



**City Council Special Meeting
Fire Department – SWOT Analysis
January 16, 2020
Bessie Rowell Community Center**

Council In attendance: Councilor Jo Brown, Councilor Olivia Zink, Councilor George Dzujna, Councilor Bob Desrochers, Councilor Paul Trudel, Councilor Ted Starkweather.

Others in attendance: Fire Chief Mike Foss, City Manager Judie Milner, Fire Department Secretary Amanda Morang

Absent: Councilor Testerman, Councilor Clarenbach, Councilor Bunker

Chief Foss began the meeting at 6:07 p.m. He shared a slide show as he reviewed the Fire Department's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities & Threats.

Foss started with the first segment, Strengths. He described the members of our current fire department as; 3 admin personnel including himself, 2 prevention firemen, 14 operation level career firefighters, who are full time members of the staff, 5 call suppression people, who can be called if needed to fight a blaze, and stated that we have several others who work on call as support staff in several different ways. He displayed a photo taken after a training fire and stated that anytime they can have a successful training exercise is a time to smile.

Foss continued explaining what makes our men and women here special saying we have incredibly dedicated employees and who have a strong knowledge base. He also stressed that he sets high standards for them because we have less staff then other surrounding communities.

Councilor Jo Brown referenced a Laconia Firefighter who was able to find employment with another city and start there making the same amount of money as he had made in his previous job. Brown asked if Chief Foss was aware of this and if we also have this practice here. Foss replied that we can pay our men a higher rate at their start if they bring certain paramedic skills to the table. Foss also shared that it is his goal as Fire Chief to represent his men very well so they do not feel that they have bargain over wages.

Foss further discussed the higher skill levels that our City obtains from our firefighters. He stated that several fire units around the state just fight fires but our crew must be able to fight fires, provide EMS services and perform rescues. Foss credits his high hiring standards as a way of helping them achieve this as our firefighters must go train through the New Hampshire Fire Academy and achieve a minimum of 2 levels before being considered for employment here.

Foss then explained their training routine saying they train for hose advancement, ladder use, self-extrication, and mayday. He explained a situation where one of the men had to use their mayday training to escape safely after becoming trapped in a fire. Foss explained that his staff must be firefighters, pumps operators, CDL truck drivers, and must also be proficient at it. They also have to participate in hazmat training within a classroom and also outside a classroom.

Foss continued to explain that their rescue training includes proficiency in rope, water, confined spaces, trench, and heavy equipment rescues. They are ready for all of these to provide the highest customer service to all our citizens.

Next, Foss explained the levels of EMS service they provide. They include airway constriction, wound care, and splinting. In addition, this includes advanced care with lifesaving medications, clearing airways, and starting IV's. Foss stated that all our Full-time EMTs are at this advanced level minimally when hired. Lastly, Franklin has 4 paramedics that are professional level paramedics. He added that in 2019, our firefighters documented about 2000 hours of training and he stated that our paramedics are top notch and that he would put them up against any other paramedics in the state

Foss stated that buying dependable fire equipment is another Fire Department strength. When the City buys equipment, good quality is a priority and that pays off in the long run. Foss provided examples of this with the 2012 International ambulance, Engine One, which was purchased in 2016 and the 2003 purchase of a Mac Rescue Truck. These vehicles have all been very reliable and have had little to no problems since they were purchased.

Councilor Zink asked if Franklin is working with Tilton, Sanbornton, and Northfield to share of equipment and resources and Chief Foss explained that yes, we can call them to borrow personnel or equipment if needed. Zink asked if it was true that we do not buy equipment if its available to borrow from another surrounding area and Foss replied that technically we all have mostly the same equipment but we have a staffed ladder truck that the surrounding communities do not have. Foss added that the problem we face is that Tilton has a firetruck that we use to help fight fires, but it can take time for them to get here. Other stations are even further away, and fires can be out of control by the time other communities can get here to assist us therefore, Franklin is required to have a staffed ladder truck. Other communities may call us because of our ladder truck.

Foss stated that Franklin provides an exceptional level of customer service and shared a few slides with photos of the many activities the Fire Department provides. In addition to Firefighting, the department provides 911 mapping, medical care, fire prevention, fire rescue, code enforcement, maintenance cleanup, pre-planning, fire alarm box maintenance and fire investigations. Foss stated that last year they performed about 1,400 inspections throughout the City. Fire inspections have shown to be making a positive impact and therefore another strength due to the number of calls to perform them have Increased at a rapid rate. In 2018 they answered 1,949 emergency calls and in 2019, there were about 100 less calls even with providing Andover with EMS service. Foss credited the fire prevention inspections as the reason for less calls. He further explained that educating Franklin's citizens on how to handle certain situations that do not necessarily require an emergency call is key. He then cautioned that if they do not stay proactive, the higher number of calls will creep back up.

