

Board of Firewards
Town of New London – DRAFT Meeting Minutes
September 16, 2024

The meeting was called to order at 4:28 PM with the following members present: Chair Steve Ensign, Karen Hoglund, Pete Lauridsen, John Ryan, Bill Degnan. Selectboard representative Janet Kidder, New London Fire Chief Jason Lyon, and resident Karen Epstein. There was a motion made to accept the draft minutes of the August meeting and they were accepted as posted.

General updates:

Chief Lyon reported that the calls for service have been steady. By the end of August there have been 593 calls, and 47 calls so far in September. On the date of this meeting, NLFD has already responded to seven calls ranging from fire alarm activations, motor vehicle accidents, medicals, a propane leak and support with a car vs, pedestrian on I-89 in Sutton. Year to date there have been 100 general alarms.

Unfortunately there was a horrible two vehicle crash on King Hill Road last Monday. One person was entrapped and had to be extricated with the Jaws of Life, and was taken to DHMC with serious, but non-life threatening injuries. Tragically, one person passed away at the scene after extensive advance lifesaving efforts were unsuccessful. It was a difficult incident, as both parties were residents of New London.

Chief Lyon thanked everyone who was able to attend the 9/11 Patriot Day Ceremony. The NLFD has received several compliments from participants. John Ryan and Karen Hoglund thought that it was extremely well done and both concurred that it gets better and better each year. Having the ceremony inside gives it a more communal feel and the acoustics are much better. The school children focused on “trust” this year and Pam.Drewniak, Bill Degnan, Andrew Sarnevitz and Max Isley were interviewed and asked to share their thoughts and experience regarding trust in the emergency services.

Water Main project: The water main replacement has been going well even with some setbacks including a water leak in front of the FD from a bad gasket. The company is ahead of schedule and hopes to finish in the next couple of weeks. A decision was made to replace the water main from PCs to the NLFD, over a three night period. They had made this decision after dealing with the complexity of having school in session and the busy downtown area. At times it has been a challenge to navigate through the

construction and traffic when responding to calls. Everyone is looking forward to its completion. Janet Kidder shared that the NH DOT is not responsible for paving the road as it was just done in 2019 and they have a 10 year repaving schedule. The West Company will be taking care of paving after the project is complete.

Budget:

The Board members were provided a proposed copy of the budget.

Chief Lyon explained that the significant increases are in the area of wages and salaries. After discussions with the membership, his recommendations are based upon several factors and considerations. The Chief talked about the intricacies of the calls and the struggle with adequate staffing levels. One of his main concerns is the covering of On-Call Officer shifts on nights and weekends, which is crucial for membership participation during a general alarm. This model has worked extremely well for 25 years, however over the last year, it has become increasingly difficult. The Chief thinks it's extremely important to remain fiscally responsible, but the proposal for FY2026 is a temporary fix as there will be more significant changes soon. He talked about the department's demographics and the changes in membership in 1987, 2008, and 2024. There has been a significant decrease in New London residency and employment over the last 35 years.

Officers who tended to sign up for weekend and night shifts are not readily available anymore due to circumstances such as full-time jobs on other departments or family obligations. Jay talked about the increase in number of calls, specifically, how they seem to be coming in back-to-back, or at the same time. The question was posed, how can those Officers be incentivized to sign up for shifts? The discussion focused on the next question of how to provide coverage with less members who live in town. Should some services such as residential unlocks no longer be provided? The Chief wants to look at things from all angles in order to make the best decisions for the residents of New London.

Jay explained that there was a request for a more in-depth explanation of each line item in the budget, and therefore, if there's anything that should be modified or expanded to better clarify items, please let him know.

Part time salaries: There was a recommendation to increase the compensation of part-time employees. The pay is based upon level of certification and rank. The fire officers

are compensated slightly more because of their responsibilities.

