

LFD Fire Council Proposed Agenda for Discussions with Village Board

At the Board meeting last week, residents expressed a clear preference for the Village Board and the Fire Council to arrive at a compromise that a) addresses the primary concerns of the Village Board about the management structure of the Fire Department and b) is supported by the Fire Council and the volunteer membership because they perceive the compromise to be fair, legal and likely to succeed. The following ideas are suggested in an attempt to achieve such a compromise.

The first two ideas address the core of our concerns. If we all can reach agreement based on these ideas, we believe that the goal of effective compromise has been achieved. If we cannot agree based on the first two ideas, then the remaining ideas are offered as ways to gain additional information that might give rise to additional ideas for compromise.

We believe that the storm last weekend clearly illustrates the primary importance of maintaining a strong volunteer/paid combination fire department. Large-scale emergencies are becoming routine events, and during such incidents we cannot rely on the mutual aid system, and we cannot respond effectively unless we deploy all of our resources – both paid and volunteer. At such times, it is essential that our volunteer members are trained and experienced to respond to the full range of conditions encountered.

Core Proposals

1. Reconsider the Paid Deputy Chief Concept

The Fire Council has proposed the concept of a paid deputy chief serving under a volunteer chief. We believe that this concept can address the primary concerns of the Village Board about supervision and leadership of the paid staff, without disrupting an overall department structure that we view as being essential to the maintenance of an effective volunteer/paid combination fire department. While alternative structures can always be proposed and considered in the future, our view is that the addition of a paid deputy chief would be a permanent change, not a temporary change that represents a transition to a fully paid chief structure.

2. Affirm the Appointment of Chief Nominated by the Membership

The membership, following the process defined in law and in the Department Bylaws, elected a chief by an overwhelming margin in a secret ballot election. There is no doubt that more than 90% of the members want Tom Broderick to be their Chief, based on his 20 years of service and the quality of his leadership during his service as a departmental officer.

We urge the Village Board to reconsider their announced intention to reject his appointment. This would constitute the most severe sanction for any member in the history of the department. Tom Broderick has an extraordinary record of service to the village and deserves respect, not just for him personally, but for him as a symbol of how the village treats and values volunteers.

Additional Proposals

3. Review the TMFD Approach to Supervision of Career Staff

Fire Council encourages the Village Board, accompanied by the Fire Council, to meet with some of the TMFD and Town of Mamaroneck leadership for an informational discussion about the differences between how TMFD organizes and supervises their paid staff and what we do in Larchmont. Are they satisfied with their approach? Can their approach serve as a model for Larchmont? If not, why not? If their approach is cheaper and works better, shouldn't we try it?

4. Authoritatively Determine Legality of Paid Chief Proposal

We recommend that the Village Board agree to a process to authoritatively determine whether particular organizational ideas are legal. We believe that requesting an Attorney General opinion is a good approach, as it can be requested and received during the period before Rich Heine could pass a test.

It is important that Village residents and Fire Department members be reassured that the approach that the Board undertakes is legal. There are enough questions about this uncharted approach to warrant an Attorney General opinion as a prudent measure.

5. Identify Bylaw Changes in Advance

We recommend that the Village Board join with the Fire Council to examine and agree on the Fire Department Bylaws changes necessary to implement the Board's ideas, so that when and if the Board passes one or more resolutions, they are also approving in principle specific Bylaw changes.

This provides greater certainty as to what the approach will be, and it avoids the uncertainties of negotiating with a provisional paid chief about the role of the Fire Council in the oversight of the paid chief.

6. Assess Performance of Similar Fire Departments with Paid Chiefs

The Council recommends that the Board identify some village fire departments that are similar to Larchmont have adopted a paid fire chief concept. This will permit us to jointly assess what has worked and what has not worked. This is a reasonable and prudent step before a major change in structure is made.

At the same time, we can also determine the legal basis for villages with paid chiefs, to identify whether there are legal and organizational models that might be considered.

7. Provide a 5-year Budget Projection

The Fire Council recommends that the Board provide a 5-year budget projection, so that they and we and the residents are fully aware of the budget implications of their request. We also recommend that this project be compared to a 5-year projection of the similar costs for the TMFD Fire District, so that a clear comparison of costs can be made.

8. Meet with Town Officials to Assess Impact on Merger

The Fire Council recommends that the Board and the Fire Council meet with Town elected officials and the TMFD leadership to assess the impact of any paid chief plan on the prospects for merger.

9. Develop a Contingency Plan

The Council recommends that the Board develop a contingency plan for the possibility that there would be insufficient volunteer response following a decision, in the face of profound and pervasive opposition by the volunteer firefighters, to appoint a paid chief.

Our view is that such a situation would require heavy reliance on dual response by TMFD, and that it would represent a step toward *de facto* merger. The plan should therefore consider how, in such a situation, an expedited process of merger might be undertaken.

10. Develop a Written Plan

The Fire Council recommends that the Board provide a written plan as the basis for any proposed course of action. The plan should explain what is being done, and why. The plan should be made available to the Fire Council and to the residents, and there should be a public hearing before the Board makes a final decision as to what to do.