Next, Foss discussed the Fire Department's weaknesses. Foss emphasized that the real weaknesses is an aging fleet of vehicles. The City does not have the necessary funding in place to buy new equipment. The Fire Department also has a dwindling certified call force. Also, the Fire Station needs several repairs and could use an expansion to give them move room. Foss further added that there is an increase of simultaneous calls and not enough staff to cover them all.

Foss explained the aging fleet in detail. Engine 4 is a 2009 American LaFrance truck, and while it still runs well, the company that made it has gone bankrupt and we are unable to obtain any new parts to fix

it. He added that our mechanic must shop on eBay just to find parts for it. Foss anticipates that by 2025, we will need to replace it and the cost will be roughly \$700,000 to do so. Several people have asked Foss if the 1998 American LaFrance Ladder Truck needs to be replaced. But Foss stated that since its only used for calls where there is an actual fire, we should not need to replace it until 2030. He cautioned though, if we do not replace Engine 4 and Tilton does not make room for one that we would have to wait for either Concord, Laconia, or Bristol to come with theirs in case of an emergency. He added this could cause the City insurance to go up to an unknown amount. The 2006 Chevy Tahoe staff vehicle is used every day. Foss would like to ask the Council to replace it this year because of rust and corrosion, it is 14 years old, and time to retire it. A Toyota Tacoma would be nice and less expensive. Fully loaded, Foss is thinking the cost to be around \$42,000.

City manager Milner asked Foss if he considered a Ford Ranger and he replied yes, and that a GMC and Chevy are being considered as well.

Foss then discussed the staffing shortage and the dwindling certified call force. People have asked Foss to simply hire more on call Staff but he replied that the department has tried that already but it does not work anymore. Our society has changed. Workers today have more obligations at home plus multiple jobs where they can't just jump up and run out to volunteer if there's a fire. Foss added that in 2015 they experimented by adding 5 new members to their call staff but 4 of the 5 only lasted less than a year. They could not keep up with the commitments, the training, and the calls. The member that could keep up is now a full-time member of the Franklin Fire Department. In 2017 they tried the experiment again which ended in the same result. Foss stated that the average of on call firefighter calls has been 14 calls a year, but this past year, it was 22. He added that while it may seem less expensive to hire on call people instead of full time, it can cost about \$4,100 just to get them started and they will only answer about 1% of all calls for the entire year. This has become a problem because several of our older on call staff have retired and a couple others work with another fire department.

Councilor Starkweather asked if we consider paying for the schooling of firefighters in exchange for a contract after completion. Chief Foss replied that we sometimes do this for EMS services but we don't do this for fire because guys either don't do the training or don't show up on calls so it's better to use that money to hire career firemen instead.

The next weakness discussed was regarding the actual Fire Station. Chief Foss stated that they have already outgrown the firehouse, more office space, bunk rooms, interview rooms and training space is needed. The building was built in 1970 and no major renovations have been done since. He added that energy cost has been rising and the apparatus where they park the trucks is beginning to sink in the ground under the weight of the trucks. The Station Door is in need of a major renovation. The bunk rooms are not separate for males and females. Foss continued to explain that the Fire Department staff isn't able to interact with the public utilizing a separate interview room. He described a scenario that occurred a couple of months ago when a juvenile had set fire to his bedroom and they needed to interview him, include the Fire Marshal, and DCYF at the Fire Station in the training room/living quarters to have enough room for everyone. During this interviewing process, the young man had soiled himself and was jumping on the furniture the staff uses, soiling that as well.

The good news about the station is that the building is still structurally sound and Chief Foss has no desire to ask that it be torn down. The location is also perfect for answering calls with their average response time being just 6 minutes.

The next weakness is that current staffing is set up to handle maybe 1 to 2 simple medical calls at a time. Currently, they receive another call while completing a call 29% of the time. This means there is a delay in their response to calls so citizens may have longer waiting times. This percentage is increasing due to calls that previously went to Franklin Regional hospital now (11% of people) need to be transported to Concord Hospital or New London.

Councilor Trudel asked Chief Foss what the main reason was for the increase in calls? Trudel asked if it were drug overdose related. Chief Foss replied that it was not mainly due to drug overdoses because Franklin hospital can treat the drug overdoses. The three things that the Franklin Hospital doesn't handle anymore are OBGYN care, a high level of trauma care (OR), and heart attacks because Franklin Hospital doesn't have a CATH Lab to monitor or treat them.

Councilor Starkweather commented that this must be that the whole shift is out of the city when this happens, and Chief Foss replied that Starkweather was spot on, they need to take three staff to Concord. Foss added that there is only three on staff at night. At least, during the day, they can leave someone behind to run things and call in back up when needed.

