



LEVERETT FIRE DEPARTMENT

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Brian J. Cook - Fire Chief

To: Selectboard, Personnel Board, Finance Committee, and Town Administrator McGinnis

From: Fire Chief Brian J. Cook

Date: 3/23/2023

Re: Fire Chief Increased Hours Request

I apologize for not following the town's policies and procedures in terms of requesting an increase in fire chief hours during the public budget hearing on Tuesday, March 21, 2023. Given that this is my second budget cycle as fire chief perhaps monthly or quarterly department head meetings might be beneficial to increase cohesiveness of the departments and outline upcoming meetings and procedures. I feel increased communication amongst the department heads, Town Administrator, town boards and committees would be advantageous to all involved.

I hereby submit this written justification, request, and financial analysis to have the fire chief's hours increased fifteen hours from twenty-five to forty hours per week.

Past Studies

Two committees were formed, one in 2006-2007 and another in 2013 for the purpose of reviewing and analyzing the Leverett Fire Department's functions and staffing levels. Once the data had been gathered, an analysis took place through research. The examination was primarily by assessing other local departments and nationwide trends. The findings of both final reports were similar in nature in that it was recommended that a full-time position be created. The 2006-2007 report stated the estimated cost of hiring an individual was deemed to be too great at this time. While the 2013 study suggested the town look into hiring a full-time firefighter and a part-time fire chief. Since the reports were released ten years ago the fire department call volume has increased, the services the department provides have increased, the reporting requirements to the state have increased, mandated training has increased, and the professionalism and responsibility of being a highly efficient, fiscally responsible, well trained, ready to respond department has increased as well.

Justification

The reasoning for a full-time position at the time the two reports were written which still holds true today, is the difficulty in recruiting enough paid on-call members who are available particularly during the day, the demographics of the town being of an aging population with limited applicant pool, and the responsibilities, functions, and duties that the fire department performs. Employing a full-time fire chief aids in addressing many of those issues in the following areas:

Efficiency: A full-time fire chief is dedicated solely to managing the fire department, which means they can devote their full attention to overseeing the department's operations, staff, and budget. This ensures that the department runs efficiently and effectively.

Professionalism: A full-time fire chief is a trained professional who has the skills and expertise necessary to manage a fire department. They are familiar with best practices, regulations, and standards for fire safety, which enables them to make informed decisions that promote the safety of both the firefighters and the public. The time they put into the department directly correlates with the output through services the department provides to the town.

Emergency Response: A full-time fire chief is available to respond to emergencies at all hours but especially during the day when most of the fire department members are working out of town or are otherwise unavailable to respond. A fast response by the fire chief ensures that necessary resources are responding quickly to resolve any incident. Proper size-up of a situation allows for the appropriate resources to be requested in a timely manner to minimize and mitigate the evolving and expanding incident.

Community Engagement: A full-time fire chief can be more involved in the community and establish stronger relationships with residents, local groups, and other stakeholders. This can help the department to better understand the needs of the community and develop strategies to address them. For example, the fire department currently installs house numbers, visits homes to conduct safety inspections, and installs smoke and carbon monoxide alarms. The aging population of Leverett that the fire department encounters often through medical incidents overall wants to continue to live in their homes as long as possible. More could be done by the fire department to assist them with this goal if more time were available.

Planning and Development: A full-time fire chief can devote time to planning for the future of the department, including developing long-term strategies for improving services, acquiring new equipment, and enhancing training programs. In addition, more time would be available to seek out alternative funding sources for equipment and training primarily through grant writing.

OSHA: In 2020 the Commonwealth of Massachusetts applied to the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) for formal state plan authorization to regulate state and local government employers. After a two-year review OSHA approved the request and as of August 18, 2022 Massachusetts has become an OSHA state. OSHA has increased the requirements of fire departments (in addition to other departments – police, highway, etc.) in terms of required training, policies, and documentation.

