

Fire Coordinator Report to Town Board 09 FEB 2023

With Cassie's invaluable help, all five contracts with the fire departments and Dryden Ambulance were upgraded and hand-delivered so that I could meet with the Fire Chiefs and Boards of Directors so that the new language could be gone over in person and any concerns addressed. To a very large degree all the contracts were standardized. Some language was added to require that the fire departments all increase both their frequency, accuracy, and be more comprehensive in their reporting to the Town. These changes will enable the Town to have a greater understanding of how each department is doing with their alarm responses, number of volunteers, and training. The new contracts also require that each department meet with the Town Fire Coordinator to develop plans for improvement, with mutually agreed upon benchmarks for progress/completion. They are also required to meet with me regularly to review the progress made in achieving their goals.

We had a well attended Town of Dryden Chiefs meeting a couple weeks ago, during which we all agreed that the number one challenge facing all the Town departments are the issues surrounding retention and recruitment of members. I have been conducting extensive research into all of the issues surrounding the problem, and the Chiefs and I will come up with a comprehensive plan to address the issue at our next meeting in March.

I am beginning to reach out to all of the administrative officers of the fire departments, the members of their Boards of Directors, the Presidents, Secretaries, and Treasurers so that I can hear of their concerns regarding the running of their fire departments. They are the unsung heroes of the Town's fire departments, and devote countless hours in chairing meetings, preparing budgets and reports, approving purchases, managing the finances, and setting policies. I have suggested that they as a Town-wide group meet as needed so that they can share their collective wisdom with each other. The Chiefs of the departments have always had at least some opportunity to meet and discuss things, almost all of the Administrators don't even know who their colleagues and counterparts in their neighboring departments are.

My plan is to establish some working groups, made of members from all of the Town fire departments, to meet on as needed basis to conduct research and share experiences and ideas regarding such topics as Recruitment and Retention, Health and Safety, Technology, EMS, Apparatus, Hose and Nozzles, Personal Protective Equipment, Training, and Communications. My plan is to have each department forward a few names of people who have the time, expertise, and ability to conduct solid research for each of the aforementioned groups. I'm hopeful that the Chiefs will name rank and file members and lower ranking officers; the Chiefs are already overloaded and these groups will be a way for others to both develop leadership skills and feel more engaged and valued.

One issue that needs to be addressed is that some fire departments have been having great difficulty in responding to calls within their contracted areas. As of today all of the departments need help at times in fielding a timely and effective response to the ever growing numbers of calls for assistance from the public. Some departments need more help with EMS responses than others, others lack enough trained firefighters to quickly and effectively respond to a fire. Some have almost no one who can quickly respond during working hours M-F, others lose a significant portion of their members at certain times of the year. I have begun working with all of the departments to help them strengthen their automatic

mutual aid plans, recognizing whatever deficiencies exist and coming up with an automatically dispatched mutual aid plan to help out whenever they cannot respond. The Chiefs will need to set aside their feelings of pride in their organization and possibly ancient feelings of animosity in order to come up with an effective plan, but I am determined to take whatever steps need to happen to make it so that when someone calls 911 in the Town help will be sent.

A few weeks ago I spent the morning touring the Enfield fire station, and meeting with their Fire Chief and Board Chair, both friends of mine for almost 40 years. I am hoping to arrange for members of the Town of Dryden fire departments to join me in having that same opportunity to see and hear from another local fire department how they run their operation. I was very impressed with almost everything I saw and heard at Enfield. Their physical facility is huge, well designed, and spotlessly clean. All of their apparatus is well designed, without any extraneous bells and whistles, and is well equipped and maintained. Enfield has developed a tried and true program for recruiting, retaining, and training new volunteers. In years past the fire department had some significant tussles with their Town Board, mostly regarding their budget, and its impact on the Town tax rates. Enfield is physically smaller and has a much smaller population than Dryden, and has a much smaller tax base and very few commercial establishments. The Town Board and the fire department have worked well together for some years now, largely because the fire department chose to up their game, become more professional in their operations, and generally prove to the Town Board that their 2023 annual contract of just under \$340,000 is money well spent.

The Town of Dryden fire departments have begun collaborating regarding training again, already there have been several important joint training sessions held. I will be encouraging them all to engage each other even more in the future. After working with the Town Code Enforcement office, I have developed a list of condemned buildings within the Town and have visited several of them with an eye towards utilizing the buildings as Town wide training opportunities so that all the Town's firefighters can practice their skills in a realistic environment. I have no plans to allow any live fire training at any of these buildings, but firefighters can learn a great deal without actually burning a structure.

One long term goal is to work towards all of the Town fire departments working together to have all of their apparatus, equipment, and standard operating procedures to be interoperable in the short run, and in the long term agree to develop common specifications for big ticket items such as SCBA, turnout gear, hoses, and even apparatus to a degree. Any steps taken in that direction will make working together at fires more effective and has great potential for saving money when essential equipment is ordered. The Varna Fire Department has already decided to change its 30 plus year practice of using 2 inch attack lines with storz couplings to the 1 ¾ inch hose with threaded couplings like all the other Town fire departments use. Varna is also considering changing its historical training night of Thursday training on Wednesday evenings specifically so that they can train with their mutual aid partners in the Town.

Some of the departments have already seen an increase in their numbers of active volunteers. In one instance a department has redoubled their recruiting efforts and are continuing with their winning efforts at making new members feel welcomed and put into an effective training program. Another department has been successful in luring back previously active and trained members who had quit because of leadership and organizational issues. I'm also exploring the possibilities of expanding the numbers of mutual aid members in all the departments, thereby allowing trained members of one

department to help out another Town department if they regularly spend time in another departments covered area.

There's much to do, but 2023 is definitely looking great !

Respectfully submitted,

Chris O'Connor

Town Fire Coordinator