Foss next discussed the opportunities for the Fire Department. Foss began saying we have the opportunity for a study on the Station expansion but he doesn't want a complete tear down. In addition, Foss stated that we could add staff by obtaining a SAFER Grant (Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response). We also have the opportunity to fund the Capital Investment Plan that the City already has. He expanded on the expansion of the Fire Station stating that the original architects, Bonnet, Page & Stone, are still operating. They can do a complete expansion study and proposal for \$15,000. Foss shared a slide with a list of everything that would be upgraded starting from the electrical system, being code compliant, to training rooms.

Councilor Brown asked if there is enough land there to build an extension and Chief Foss replied that he will recommend to build upward on the original footprint structure. He will request that the Council agree to provide funding for this study by the end of this year.

Foss discussed applying for the SAFER Grant for additional staffing in greater detail. The government allocated \$355M to help small communities fund Firefighter and EMT positions. NFPA recommends having 6 firefighters respond to fires but Foss said he only has 4 if they are not already on another call. After 7 p.m. the staff number goes down to 3. Foss stated that he is not asking to bring the staff number up to 6 however he recommends bringing the number for each shift up to 4 which means hiring 2 additional firefighters. It costs roughly \$90,000 per firefighter per year. The SAFER Grant would pay 75% of this expense.

Foss played a video of First Responders answering an accident call. He described what was being shown and explained that actual pictures of victims could not be shown so he would also further describe what was happening behind what could be seen on the video recording. Foss also described the conditions of what it looks like when his staff enters a residence. There are many times where plumbing or bathroom facilities are not utilized and this is something his staff is familiar with and not fazed by at all. The Fire

Department staff is faced with situations like this on a daily basis. When trying to save a life, they sometimes kneel in bodily fluids to do so. Foss continued to describe some deplorable conditions unimaginable when trying to do a rescue.

Foss said that they take this stress home to their families at the end of the day. Foss shared another video of a fire on Franklin Street. The stress however does not go away and takes its toll on the firefighters.

The hiring pool for new firefighters is dwindling. When Foss started down this career path, he competed against 20 applicants, today you have 2 applicants. Other communities are paying more than Franklin. There is also local business such as McDonalds and Walmart who start people from \$16-\$18 an hour (no training required) with benefits and without the emotional strain that his firefighters have. They also have less risk of getting cancer, injury, PTSD and other illnesses that firefighters face. The important thing to keeping quality staff is to continue to fund the pay scale steps.

Foss explained how other communities can pay more overtime hours and with less stress or required certification. Other communities are paying extra for college degrees with end of year bonuses, and we are simply requiring this without the bonuses. Foss cautioned that if they do not recognize the firefighters through step increases at least, they will not feel the appreciation and other cities will be there waiting to offer them what they deserve.

Foss shared the statistic that firefighters have a 9% higher risk of being diagnosed with cancer and a 14% higher risk of dying from cancer than average US citizens. He added that he and his teammates have gone to several funerals of firefighters that have died of cancer and his second lieutenant only has weeks to live after battling cancer. He also mentioned studies that show young men and women within the fire service getting cancer at alarmingly increased rates. Even with all protective gear on, the carcinogens still get on the skin and penetrate these dangerous chemicals from fires.

Foss said it costs about \$11,154 to replace one firefighter. This covers the uniform, physicals, and testing. It takes about 6 weeks to hire and train a new fireman so we must also pay for shift coverage as well as overtime during this period. When the City loses a good firefighter, it's like throwing away money. If the City isn't able to do anything else, as long as we treat our employees right, they will stay.

Foss stated that we need to reward loyal employees. We need to start planning the expansion and we need to deal with handling simultaneous calls by hiring 2 more firefighters with a SAFER grant. We need to start things now before it's too late and costs go significantly higher to do so.

He thanked Amanda for her work on the slideshow and the crowd applauded.

Chief Foss asked if anyone had any questions and Councilor Zink that if all the money cannot be raised would he prioritize the list. Foss replied yes, he would ask for the increase in pay followed by the hiring of the two extra firefighters.

Councilor Dzujna stated that with the City's Revitalization Plan, we will need this extra force with the Fire Department as well as Police Department. The process needs to start now.

Dzujna asked what would happen if we were regionalized and three calls came in at once. Foss explained that if this happened, all the firefighters would be cross trained so any of them could answer the calls.

There was further discussion on regionalization and community cooperative training. Foss commented that he wouldn't recommend regionalization at this time but could possibly happen in the future. Zink stated that we are already operating in a cooperative way in a sense. She stated that maybe this can be done more efficiently by being more cooperative between communities and not so much regionalizing it. If they have certain equipment, then possibly we wouldn't need to purchase certain things and vice versa.

