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Fire Services Study Committee

September 13, 2018

Hearing Minutes

Committee Members Present:

Don Beaudin, Douglas Erb, Kathy Parsons, Richard Sagar, Bruce Ulricson.

There were 35 people in the audience

Hearing opened at 6:00 pm.

- Doug explained the purpose of the Committee. He read the Warrant Article that created the Committee, and stressed that its mission was fact finding; not decision making. In answer to an audience question regarding who will make any decisions, he stated that the Committee will provide information, but that the voters will make any final decisions. He stated that this evening's report was a work in progress, and welcomed any input from the audience. He reported that the Committee has met eleven times, in addition to meetings with the Lyman and Lisbon Select Boards. The Committee will continue to meet, and issue a final written report by December 1, 2018.
- The Committee members introduced themselves, and Doug explained that each member would make a presentation reviewing progress in various areas. He asked that questions and comments be held until the completion of each presentation.
- Insofar as much of the material included in the presentations has been documented in prior Minutes, the current Minutes will include a summary, with references to any pertinent Committee Minutes for additional detail. The Minutes can be viewed on the Town website and the Landaff Ledger.
- Doug began with a cost comparison. He explained that Landaff has an assessed tax base of approximately 50 million dollars. A comparison of other towns with a similar assessment and population showed that Landaff is about average in the basic cost for fire services. He said that capital investment was difficult to compare, due to different reporting practices in the compared towns. He explained that an expenditure of \$50,000 would result in a tax cost of \$1 per \$1000 of assessed value; every \$5,000 of expenditure would cost taxpayers ten cents per \$1000 of assessed value.
- As an example, he said that the 2017 Fire Department expenses equaled thirty-seven cents per \$1000 of assessed value, and the capital appropriation added twenty cents per \$1000. He calculated that a homeowner with a \$250,000 assessment would have paid \$92.50 in 2017 for the fire service. The base cost of the contract that Lisbon had offered would have amounted to \$88.75 for a \$250,000 assessment. This example does not include any additional per-call charges from Lisbon.
- Doug explained that the Committee tried to assess any impacts that a contract with Lisbon might have on homeowner's insurance, but had been unable to get clear answers. He read

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the statement that the Committee had drafted on the issue: Due to the complexities of the insurance industry, it is difficult to accurately assess all factors involved in a change of fire service. It would be advisable for homeowners to check with their agents regarding their particular circumstances.

- Doug reported that the Committee is preparing a worksheet for taxpayers to calculate how any changes might affect their overall costs. Using the worksheet, taxpayers would be able to compare any changes in the tax rate along with their insurance costs to determine how they would be affected.
- Richard reported on the Landaff Volunteer Fire Department, Landaff Volunteer Firefighters Association, and Twin State Mutual Aid Association:
- Several area Fire Chiefs have spoken to the Committee, expressing their opinions in favor of Landaff, and other towns, retaining their own departments. They were Jack Anderson, from Bethlehem who is also President of the Twin State Mutual Aid Association, Willie Minot, from Bath, and Allen Clark, from Sugar Hill. They also explained how the mutual aid system functions, and how any changes might affect Twin State.
- The chiefs explained the values of a local department, and how difficult, and costly, it would be to re-start a department after disbanding.
- Background checks are supported. Landaff Chief Cartwright has indicated that the department and Select Board are cooperating on a revised background check.
- The chiefs had spoken against too stringent fitness requirements, saying that it could hamper a department and take away talent that is useful. They said we all work together and it is important to have more, rather than fewer people. The chief needs to use judgement. The Committee hopes to explore any insurance implications this, or other issues, may pose for the Town.
- Twin State bylaws allow responding departments to charge when they provide services to associate towns (towns without their own fire dept.), but they have traditionally not done so. Jack Anderson has verified that the policy would likely change, and that they would begin charging when responding to towns that lack their own department. He said that a study committee has made that recommendation, and a final vote will take place in December.
- They had indicated that the allowable per hour charges for mutual aid responding departments are \$175 engine, \$150 tanker, and \$20 for each firefighter.
- They have provided estimates of the costs for various calls, and mentioned that Mutual Aid presently provides all coverage in South Landaff due to the remoteness of the area.
- ***See August 16, 2018 Minutes for full report of the discussions with Anderson & Minot.***

