

**MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE MAYOR AND COUNCIL OF THE BOROUGH OF NETCONG HELD JANUARY 16, 2014 AT THE NETCONG MUNICIPAL BUILDING, 23 MAPLE AVENUE, NETCONG, NEW JERSEY COMMENCING AT 7:00 P.M.**

Mayor Nametko called the meeting to order at 7:00 P.M.

**PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE**

**OPEN PUBLIC MEETING ACT STATEMENT**

The Borough Clerk read the following statement:

Adequate notice of this meeting as defined by the Open Public Meetings Act has been provided by:

1. Posting a notice of said meeting in the space provided for such announcements at the Borough Hall on January 2, 2014.
2. Publishing a notice in the Daily Record, the official newspaper of the Borough on January 6, 2014 and faxing a copy to the Star Ledger on January 2, 2014.

**ROLL CALL**

Those in attendance were Councilwoman Butler, Councilman Hathaway, Councilman Koster, Councilman Laureys, Councilman Still, Councilman Sylvester and Mayor Nametko. Also present was Borough Clerk, Ms. Eckert and Borough Administrator, Mr. Blakeslee.

**MAYOR'S COMMENTS**

The Mayor thanked everyone for all of the effort put forward for this Task Force. He did not anticipate this was going to be an easy evening. He asked all to keep an open mind and to consider the future.

For the record, Councilman Koster recused himself from the following discussion and stepped down from the dais.

Councilman Sylvester read a statement he obtained from Mr. Bucco that stated a volunteer firefighter could participate as an elected official in this public discussion.

**TASK FORCE COMMITTEE REPORT**

Councilwoman Butler provided an overview of the current firefighters and their importance to Netcong. She noted a potential hindrance by continuing with two fire station locations. She made a recommendation to close Hilltop #2 and relocate the equipment and personnel to Maple Avenue and call this facility the Netcong Fire Department. She cited benefits and put a year on the time frame for transition.

She reviewed the task force meeting. A pamphlet was handed to her at that time and she read from it. She continued her report with scenario's for the fire equipment. This included the purchase of the new fire truck as discussed in previous meetings. Councilwoman Butler's opinion was that although new equipment was very much needed, she felt that the fire company stays status quo with equipment. She also felt that the Hilltop facility can remain but used for other purposes by the firemen.

Councilwoman Butler reviewed a multitude of topics, described the research completed and research still needed and the many discussions with the fire companies regarding the equipment and the process of consolidation. She repeated that she felt the ideal situation would be to have all equipment named with "Netcong fire Department."

The Mayor interjected that whatever the name of the fire company it must remain as a 501c3 nonprofit organization.

Councilman Sylvester was not comfortable with a consolidation and felt both buildings should remain active with perhaps some procedural changes.

Councilman Laureys wished both buildings would remain open but felt the equipment and actual fire fighting emergency activity come from one building.

Councilman Hathaway felt the consolidation was logical but expressed concern about the future of the related social clubs. He noted that these issues need to be dealt with and resolved before going forward. He requested that no penalties be incurred by anyone from this transition. Regarding what equipment gets consolidated, he felt that the recommendations and decision should come from the fire experts. He added that there may be possible costs from consolidating the team has not considered. In sum Councilman Hathaway's opinion was for consolidation at Maple Avenue.

Councilman Sylvester stated that there currently exists disagreement between the fire companies on what equipment should remain. He added it will be very costly to move Hilltop to Maple Avenue. Plus, all the equipment would not fit there. He wanted to know where the additional 30 sets of gear would go. He also noted the repainting of all the trucks to change the name would be costly. Councilman Sylvester summarized that the Maple Avenue facility will need to be remodeled in order to function properly. He felt that the sense of consolidation could be achieved without changing the 2 fire companies.

The Mayor stated that many good ideas were brought up. And he agreed that any decision made to consolidate has to be made at the fire company level. Clearly both fire companies needed to come up with one working scenario together.

The Council continued discussion with history of the two fire companies. It was noted that there is some dissension between the two groups. Also continued was discussion about the pros and cons of either scenario.

The borough attorney reminded the Mayor that there would be no voting during tonight's session.

Councilman Hathaway agreed that our fire facilities need to be updated but he felt the Council should focus on upgrading one facility. The Council should provide the amount that the town can afford and the fire experts should determine what is needed. The Maple Avenue facility is clearly not ready for all the firefighters to move there at present. But he agreed with Councilwoman Butler that in the future there needs to be one facility.

The Council discussed grants. The Mayor noted that it was very difficult to get grants for apparatus but it may be easier to get grants for the facility. He agreed that the advice of both fire companies, all firemen is needed to make the right decision.

The Mayor asked for a motion to provide a short recess. A motion was passed and approved by unanimous voice vote at 8:07 PM. It was noted that public comments would be addressed after the recess.

The meeting resumed at 8:15 PM.

