

# Safety Health & Service Committee Meeting

Monday, November 24, 2003

The Safety Health and Service Committee met in council chambers at 7:00 P.M. to discuss a renewed request for the creation of a position of "Fire Inspector/Investigator" in the fire department. Present at the meeting were committee members Rob Maurer, Art Cicconetti and Chairman Sam Hitchcock. Guests presents were Councilwoman Sandy Cox, Fire Chief Jamie Snyder, Fire Captain Dan Fait, Safety Director Greg Popham, Citizen Ella Slough, and the media.

Chairman Hitchcock began discussion of the matter by explaining that a request for the same position was made in the year 2001 and was defeated at that time by a 4-3 vote. Hitchcock also mentioned that the issue was raised during a quarterly meeting with the fire department in 2002 along with a list of other concerns. Hitchcock pointed out that no action was expected at this meeting and that it was merely to be an initial meeting to bring to proposal to an information gathering stage of the committee. He also mentioned that, if the proposal was endorsed by the committee, funding would need to be available to support the new position.

Hitchcock explained that this time the request was supported by a lengthy document supplied to him at the time the issue was assigned to the SHS Committee at last council meeting. Hitchcock stated that he has read the document and commented on several items of concern listed in the document. He praised the chief and Captain Fait on the professional nature of the document and the obvious time spent in preparation of the report. Hitchcock passed out copies to committee members Cicconetti and Maurer and requested that they read the report thoroughly and report back to him when they had done so. The floor was then relinquished to Chief Snyder for a brief explanation of the request.

Chief Snyder pointed out that the basic problem in the fire department is that Captain Fait and himself are the only certified fire inspectors in the city at the present time. He praised the work of Captain Fait but said that he has tried to do this while carrying on his regular duties. He said that when Dan leaves he will have to do these inspections himself while trying to do his regular duties. He further pointed out that the document presented was the result of a two-year effort. He said that he considered the most important part of this position was that of prevention. He alluded to the report and the state law regarding buildings and their safety. He mentioned that before the election the issue was brought up about trying to bring new business into the community.

He said that one of the most important things is looking at the laws of the State of Ohio regarding buildings and their safety that one of the most important jobs in the city was for someone to come in and make sure that buildings are safe for occupancy by their inhabitants. That we prevent tragedies from happening in the City of New Philadelphia. He gave the example of a "C of O" , (certificate of Occupancy) for someone who wishes to either start a new business or change the type of occupancy or use the building for some other purpose, there are four signatures on the certificate that allows them to operate: the State Electrical Inspector, the State Plumbing Inspector, the State Structural Inspector and the local fire official, the Chief or his appointee and that it should be a certified individual. He said that it is very important that this person understands the safety issues involved with building occupancy.

Chief Snyder reiterated that this meeting was only a time of discovery and encouraged committee members to take the time to read the report and contact him if they had any questions regarding the contents of the report. He stated that his "soap box " issue was that prior to February of 2002, nobody knew where West Warwick, R.I. was but now everybody knows. He said that he is not one of those believers that thinks that it can't happen here. He said that he have the ability to have tragic fires in this town and he hopes that we can make prevention one of our very top priorities.

Chairman Hitchcock then asked those in attendance if they had any questions regarding the issue or the chief's comments. Hitchcock mentioned that there was a budget meeting at Noon this day and asked Finance Chairwoman Sandy Cox to comment on the results of that meeting. Sandy stated: "It's gonna be tight! Real tight!" Art then asked what it takes to certify a person as an inspector. Chief Snyder explained that it was basically a two-week full-time course to get the certificate which basically teaches the person to use the code. He said that a lot of the actual knowledge of fire inspections is picked up by doing them. He said that he and Dan started doing inspections in 1980. He said that he believed that this was a closed course available only to those persons in the fire service. He said that even though they have the authority to cite violators that they prefer to work with the business owners to bring them into compliance rather than cite them.

Treasurer Mike Taylor asked the chief if any state or federal grants were available for this project and the chief responded that there were none ongoing that he was aware of but that he would certainly check with Chief Craft at the State Fire Marshall's Office in Columbus but he did not know of any that were long-term. Mike also asked whether a business would be cited under state code or municipal ordinance and the chief responded that a citation would be issued under Ohio Building Code and Ohio Fire Code. Taylor then asked the chief if he had the option of adding one new member to the fire department would this be his choice and the chief responded that he needed to do this - that it was a desperate move.

