

Quarterly Report to the Town Board

Enfield Town Board Representatives; Enfield Volunteer Fire Company Leadership
For Town Board Meeting; September 13, 2023

By Robert Lynch, Councilperson:

The past quarter has become a month of major transition for the relationship between this Town Board and the Enfield Volunteer Fire Company (EVFC). While Town Board members stand well aware of these changes, some residents in the Enfield community may not. Therefore, I will provide a brief summary herein, and address other matters facing Enfield's fire and emergency services.

Transition to Fire District Governance: At its June 14 monthly meeting, following a Public Hearing, this Enfield Town Board dissolved the Enfield Fire Protection District and created the new "Enfield Fire District." The change moves contractual oversight for EVFC operations out of the Town Board's control and into the hands of a five-member Board of Fire Commissioners, which now governs the Fire District.

In July, following the receipt of letters of interest and executive session deliberations, the Town Board recommended five Enfield residents become the initial appointees as Fire Commissioners. At its subsequent meeting August 9, the Town Board confirmed to appointment these five nominees. Each Commissioner will serve through the end of 2023. Commissioners elected at an annual Fire District Election December 12 will serve thereafter.

At its August meeting, the Town Board appointed Cortney Bailey as District Treasurer, to serve until December 31. Also that night, the Town Board decided to keep the Treasurer's position appointive, consistent with the Town Board's initial intent. The Board decided not to make the position elective, as state law permits as its default position.

The Enfield Fire District legally took effect August 1, 2023. Commissioners held their first official meeting August 9, the date of their appointment (though they'd convened unofficially with the Commission's attorney August 1.) Organizational business dominated the August 9 meeting. Among the items decided, the Commissioners elected Jim Mathews as its Board Chair.

At that first official meeting, the Fire Commissioners decided to put to Enfield voters September 12 three resolutions, the principal of which would answer a new state requirement affecting Fire Districts only. The Board of Commissioners put to referendum a resolution to increase what's called the "Statutory Spending Limitation" for the Fire District, and set it at a maximum \$575,000 for each of the next five years. Commissioners were cautioned that without voter authorization to raise the limit, state law would limit spending for fire protection in Enfield considerably below current 2023 levels.

Also scheduled for referendum by the Board of Fire Commissioners were resolutions to: 1) Establish a Vehicle Purchase, Replacement, Improvement, Repair and Maintenance Capital Reserve Fund; and 2) Establish an Equipment Replacement, Improvement, Repair and Maintenance Capital Reserve Fund.

As required by law, the Fire Commissioners held a Public Hearing September 6 on the three resolutions to be put to referendum. About 20 residents attended the Public Hearing. The hearing lasted about 45 minutes, after which the Chair adjourned the hearing and the Board proceeded to other business. Public Hearing discussion that night proved lively. As one item of additional business, the Commissioners appointed Alexis Comparetta, an EVFC volunteer, as their Secretary.

Yesterday, Tuesday, September 12, Enfield voters approved each of the resolutions put to referendum. The resolution to increase the Statutory Spending Limit passed 102 votes to 78. The resolution to establish the vehicle fund passed 117 votes to 62 (with one blank ballot). The equipment fund resolution passed 117 votes to 63. The referendum went smoothly, without incident or irregularities.

The Enfield Fire District's next meeting is Monday, September 25th, at 6:30 PM in the Town Board's meeting room. Annual budget preparation is expected to dominate much of the meeting's business.

Public Safety Concerns: On Monday, September 11, Enfield Fire Chief Greg Stevenson, Board of Fire Commissioners Chair Jim Mathews and I met with five members of the Tompkins County Department of Emergency Response (DOER), including DOER's Director, Michael Stitley. The meeting related to a traffic accident August 30, 2023 at the corner of Applegate Road and Mecklenburg Road (NY-79) in Enfield. Its circumstances prompted Chief Stevenson's concern that Tompkins County's emergency dispatch procedures that day proved inadequate.

The accident involved two vehicles. In Chief Stevenson's opinion, initial actions by the County's 911 Call Center minimized the collision's true significance. One vehicle landed in a ditch; the other was propelled perhaps 100 yards into a field. Though on-scene accounts reported one accident vehicle smoking, Enfield Fire units were initially not summoned. Moreover, the 911 Call Center relied heavily upon an accident victim's own injury assessment to delay its dispatch of the Rescue Squad. As later facts revealed, one accident victim required treatment at a trauma center.

"The average person has zero clue to assess injuries," Mathews told the meeting. And the observation of a smoking vehicle, he and Chief Stevenson said, should have prompted an immediate fire service response. (I said I agreed.) Moreover, a sheriff's deputies' handling of matters at the scene suggested an inconsistent or inadequate command and control of the situation.

Monday's roundtable discussion lasted nearly two hours. It concluded with Director Stitley acknowledging that the incident could have been handled better and that improvements stand in order. Call Center protocols establish levels of accident severity, which in turn dictate the level of emergency response. Various fire departments in Tompkins County, we were told, have requested different levels of severity to trigger their response. Chief Stevenson indicated that Enfield may consider revising its criteria so as to respond to more incidents of this sort in the future. "Enfield will mull over where we stand," Stevenson told the meeting.

Future Meetings: In recent years, leadership of the Town Board and the EVFC have met quarterly to discuss matters of mutual interest. Supervisor Redmond and I held our last such meeting May 22 of this year. I met informally with Fire Chief Stevenson and EVFC President Dennis Hubbell on June 26th, principally to discuss organization of the newly-created Board of Fire Commissioners. An initially-scheduled Quarterly Meeting August 21 was not held. And the status of future quarterly meetings remains in doubt given that fire governance has now transitioned to the Fire District's Commissioners. Personally, I would welcome these meetings to continue.

Respectfully submitted,

Robert A. Lynch
Councilperson