire Service personnel and interested citizens from Greenfield, Bennington, Frankestown, Hancock, Lyndeborough and Peterborough in July. At this meeting, Jim Grant from Peterborough made a presentation on the "Decline of Volunteerism in the Fire Service" and on the complexity of this issue nationwide. After this meeting, the Committee began to focus its work on circumstances specific to Greenfield.

In September, the committee reviewed letters from present and former Greenfield Fire Department (GFD) members. In October, an extensive survey was conducted of present and former GFD members/volunteers. A 6 month call log report was developed and discussed in November. Using all of this information, by December, a draft of this report was developed and at the January 5, 2015 meeting, revised and expanded.

Recommendations and Rationale

Improve leadership & culture

1. Make the Fire Chief an appointed position
 - Create a job description and provide for an annual evaluation.
 - Review compensation for the expanded job requirement

Because New Hampshire has no requirements for an elected Fire Chief and because we felt that the position should be based on solid qualifications and experience, we believe this would be better achieved with an appointment process. There would need to be a job description, an evaluation process and a regular review of our Fire Chief to ensure optimal performance. Volunteers will be attracted to a well-run organization and most of the responsibility for this rests on the Chief.

2. Creation of a professional management system for the Fire Department
 - Create a town personnel policy manual, modified for volunteers
 - Provide training for officers and other volunteers on personnel issues
 - Provide for data collection related to GFD issues to help in management and budget decision (i.e. tracking calls, attendance, and other relevant data).
 - Update Bylaws, operating standards and establish minimum call attendance for volunteers.

A policy manual would insure enforcement, accountability in professional procedures, and fairness in all personnel interactions. Data collection is an important part of Greenfield Fire Department management. It is important in decision making, but also in keeping the town apprised of the call load and the need for support from the town. The by-laws and operating standards are out of date and need to accurately reflect changes in Fire service professional standards. Again, volunteers will be attracted to a well-run organization where there is a structure in place to insure fair treatment and clear directives for all personnel.

3. Elevate the Greenfield Fire Department to professional Firefighter and EMS standards

Promoting professional training standards will attract volunteers to the Fire Department's professionalism and safety conscious environment.

Increase community support

1. The Town must ensure adequate liability insurance

Gap insurance is needed to protect Fire Department volunteers who may be injured in the performance of their duties and which is not covered by the Town's primary liability insurance. No Fire Department volunteer should suffer financial difficulties due to injuries suffered on the Town's behalf.

2. Ensure the Fire Department budget covers the costs of training

Since training is required for certification of Fire/EMS personnel, the Town should pay these costs. The commitment of their time, effort and the risk to themselves is asking more than enough of our volunteers.

3. Create more involvement and interaction between Fire Dept. members and the townspeople

More interaction between the townspeople and the Fire Department would ensure that townspeople know who the volunteers are as well as the work and training they do. This will promote confidence in our Fire and Rescue Services and an understanding that the commitment and risk taken by our volunteers is a gift to the Town.

Incentives

1. Explore financial incentives for volunteers

Fire Department volunteers are filling a huge need in the community. Exploring financial incentives for volunteers such as increased compensation for calls, waived recycling fees, and/or reduction of taxes are all ideas that could and should be considered.

2. Increase Fire Department transparency concerning the requirement for fire department membership

Increased transparency would educate the public about what is required for membership and would allow potential volunteers to see themselves as part of a professional organization that they would be proud to join.

In the last few months, although arrived at separately, many changes have occurred or are underway at the Fire Department that we have listed as recommendations. We feel it is important that we promote and support what we believe are improvements that will benefit the GFD and our town as a whole.

Respectfully submitted by committee members:

Glenn Roberge, Chair, Police Department
Bob Marshall, Vice Chair
Diane Boilard, Resident
Karen Day, Selectboard member
Kristine Hall, Past GFD Officer
Jim Murphy, GFD Deputy Rescue Chief