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- The presentation continued with a summary of answers to questions asked of the Fire Department and Fire Association. Included topics were: 1. Skills and assets that Landaff can provide to Twin State, and effects if Landaff disbands. 2. Current roster and training levels. 3. Recruitment and retention issues. 4. How the Town can assist the Fire Department's mission. 5. Is Landaff considered an offensive or defensive department. 6. How many firefighters expected to show up when called. 7. Fire Department compliance with standard guidelines. 8. Effect on coverage if the department is disbanded. **See July 12, 2018 Minutes for detailed reporting of the Landaff Fire Department's answers to these questions.**
- Audience Comments:
- Susan Stanley questioned why the tanker needed replacement. Jason Cartwright said that the tanker was presently in good working order, and not in need of replacement. There may have been confusion due to a previous Committee question to the Fire Department asking them to project possible future capital expenditures. **See July 12, 2018 Minutes, page 5.**
- Susan Stanley asked about recovery of per-call charges from the homeowner's insurance. Richard explained that the possibility of the Town recovering those costs from insurance had been raised at a previous meeting by a member of the audience. He said that Lyman had attempted to bill a homeowner's insurance once, but that attempt failed and Lyman has made no further attempts. Richard had researched the issue, and been told that any coverage for fire department services would require an additional rider on the policy and an added premium. He also stated that there was no indication that the Town of Landaff intended to pursue billing insurance. He said that the Committee plans to meet with the Select Board for their input, but that at this point the Select Board has not had a chance to weigh in on this issue. **See June 14, 2018 Minutes, page 3.**
- Pat Webb mentioned an incident of a few years ago in Benton where a homeowner was billed for costs resulting from a fire that destroyed the home. He said that the homeowner was unable to pay, with a lien being placed on the property. The Town took the property with the lien. Pat suggested that the Committee might like to look into the incident.
- Phil Finkle suggested that the Committee look at a breakdown of the call history for the past several years to determine what the costs would have been under a per-call charge system. It was felt that this would be worth pursuing.
- Linda Chandler was concerned about what she perceived as the Landaff Fire Department's failure to respond to a recent brush fire. She said that to support the Fire Department she needs to know that they will show up. She suggested that they should be motivated to respond, and wondered if the Town could provide an incentive such as free taxes. The incident in question was explained by Don Beaudin, who was the officer in charge at the time. Landaff did respond, being second on scene minutes after Lisbon's arrival. Because a

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dwelling was in danger, and logistical considerations, Don requested mutual aid, resulting in Lisbon being toned. ***For a more detailed explanation see June 14, 2018 Minutes and a revision in June 21, 2018 Minutes.***

- Susan Stanley wondered why Lisbon Fire Chief Hartwell had not been invited to address the Committee when other area chiefs had been. Richard explained that Chief Hartwell had been present at the meeting with the Lisbon Select Board, and had answered questions. The Committee thought that it might be helpful to seek a meeting with Chief Hartwell, and thanked Susan for the suggestion.
- Bruce, presented the results of the meeting with the Lyman Select Board:
- Lyman has contracted with Lisbon for about 35 years on a year to year basis, with little change in costs over that period. Since 2016 there has been no cap on per-call charges. The Selectmen feel that the townspeople are pleased with the arrangement, and are not aware of any complaints. ***For more detail on the Lyman meeting see June 21, 2018 Minutes, page 1-2.***
- Audience Comments:
- Harry McGovern asked if Twin State's plans to begin charging associate towns for responses was discussed at the meeting. Doug said that the Committee thought that it would have been inappropriate to bring up the issue.
- Kathy presented the results of the meeting with the Lisbon Select Board:
- Lisbon is still interested in providing fire coverage for Landaff.
- The costs would be population based, plus per-call charges for firefighters and equipment used. As Landaff's population is smaller, the base charges would be less than that charged to Lyman.
- Per hour costs: \$27 Chief; \$15 certified firefighter; \$12 non-certified firefighter; \$150 tanker; \$300 engine; and \$325-\$350 ladder truck. There would be no minimum charge for responding. In a case of being called back, as in a false alarm, the Chief indicated that they usually would not charge.
- Landaff and Lisbon Select Boards would negotiate contract.
- Lisbon would consider termination clauses and a contract longer than one year.
- The current Lisbon FD roster: total of 16 members; 10 are Level 1 or higher certified; 5 committed to Level 1 training for certification in the near future.
- Capital investment and interest expense would not be charged to Landaff.