Council President Dave Johnson spoke up and commented that another duty for the chief and his departments was to be able to map the businesses in the downtown area so that firefighters would know where the gas and electrical shut-offs are located and what chemicals are used in the business on a day-to-day basis and where they are located. He gave an example of the 1983 fire in the downtown where a fire in one business caused the loss of several neighboring buildings.

Chief Snyder said that what Dave was referring to was "pre-planning" and that it would be something that the fire inspector could have control over. He said that they are trying to do this now with businesses but that there are hundreds of businesses in town but it is impossible to get to all of the businesses at present. Art asked if anyone else in the department that could become a certified inspector. Snyder admitted that anyone could but that it was an extremely difficult part of the job. He said that there is a lot of study involved. He said that when considering a certificate of occupancy for a new business, the state structural inspector would not sign until the chief signed the certificate. He said that there was a lot of weight on the shoulders of the person who signs these certificates. Art said he felt as though the chief should try to get one of the department willing members to assume this responsibility until council could get this matter talked out. The chief assured the committee that he would continue trying to do inspections as time permits but that invariably something would have to suffer.

Hitchcock asked Snyder where they were at on the mapping of the city businesses that Dave Johnson had mentioned. Snyder said that out of about 800 businesses, about 20 had been mapped. When asked about priorities, Chief Snyder responded that schools and places of assembly would take first priority. Hitchcock asked if any of the industries did any of their own mapping and submitted reports to the fire department and Snyder admitted that they did have recording and reporting requirements.

Committee Member Rob Maurer said that he considered the proposed position as being important within the city but before any decision was made he would want a commitment from Gradall and Stone Container that they were going to remain in the city of New Philadelphia. He said we should know by the end of January about Gradall and he was not sure about Stone Container but that the loss of these two companies would be devastating to the city.

Hitchcock reminded committee members that we are only in the information-gathering stage at this point and that anyone with questions should contact Chief Snyder.

Art said that the position was something that probably was needed in the city but he felt as though someone already in the fire department should be sought out to pursue the responsibility at the present time.

Citizen Ella Slough asked the chief what the city's insurance rating was and Snyder responded that on a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being the best, that the city's rating was 4.

City Building Inspector Bill Richesson commented that both Dan Fait and Chief Snyder had already helped him with some of his building inspections because their knowledge in these area was more extensive than his own. Hitchcock commented that this cooperative effort was also brought out in the submitted report and thanked Bill for his comments.

Safety Director Greg Popham commented that 30 years ago when he went to fire school, one of the big things that they preached was that the best thing in a fire department was prevention. He said that if you can keep a fire from happening, you don't have the loss, don't have people moving out, and it reduces your call volume. He said that secondly, with mandatory inspections that are required such as foster homes, day care facilities and schools such as an example of two years ago when Captain Fait found a gas leak at East School while kids were in the school. Popham characterized how tragic that would have been if not discovered. He said that he believed there was a liability involved. He said if problem are reported to the fire department requiring a follow-up inspection that doesn't take place, the city would shoulder a liability for incurred loss. He said that for the past six months, while Dan Fait has been on light duty, he has been doing inspections full-time and that it will be a tremendous burden on the chief to do these inspections after Dan retires.

Dan Fait then said that 23 years ago when he started doing inspections the department was running 600-700 calls a year without the additional responsibilities that have recently been placed on the fire service such as the dive team and Haz-Mat unit. He said that there has been a 400% increase in call volume and that mandatory training has increased. He said that it was easy to do a few inspections in past years when time was available but that with existing situations today it is very difficult to maintain this service to the community. He gave an example of a firefighter doing an inspection that may have been scheduled two weeks prior and being called away to respond to a fire or ambulance call. He said that it may be another two weeks until this inspection could be re-scheduled. He said it's gone beyond the point of being part-time or "piece-meal". He said he has done over 200 mandatory inspections in the past seven months and he believes that this is a position that has to become a full-time effort.

At 7:27 P.M. Chairman Hitchcock reminded all that further discussion would be cut off at this time due to regular council meeting needing to begin at 7:30. Committee members were again urged to read to documents and report back to him when they had done so.

Meeting adjourned at 7:27 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,  
Sam R. Hitchcock, Chairman  
SAFETY, HEALTH & SERVICE COMMITTEE  
CITY OF NEW PHILADELPHIA