Chief Foss described how fighting fire tactics have changed over the years and how two trucks to one fire rarely happens anymore. Foss added that 75% are EMS calls and the other 25% is fire and rescue calls. Another strength of our Fire Department is that our firefighters are cross trained. They are EMS certified so they can handle both types of calls with the same crew. Councilor Starkweather explained how the whole EMS service started when many years ago, injured firefighters needed medical attention on site so staff was trained to assist their injured. This service then became desired by the residents. Starkweather also stated that Franklin is the first City in the state to have all their firefighters be certified in addition to being certified EMTs. Starkweather was also one of the teachers who taught a portion of Chief Foss's classes in Fire & EMS service.

Councilor Zink asked Foss what the fatigue level is like, what morale is like at the station, and if there is a lot of overtime required which results in exhausted firefighters. Foss said that morale is very good this year. When the staff feels they are taken care of by means of COLAs, they feel valued and want to stay. Fatigue levels are up because of the dwindling call back force. He admitted to sleeping next to his pager and being woken up in the middle of the night 2-3 times per week. He added that every other firefighter is doing the same thing. He admitted that his firefighters are exhausted sometimes when they come in and some of them are even working 2 jobs just to make ends meet. Foss stated that mental health has already hit his staff. Several members see professionals and one member was sent away for a couple months to get the help he needed.

Councilor Dzujna stated how great it was to recognize the firefighter needed help in the first place. Dzujna then asked if the Safer grant goes through, how many regular staffers are needed and how would that effect the overtime rate at the station. Foss explained that unfortunately he needs the staff and the overtime. He has reduced the overtime hours though to combat costs. He did say that the County Home provides 4-5 weeks paid vacation and it takes five years here to only earn a third week therefore he requested giving the firefighter team a minimum of three weeks right from the start.

Foss added that a little overtime is good for the City and the employees. A lot of overtime is bad for the City and the employees, it is a balancing act. The overtime is what keeps some workers from leaving to make more money elsewhere.

Councilor Desrochers stated that he used to work 60-65 hours a week until he got sick of it. Foss stated that they have mandatory overtime and at times its necessary to call a firefighter back in after they have gone home thinking they have the night off. This is a balancing act as well and happens only if its unavoidable. Foss stressed that It is important to treat the firefighters well so they will do it.

Dzujna stated that the Council really does appreciate all they do. Brown added that they were wonderful when they went to her house for medical assistance. Dzujna asked if the urgent care facilities were any good for cardiac arrest preventing them from having to go to Concord. Foss replied that they do not right now but the NH EMS service is looking into this for the future. It will depend if they bring one to Franklin.

Councilor Desrochers stated when the ambulance services started charging a fee for medical EMS service, 90% of the calls for an ambulance went away. Councilor Zink asked if the Medicare reimbursement had gone up or if we continue to lose money on it. Foss replied that Medicare is doing an audit to all stations & hospitals and that Franklin will be audited. If we do not do the audit, we will take a 10% reduction to Medicare payments as a penalty. Some wealthier communities are taking the penalty just to not have to deal with the paperwork. He says that if Franklin charges \$1200 for a ride in an ambulance, we are only reimbursed about \$250. This goes for Medicare and Medicaid.

Councilor Zink suggested that we inform congress about the problems caused by their Medicare reimbursement cuts. Foss said its true because the local people are the ones who will end up paying through tax increases. Dzujna suggested looking at LRGH and Franklin Hospital and how Medicaid and Medicare reimbursements killed them. Foss said there are talks about Franklin going back to offering more services for our residents because of the reimbursement rates.

Councilor Brown asked if there were any further questions for Chief Foss. Brown also stated that these sessions are highly informative. Dzujna reminded everyone that our main job is to keep people safe and we must use tax dollars to do this.

City Manager Milner thanked Chief Foss. Everyone applauded.

Milner stated that there was a problem with the vote on Councilor Starkweather's appointment to the Planning Board and they need to do a new vote.

Motion – Councilor Dzujna moved to appoint Councilor Ted Starkweather as an alternate member of the Franklin Planning Board. He will fill seat PB12. The term of service is 3 years to January 2023.

Seconded by Councilor Trudel.

There was no further discussion. All in favor. Motion Passed.

Motion – Councilor Dzujna moved that the Franklin City Council reappoint Glenn Feener to the Zoning Board of Adjustments. Seat ZBA3. Term of service is 3 years to January 2023.

Seconded by Councilor Trudel.

There was no further discussion. All in favor. Motion Passed.

Motion – Councilor Dzujna moved that the Franklin City Council reappoint Jeffrey Dickenson to the Zoning Board of Adjustments. Seat ZBA5. Term of service is 3 years to January 2023.

Seconded by Councilor Desrochers.

There was no further discussion. All in favor. Motion Passed.

Motion to adjourn was made by Councilor Zink. Seconded by Councilor Brown.

The meeting adjourned at 8:10 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Audrey Lanzillo