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- Lisbon was unable to obtain grants for the new station construction. They did obtain grants for emergency management equipment.
- Audience Comments:
 - Becky McGovern, wondered if Lisbon might be motivated to send more equipment and personnel in order to generate additional revenue. Although there was no direct answer to the question, Richard said that Chief Hartwell's statement, regarding the policy on false alarms, suggested that Lisbon would be likely to act in good faith. However, Richard stressed that this was not in writing nor an official statement of Lisbon's policy.
 - Marilyn Booth asked what would be done with the Landaff Fire Department assets if disbanded. Doug said that would be an issue for the Select Board and Fire Department to answer. **See August 16, 2018 Minutes, page 3 for a discussion of this issue.**
 - Shirley Peterson wondered if a contract with Lisbon would cover all of Landaff, including South Landaff. Doug said that the details of any contract would have to be worked out. It would be expected that any contract would include all coverage now provided by the Landaff FD, including South Landaff. Presently, because of the isolation of the South Landaff area, the first responders would likely be mutual aid departments, followed by the Landaff FD.
 - Linda Chandler asked if we contract with Lisbon how would mutual aid charges change. Doug explained that Landaff would still need to be a member of Twin State, but would also be charged by Twin State for mutual aid responses that are now provided free. Pat Webb, who is on the Twin State Executive Board, said that the \$450 annual membership dues are the same for all towns, whether associate or full. Pat also stated that the two hour minimum charge by responding departments would be enforced.
 - In answer to a question, Doug said that we are not comparing the two departments. He explained the call system, and said that presently Lisbon responds in addition to Landaff, providing the Town with the resources of both departments.
 - Don reported on possible issues that need to be addressed if the present station is renovated. He provided a detailed list of suggested improvements to meet the needs of the Fire Department. **See August 30, 2018 Minutes, page 1-2, for the entire report.**
- Audience Comments:
 - Cliff Boivin asked for a clarification in the previous minutes regarding the fire station property. He said that Arthur Allbee had donated the property to the department, not the school as previously stated. The minutes will be amended to reflect his account.
 - Phil Finkle questioned the wisdom of renovation. He feels that if the Town votes to continue to have our own department we should have an idea of the cost of a new building. He wondered if modular construction had been considered. Don said that his group were

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tasked with seeking ways to renovate the existing building and had not researched other options. Doug said it is a good time to study our fire services, and consider capital expenditures.

- Dale Locke wondered if all improvements needed to be undertaken at once, or could they be spread out over a longer period. Jason said that some of the issues were of higher priority, and would improve response time and recruitment
- Deb Erb recounted how ashamed she felt over how the town treats the firefighters. Recalling her service on the Life Squad, she said that there was an urgent need to provide running water with bathroom and shower facilities for responders who are often exposed to hazardous materials.
- Linda Chandler questioned the need for insulation in the building. It was explained that the building needed to be heated to prevent the water in the trucks from freezing.
- Harry McGovern explained that the previous study was for a building that would provide space for additional Town office space, Highway Department needs, and public meeting areas in addition to space needed by the FD. The feedback from townspeople indicated that it was too expensive. The plan was withdrawn and not submitted to the Town. He said that their Committee should have stated that the proposal was rejected.
- The next meeting will be at 6:00 PM, Thursday, October 4, 2018.

Meeting adjourned at 7:37 PM

Respectfully submitted, Heidi Sagar