



MEMO From the Office of the Town Manager

To: Colchester Selectboard
From: Aaron Frank, Town Manager
CC: Seth Lasker, Emergency Management Coordinator
Date: January 24, 2020
Re: Update on Fire Services Changes

Here is an update on the effort to evolve Colchester fire protection services to better serve the community.

Summary: The Colchester Selectboard has created a town-wide fire department which will begin service on July 1, 2020. This new department will bring together the three organizations that currently provide fire protection services: Colchester Center Volunteer Fire Company, Malletts Bay Fire Department, and Saint Michael's College Fire and Rescue. Fire protection expenses for vehicles, equipment, buildings and volunteer stipends have been, and will continue to be, paid for with funding from property taxes.

History: The two volunteer departments began fire services in the early 50's in the two separate population centers, the Bay and the Village. In 1951, the Town levied a property tax for fire protection and made 1% of total taxes available to each Fire department. From 1951 to 2020, annual contracted fire expenses rose from 2% of total property taxes to 9.5%, making it the third largest expense of 25 service groups in Colchester Town government with expenses of \$1,009,651.

Evolution: While separate fire departments made sense in 1951, since then Colchester has grown together. We owe it to our citizens to consolidate our fire services to provide better coverage and to ensure we are making the best use of precious taxpayer resources. The Colchester Selectboard has created a town-wide fire department which will begin service on July 1, 2020.

This service is being planned and budgeted for a combination of professional firefighters, both volunteer and career. In recent years, the fire chiefs from Colchester Center and Malletts Bay asked the Town Selectboard to add paid firefighters during weekday daytime when there is inadequate coverage to respond to structure fires. This is a dangerous situation that needs to be rectified and adding paid staff made more sense to the Selectboard under a consolidated approach.

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Process: Providing improved and consolidated fire services has been considered for decades. Recent community efforts, requests by the fire chiefs, and fiscal considerations by the Selectboard resulted in the change.

In 2012, the Colchester Heritage Project recommended considering the advantages of consolidating fire services. The Colchester Governance Committee in 2014 noted that fire budgets were developed independently and the Town was billed for services through separate contracts making oversight, coordination of capital expenses, and cost control difficult. Two options in a 2014 Governance Committee report on fire districts included merging fire districts under a single prudential committee or combining under Town government.

The Selectboard became concerned with some of the audit findings related to Colchester Center Volunteer Fire and given the amount of funding and the importance of the service, there was interest in a higher level of financial accountability and contract compliance as outlined [here](#).

In the spring of 2019 the Town provided notice to the three fire departments about changes necessary to address deficiencies in fire protection services. Specifically, the Chiefs of Colchester Center and Malletts Bay Fire departments had notified the Selectboard that the lack of available volunteers to address a structure fire during weekday daytime was dangerous to life and property.

The Selectboard considered this and agreed to provide funding for career firefighters during weekday daytime. The Selectboard asked that the fire departments, in order to continue receiving Town funding, make one of two changes: 1) combine as a single department with a single chief and a single board; or 2) transfer fire services to the Town which would then provide for fire protection as a singular town fire department with a single chief.

The CFD#2 and CFD#3 Prudential Committees (boards) signed one year contracts with the Town, concluding June 30, 2020. Both CFD#2 and CFD#3 prudential committees voted to work with the town on the transfer option. The Town engaged the fire chiefs about these changes and negotiated and executed agreements over the course of multiple meetings with both the CFD#2 and CFD#3 prudential committees for the transfer option. The CFD#3 Prudential Committee and CFD#3 negotiating team included Fire Chief Sandy Ladd.

The Town has shared information on this effort publicly at Selectboard meetings on [June 11](#), [September 10](#), and [November 12](#), 2019 to which the Prudential Committee Chairs and fire chiefs of CFD#2/Malletts Bay, CFD#3/Colchester Center and Saint Michael's Fire were specifically invited. The Selectboard also held a special meeting on June 13th, 2019 at which the Selectboard had a conversation with the Colchester Fire District #3 prudential committee including its Fire Chief, the Colchester Fire District #2 plus its Fire Chief and District Administrator.

Future: The Town's proposed budget for FY 21 (July 1, 2020-June 30, 2021) includes a \$207,000 (20%) increase for fire protection services including a full time town-wide chief and three firefighters to address the deficit during weekday daytime.

Between the three departments there are nearly 90 volunteers. It is the Town's hope and intention that all volunteers will remain active in the new department. The Town will continue to recruit, train, call up, and importantly, honor the volunteers, as well as past contributors who have provided seventy years of fire coverage in Colchester. This change will unite our current three fire departments' staff and four stations under a single command as a Town department.