ASHER: Effective August 1, 2023 the Department of Public Health through the Office of Emergency Medical Services is mandating certified EMTs at all levels, as well as any first responders, who are staffing emergency vehicles must complete an initial Active Shooter/Hostile Event Response (ASHER) training and undergo a refresher course every two years thereafter. This is based on the state's adoption of the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) 3000 standard (2021 edition, or as revised). The mandate requires the department to add another training, role, equipment to maintain, and responsibility to support police and other agencies during an incident of this type.

Fire Code: The new state fire code went into effect December 9, 2022, and has become a much more thorough and involved process. In addition, the new fire code calls for more integration between the building officials and the fire chief. Some areas in which this collaboration is increasing include fire alarm panels, residential construction, solar panel installations, and energy solar systems (ESS) (i.e. Tesla Power Wall) where a permit from the fire department is required for any ESS greater than 1KWh. The Building Inspector in Leverett is contracted through the Franklin Regional Council of Government (FRCOG) and is only available during daytime hours.

An increase in the fire chief's hours would put the three pillars of Leverett public safety (police, fire, and highway) in line with one another as both the police and highway department already have a full-time department head. This allows for greater collaboration, pre-incident planning, hazard mitigation, and emergency response.

Recent Historical Context

During fiscal year (FY) 2018 the fire department approached the town through the Selectboard, and Personnel Board and Finance Committee to request to add more hours to the fire department primarily to be put towards administrative functions and increased daytime coverage.

At the time in 2018 to increase the number of hours Chief Ingram was willing to decrease his number of hours worked on paper by one (from twenty down to nineteen) and have the money previously allocated toward the fire chief benefits be put into a nineteen hour per week deputy chief position. Previously the deputy chief was paid a small stipend and hourly at the firefighter rate for training and responses. From July 2018 to May 2021, having two nineteen hour per week positions served the town well as an effective cost saving measure to provide 38 hours of work per week which was put into the fire department functions, duties, and responsibilities.

In May of 2021 Chief Ingram resigned from the Leverett Fire Department to pursue a full-time career opportunity as the fire chief in the town of Belchertown. Then Deputy Chief Cook was hired as the next fire chief. Chief Cook came to the Personnel Board on multiple occasions throughout FY22 to explain the needs of the fire department and request the fire chief's weekly hours be increased from nineteen to forty as the deputy chief was/is unable to put in the needed nineteen hours per week due to their current full-time employment obligations.

The Personnel Board understood the need of the fire department however due to the town's financial position could not recommend increasing the hours to full-time as the expense would be too great at this time in one large increase of hours and benefits. Instead, the Personnel Board led by a statement from Phil Carter recommended that since the fire chief was putting in hours above the nineteen hours per week that the hours be increased to twenty-five to match the number of hours being worked. The increase in hours over nineteen hours would require the town to offer benefits. These benefits and increase in hours would primarily be funded by decreasing the deputy chief's position from nineteen hours per week back to a small stipend and paid hourly at the firefighter rate. The town voted in favor of this recommendation at the April 30, 2022 Annual Town Meeting.

The current decrease of 13 hours per week results in a loss of 676 hours per year. Having a full-time fire chief would recoup most of those lost hours. This number is realistically slightly less due to paid time off (sick, vacation, and personal).

The Leverett Fire Chief primary functions, duties, and responsibilities are:

- Responsible for all administrative duties and operational functions of the department
- Plans, organizes, and instructs fire and medical training for personnel
- Prepares, implements, and trains personnel in department guidelines, procedures, and regulations
- Teaches in the department's fire safety and prevention programs for children and older adults
- Coordinates all maintenance, testing, and repairs on department apparatus and equipment
- Develops and implements department budget and handles all fiscal related matters
- Applies for, purchases from, and manages all department grants
- Oversees all department inspections and permits (26F home sales, life safety, home safety, tank storage, oil burner, school, town buildings, new construction, etc.)
- Responds to emergency and non-emergency calls for service as Incident Commander
- Provides emergency medical services as an EMT Basic
- Serves as the Forest Warden for the town of Leverett

- Attends meetings, trainings, workshops, and other educational opportunities to further their knowledge base and relay this information to department personnel

Financial Analysis and Implications

To increase the fire chief's hours from twenty-five hours per week to forty hours per week at the fire chief's current hourly rate (factoring in the 4.5% COLA for FY24) an increase in the amount of \$29,493.37 would need to be made to the fire department budget and overall town budget.