On call pay: There is a recommendation to increase the rate of compensation from \$50 a 12 hour shift to \$90. The justification for this was paying \$7.25 an hour, NH minimum wage. This would increase the amount from \$24,000 to \$43,000. The hope in the past has been that there will always be an officer (Chief, Deputy, Captain or Lieutenant) on a call that can assume command and oversee the incident. Recently this has not been the case and does lead to a little bit of complexity if only firefighters respond, making sure the senior firefighter is the one to assume command. Jay explained that at some point the town of New London will need to hire additional full-time personnel. However, even with additional career personnel, the town will still have a need to cover open shifts for vacations or sickness, and will still need to backfill some schedule gaps. The question was asked regarding how many additional firefighters would be needed to cover all shifts. Jay replied a minimum of 4 full-time firefighters, to cover 24/7 each day would be needed.

Jay is recommending a new line item for Per-diem coverage on Saturday and Sunday's from 7am to 7pm. The justification for this staffing level is the number of calls on the weekends and the difficulty with covering the On-call shifts. Steve wanted to make sure that the Firewards understood that things will be changing in 3 to 5 years and that at this point we aren't going down the path of full-time and all the intricacies that would be included. He explained that we will probably be going there someday and we will have to address what will come next. The Chief is concerned that per-diem will not fix the current issues, but is a stop gap. After the last Officers meeting, Jay is concerned about what we do between now and next July.

Bill Degnan spoke to a friend who is a Chief in Illinois, and they are facing the same issues. They had relied successfully on a per-diem staffing model for years and now they have had to switch to a full-time staffing as the old model failed. Bill thinks that we need to hire additional career firefighters. John Ryan shared his concerns and talked about his experience with a similar situation in Weston. As call departments keep shrinking and many Towns are moving into full-time staffing models. John feels we need to stay ahead of this trend.

Janet Kidder was interested in a regional approach and asked how many calls are in mutual aid towns. Jay replied 40 to 50 (mostly requests for a reported building fire) out of the 900 to 1000 call annually, are out of town, and he also thought that sharing staffing

would make sense, however he doesn't know of an area in the NE that is doing this yet. Janet stated that with an increase in wages of 14%, perhaps we should make this the time to recommend additional full time staffing. She recommended putting it in the FY2026. The Chief suggested New London could apply for a SAFER grant (US Homeland Security). The funds are not a guarantee as it's a competitive grant. If the money was awarded to hire full-time firefighters, it would cover the first 3 years and wouldn't affect the taxers as significantly, as the total impact is not immediate. The grant would pay for salaries and health care, however Jay believes the Town would be responsible for retirement costs and overtime.

Steve wanted to make sure that the Board is also aware that this proposal would also mean addressing the station expansion issues as well. Chief Lyon recommended adding 4 positions. The schedule could be (2) 10 hour days and (2) 14 hour nights and we could do it with four people. This would cover the needs of the town 24 hours a day. A fifth would be needed to cover sick days and vacation time, however this could also be accomplished with per-diem staffing. Steve suggested looking more into the SAFER grants. Janet suggested looking into the mutual aid calls too. Chief Lyon stated that we need to look at regionalization, and he'll talk to some other Chiefs.

The Operation Budget is similar to last year. There is a significant increase in personnel protective equipment (PPE) of \$5,000. We have 40 members, it is required that we replace PPE every 10 years. We usually try to replace 4 sets of PPE gear annually. We do keep the old sets of PPE as a back-up when members gear needs to be washed after a fire or exposed to contaminants.

Steve stated that this budget is due to the selectmen this week. A motion was made by Steve to put this forward for FY 2026 as presented. Pete seconded the motion and the vote was in the affirmative by all those in attendance.

The Board of Firewards then entered into Non-Public session under RSA 91-A:3, II2 (a+b) at 5:24pm following a motion made by John Ryan and seconded by Bill Degnan

The Board came out of the Non-Public session at 5:36pm and approved a motion made by Pete Lauridsen and seconded by John Ryan to seal the minutes of the Non-Public session until such time as the information becomes available in the public domain.

The next meeting will be Monday October 21th, at 4:30pm

Meeting adjourned at 5:45.