

Special Meeting - October 16, 2023

Article 3 - Fund 8 New Firefighter Positions

Article 4 - Fund Fire Department Aerial Ladder Truck Replacement

Both Articles Were Approved Unanimously by the Finance Committee: 7-0-0

On Behalf of the Finance Committee: Lynn Bruneau

Good evening. As noted by my colleague, Finance Committee Chairman, Nick Athanassiou, I'll address a couple of Warrant Articles at once - and outline the Finance Committee's unanimous support for both Articles 3 and 4 on behalf of the Town's Fire/Rescue Department.

Background first. You might remember that at the Annual Town Meeting in May, I stood up to support several Fire/Rescue Department-related Warrant Articles - and provided some overall background. Here's a quick catch-up:

At the Annual Town Meeting in May. The Town voted unanimously to support:

Article 49 - which asked for interim funding for \$100k to cover anticipated overtime for the summer months to provide shift coverage, particularly when the Town's population grows from 6,000 year-round residents to 20k in the summer. Article 43 asked for \$30k to fund the build-out of bunks and lockers in what is now a conference room to accommodate the extra shift staffing. Article 41 provided \$410k from Ambulance Reserves to fund a new ambulance. And finally - Article 21 - \$1.6M for a new 100' aerial ladder truck to replace the current 70' aerial ladder truck.

As background to Article 49, the Overtime Article - I spoke at length in May about the need for additional staffing and told the story about the Department's process for applying for a FEMA-sponsored "SAFER" grant ("Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response"). The goal of the SAFER program is "to enhance local (fire) departments' abilities to comply with staffing, response and operational standards established by the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA)."

Chief Deering had made presentations to the Select Board in November 2022 and again in January 2023 that outlined the need for additional resources for the Department, referring to a number of on-going staffing challenges, including increasing call volumes, increasing multiple, simultaneous calls, increasing complexity/duration of calls, decreasing availability of callback personnel, housing and response time challenges and inadequate number of resources needed to respond to calls. The data indicate that on average, with multiple/simultaneous calls and limited callback resources, 30% of the time the station is left with just one or 2 or even no firefighters/paramedics to respond to the next call. This was true a year ago - and it continues.

The goal of the SAFER grant was to hire an additional 8 firefighters/paramedics, adding 2 per

shift. The grant would cover staff salaries and benefits for the first 3 years for each new hire, with the Town then picking up the cost after the initial period. We understood then there would be additional on-boarding costs for each new hire that the Town would have to cover (including turnout gear and Fire Academy costs).

But not all dreams come true. We didn't get the SAFER grant. I don't think that we've received official word yet - but the government website shows that all of the available grant money has been awarded - and none of it is for us. \$360M given out nation-wide to 177 communities - including 6 towns in MA. But none for Orleans.

So it's up to us to take care of this. I've already outlined the need. The need hasn't changed. Article 3 asks for \$925k to be raised and appropriated through a general override to cover the salaries and benefits for 8 additional firefighters/paramedics - plus an additional \$231k from Free Cash for funding their equipment and training expenses. The SAFER grant would have covered 3 years of salaries and benefits. The \$925k is one year of salaries and benefits for the 8 positions. After year 1, the funding would be included in the Fire Department annual budget. Unfortunately, SAFER grants are only for new hires - we could not reapply to have years 2 and 3 costs covered - that's not how it works. However, there could potentially be other grant money available to help cover some of the training and equipment expenses.

Did you see the front page article in last week's Cape Cod Chronicle - with the photo of 4 of our Fire/Rescue Department's finest? The article - which included the views of these individual firefighters - stressing the need for additional resources - also noted that it's been 10 years since Orleans last added staff to the Department's ranks. "There's no downturn anymore that we used to have in the winter months." Firefighters are working 38-hour shifts with 10-14 hours off in between. With all of them doing at last 24 hours of overtime each week to fill the shifts that need to be filled. According to the article - they do this to support each other. Warrant Article 3 is the only long-term remedy to the staffing impacts facing the Department. One firefighter described Warrant Article 3 as an investment in the Department's greatest resource - its people.

Chief Geof Deering and Deputy Chief Tim Gula told the Finance Committee on October 5 that if Town Meeting approves Article 3 and if it also passes at the Ballot on November 7, then they would begin to advertise these positions immediately. Likely the word is already out that we'll be looking. The goal is to begin hiring in early January so that the new firefighters would be part of the shift rotation in time for next summer when things get really busy.

Now the ladder truck - Article 4. As noted - Town Meeting voted to support the new ladder truck in May for \$1.6M. But the Article was written in such a way that the spending was capped at \$1.6M - including whatever we would have received for the trade-in of our 70' aerial truck. Lesson learned. And costs have continued to rise - 6-10% every few months. Availability is now 3-4 years out for these new vehicles. The total cost now is \$2.1M.

In 2007 when we bought the 70' truck - we knew then that it didn't meet all of the Town's

needs - like being able to reach behind the condos on Old Colony. But since then - with engineering design improvements - the new 100' aerial truck would now fit into the Fire Station - length and width - just a little bit taller but it would still fit. A 2007 model 100' truck would not have fit.

Please join the Select Board and the Finance Committee in voting to support these Articles - in support of the Orleans Fire/Rescue Department - and continued safety and quality of life for our residents and visitors and the members of our Fire/Rescue Department.

Please vote "YES" tonight on both of these Articles - and again at the election on Tuesday, November 7.

Thank you.