With \$832 of the \$29,362.37 going towards benefits increases according to the Leverett Treasurer Ryan Mailloux and the remaining \$28,530.37 to the fire chief's salary. After speaking with Town Administrator Margie McGinnis this increase in hours, salary, and benefits translates to a tax rate increase of \$0.09 per \$1,000.00. An increase of \$0.09 per \$1,000.00 would thereby have the following impact on the example assessed property values:

- a) a home/property assessed at \$350,000 would see an annual increase of \$31.50 in taxes,
- b) a home/property assessed at \$500,000 would see an annual increase of \$45.00 in taxes and,
- c) a home/property assessed at \$1,000,000 would see an annual increase of \$90 in taxes.

The chart below more closely examines the fire department budget with the increased hours.

FIRE DEPARTMENT	FY23	FY24		
Salaries		Request		
Chief	45,440	75,976	30,536	67.20%
Deputy Chief	2,575	2,691	116	4.50%
3 Lieutenants	3,832	4,004	172	4.50%
Response Pay	8,882	11,782	2,900	32.65%*
Training	32,447	33,907	1,460	4.50%
<i>Subtotal</i>	<i>93,176</i>	<i>128,360</i>	<i>35,184</i>	<i>37.76%</i>
Expenses			0	
Training	1,000	1,800	800	80.00%
Equipment Maintenance	9,590	9,590	0	0.00%
Gas/Oil	4,000	4,500	500	12.50%
Mutual Aid/Vehicle Maintenance	3,500	3,500	0	0.00%
FRCOG communications	2,865	2,883	18	0.63%
Radio Maintenance	2,835	2,835	0	0.00%
Software Support	3,935	3,800	-135	-3.43%
Brush Fires	2,857	3,500	643	22.51%
Supplies/Equip./Misc.	8,000	8,600	600	7.50%
Uniforms	1,000	1,000	0	0.00%
Telephone/clothing allowance	1,000	1,000	0	0.00%
Personal protective equipment	7,550	7,550	0	0.00%
<i>Subtotal</i>	<i>48,132</i>	<i>50,558</i>	<i>2,426</i>	<i>5.04%</i>
TOTAL	141,308	178,918	37,610	26.62%

* Two hour minimum pay for overnight response added

Barring any computational inaccuracies, the fire department budget (salaries and expenses) with the increase in hours represents 2.5% of the town's overall budget.

Closing

Time Period	Chief	Deputy Chief	Total Weekly Scheduled Hours
Prior to July 1, 2018	20	0	20
July 1, 2018 to May 2021	19	19	38
May 2021 to June 30, 2022	19	0 (unable to fill)	19
July 1, 2022 to Current	25	0	25
Request (July 1, 2023 forward)	40	0	40

The fire department was very effective and available to the residents of Leverett and the community during the nearly three years that they were able to work thirty-eight hours each week. It is my hope and thus request that the town re-establishes the increase in hours by increasing the fire chief's hours to forty per week. A secondary effect of doing this is it will create stability within the fire department as the number of hours worked will remain consistent moving forward.

The decision of this magnitude certainly needs to be made with many factors considered and stakeholders input including but not limited to the town's financial condition, the needs of the town, and the services the fire department provides. It is my duty as head of the fire department to bring forward the needs of the department to best address the people we serve, the people of Leverett. With increased call volume, an aging population, the townspeople's needs of the fire department are increasing and need to be reflected in the number of hours put in. If the town is unable to fulfill this request at this time, then the fire department will continue to provide high quality services to Leverett as we have done since its inception.

I can make myself available to listen to any comments, answer any questions, or address any concerns you may have. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully submitted,



Brian J. Cook, Fire Chief