### **PUBLIC COMMENTS**

Mr. Jack Sylvester, III, Hilltop Road Netcong, came to speak on behalf of the Hilltop fire company. He is the captain of the Hilltop Fire Company and has been a firefighter for over 14 years. He described some rumors that have been circulating for the past few months. He noted that the Hilltop Fire Company was the first fire company in Netcong which was formed in 1929. He noted the fire company is completely staffed by volunteers. The Hilltop Fire Company has been family oriented. He noted that this particular fire company has been maintained without funds from the town. The firemen themselves have been responsible for all the maintenance. He noted that there is no place that both fire companies can be consolidated without an upgrade expense of approximately \$1 million. Mr. Sylvester also offered that the Hilltop Fire Company did not believe an expenditure of \$870,000 was necessary for the fire truck proposed. He provided historical information about previous fires and how they were handled through shared resources with the two Netcong Fire Companies and the Stanhope Fire Department. He stated after 9-11, Homeland Security has encouraged duplicating resources to facilitate better response in times of crisis. The U.S. Military reinforces this concept because there is coverage if one entity becomes incapacitated. Mr. Sylvester questioned some of the documentation that stated a new fire truck was required. He has not seen this information nor does he believe it's true. He briefly discussed the previous task force meeting and why he believed it went wrong. In summary, he felt that all information input from the fire companies needed to be carefully reviewed and a cohesive decision be made by all parties.

Mr. Rich Sylvester, 113 Allen St., Netcong, representing himself as a taxpayer stepped forward. He wanted to know what originally prodded this study. The Mayor responded purely the cost of a new piece of apparatus. The Mayor realized this was not just a yes or no decision and opened this to determine what

was needed on a bigger scale. Mr. Sylvester felt the decision was being made without understanding the full scope and definition of the issue. The Mayor and Mr. Sylvester discussed actual equipment numbers. Mr. Sylvester requested concrete numbers including how it affects his taxes going forward that completely cover the issue before anyone goes forward. The Mayor clarified that the task going forward is to make a decision yes or no regarding Fire House Company number 1's request for a new truck by July 4. Mr. Sylvester wondered why this was not going to ballot. The Mayor replied that is a possibility.

Mr. Dominic Arbolino, 18 Allen St., has been a fire house member for 42 years. He noted that in the 42 years of experience there have been approximately 6 trucks purchased and never before did he ever hear criticism or complaints by other firefighters for an acquisition. He mandated that this is causing arguments and it's not right. He can't believe that the town feels it doesn't need another truck. Councilman Sylvester and Mr. Carr Arbolino continued this discussion.

Mr. Pat Kunkel, 13 Church St., Netcong. He's very uncomfortable with seeing a betrayal within the companies. He feels it's almost gang like. There is a lot of history and heart involved in this situation. He feels the Mayor and Council have to make the decision for the merger. Until it's made, the dissension will continue. Once the merge has been made then a decision on equipment etc. can be made. Councilwoman Butler and Mr. Couple continued discussion on their view of the previous task force meeting. Councilwoman Butler explained that she didn't feel right making this decision with the Council without taking in the hundreds of years of experience and knowledge the firemen had to offer.

Mr. Joe Lamberto began by saying he has 47 years experience as a firemen. Now due to a heart problem, he doesn't respond as fast as he used to. He noted that he agrees with Donnie Arbolino. He wanted to know how this situation moved from a truck to a merging of 2 firehouses. He questioned how a truck issue changed so considerably. He felt that the situation should be returned to a yes or no vote on a truck. He explained how the Hilltop Fire Company obtained funds on their own.

Mr. Michael Pellek, 2 Leehill Rd., Andover, NJ has been a member of both fire companies; 22 years have been with the Hilltop Fire Department. He believes he is part of both fire departments and they work as a team. He does not like how the topic of merging the two fire companies started and developed over the past year. He became part of the task force and was stunned that after the 1<sup>st</sup> meeting the task force was not going to meet again. He commented regarding the talk about the Hilltop manpower. He confidently stated and said that Jack Sylvester would agree this problem has been resolved. He offered the idea of the two fire companies sharing schedule logs and training in order to enhance both companies. He added these could be all temporary reassignments. He agreed that in a perfect world there should be one complete firehouse. He reviewed some history that provided examples of the advantage of having two separate fire houses. For instance during Hurricane Floyd, polls and wires were down on Maple Ave. trapping Fire Co. #1, Hilltop Co. covered the calls. During the recent road project involving the Route 183 Bridge closing, Hilltop had difficulty responding to certain calls, Fire Co. #1 covered. He stated that the current situation has rendered uncomfortable feelings in each other's firehouses.

He emphasized that this has become a very personal issue. Mr. Pellek noted that formal organizations such as ISO need to be queried before final answers could be made. He also wanted to see complete inventory counts. Councilwoman Butler stated she felt blindsided and overwhelmed by the meeting. Now she said she feels we are hearing logic. The Mayor agreed and stated the most logic that he's heard since this 'cockamamie idea of his started, came up within the last 5 minutes of this meeting. Both the Councilwoman and the Mayor requested all of Mr. Pellek's notes on this topic. Mr. Pellek noted that even though he served here for 32 years he has never been a taxpayer of Netcong. The Mayor and Mr. Pellek discussed details about ISO-ratings to educate the public. He provided current ISO ratings for Netcong. He added that an ISO review could be performed by request and would be free.

The Mayor saw no one coming forward to speak.

A Motion to Close the Meeting to the Public was made by Councilwoman Butler and seconded by Councilman Laureys.

Roll Call: 6 Yes

### **ADJOURNMENT**

A Motion to Adjourn the Meeting was made by Councilman Still at 9:07 PM and was carried by unanimous voice vote.

Respectfully Submitted,

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Cynthia Eckert, Borough Clerk