

**Minutes of the regular meeting of the Board of Directors of the Sonoita-Elgin Fire District
25 January 2021
0900**

Call to Order

Pledge of Allegiance

Roll Call – Present: Johnson, Webber, Dorney, Archibald. Unknown if Aversa was attending by phone at this time.

Call to the Public – there was no call to the public; Chairman Johnson read a letter that had been received from Dennis Conner, it is attached.

Minutes – Approval of the minutes – listed separately

- Nov 23, 2020 – Summarized version had been sent to each Board member for review; motion to accept the summarized version was made by Archibald, seconded by Dorney, motion carried unanimously.
- Dec 28, 2020 – Motion to approve as presented by Dorney, seconded by Archibald, motion carried unanimously
- Jan 4, 2021 – Motion to approve by Dorney, second by Archibald, motion carried unanimously
- Jan 8, 2021 – motion to approve by Archibald, second by Dorney, motion carried unanimously.

Chief's Report – Dec 532 calls, A 18, B 13, C 21. Busiest zones were 1 & 5, year total is 635 calls: 257 fire related, 378 EMS Calls with transports of 362. Apparatus and personnel wise, we're doing good. Acting Ops Chief Meredith gave a report on personnel items. Since the last meeting we've had one recruit begin the process, three complete the process. In terms of departures, we had one recruit drop out of our process because he was hired full-time by another department, and another drop out due to life changes. Meredith gave short bios on each of the three new members.

Financial Report – Financial reports were presented and reviewed by Rutter, motion to accept finances as presented was made by Webber, seconded by Dorney, motion carried unanimously.

Action Items:

Board Survey – Dorney requested to table this to a further meeting; tabled.

Replacement of Fire Chief – Johnson proposed having an interim chief or creating an IGA with Palominas to have Buonaccorsi continue as Acting Chief. Archibald felt that the position should be opened up for availability. There was discussion of creating a committee of a total of 6 members: two Board members, two community members and two firefighters. Archibald asked that Buonaccorsi & the Board sit down and discuss a plan and report to the Board next month. Dorney, think we need a timeframe. Johnson – do we have a current list of requirements for

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the Chief's position? Multiple comments replied – it's in the policy manual and contract or We have that information.

Question by Archibald – how many people had submitted applications for the Board position?
6 (Buonaccorsi)

Bank Accounts and Signers: Chris Johnson - had been added to the National Bank account, but not yet added to Chase or Hughes. With two signers, we have no backup; I move to add Chief Buonaccorsi as a third signer by Archibald – there will be three signers on all bank accounts, Reba Webber (Board Clerk), Chris Johnson (Board Chair) and Jon Buonaccorsi, Acting Chief. Motion seconded by Webber; motion carried unanimously.

PSPRS Local Board – Archibald wanted to secure here replacement on the PSPRS Local Board prior to her departure in February. Motion was made by Archibald to appoint Annette Dorney to the Local Board once she (Archibald) resigns her SEFD Board position, seconded by Webber, motion carried Johnson/Webber/Archibald Aye; Dorney abstained.

Executive session for Financial Audit – there were no results as of yet, so the Board did not go into executive session on this item.

Discussion and possible action regarding results of financial audit – tabled

Executive session for Legal Advice on Toxic Work Environment; motion to enter executive session to consult with Attorney by Archibald, second by Dorney, motion carried unanimously.
Time: 1004

Caution by Chair in confidentiality

Back in regular session: Aversa on the phone; time not stated by Chair

Discussion and possible action regarding Toxic work environment; we received a report from the investigator; Johnson has a summary and will read some of the bullet points:

In response to some concerns brought forward in the summer of 2020, the Board engaged an independent investigator; various SEFD members as well as non-members raised concerns in late fall of 2020 had the opportunity to speak with the investigator and some were interviewed. The investigation is now final and the Board and Chief Buonaccorsi are in receipt of the investigator's report.

The investigation included allegations of retaliation against SEFD members for their involvement or perceived involvement in the matter that occurred on Nov. 9, 2018, the Belt incident. There was no evidence of retaliation of the members that were interviewed.

The investigation included allegations of workplace conduct and violation of SEFD policies. The investigation revealed conduct which violated SEFD Policies. Acting Chief Buonaccorsi,

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appointed to his positions with all the powers and authority of the SEFD's Fire Chief is addressing any disciplinary action for SEFD for members arising from the investigation.

Conduct by Chief De Wolf does not warrant additional discussion as the Board has terminated his employment contract as of January 5, 2021 for other reasons.

No more discussion or action is needed regarding this investigation. Chief Buonaccorsi is taking care of the action on an operational level, not on a Board level, however the continuing examination by the auditors for the amount of unauthorized compensation paid to Chief De Wolf, that remains an open issue and we have not received that report yet.

Discussion – Archibald – with regards to the hostile work environment, we've already, Jon's taken some action with regards to that, Jon, would you like to address what you've done. Aversa couldn't hear Sue so asked for a repeat: Johnson- Sue asked for Buonaccorsi to talk on what action he has taken for disciplinary action. Aversa – difficult to hear but the just was she was wanting to know if Buonaccorsi had spoken of the actions taken regarding the position of Medical Chief.

Buonaccorsi – The Medical Chief's position has been eliminated, during the time we had Laura on leave, those duties were given to the Operations Chief and he was able to do both positions, so that position has been eliminated.

Aversa – spoke again, very difficult to understand, no one understood on Board, Chris asked to repeat or summarize – Johnson – Donna, you're asking that Buonaccorsi not discuss any disciplinary actions that are in process? Aversa – Correct. Aversa – Mr. Chairman, will the Board send a response to the two main person who _____?

Webber – I'll make a motion to have the Chair have a written response to Kathe Prentice and to Mark Bennett, as Chris (Johnson) noted when he was talking in the beginning, one of the parts of the investigation was a matter that involved an [alleged] incident on November 9, 2018, that greatly impacted those two individuals, so the motion is to have the Chair issue a written response to those individuals on the results of the investigation. Seconded by Dorney, Motion carried unanimously.

Aversa – Mr Chairman, if I may, _____ and _____ pending____ something about Board members (not understandable.) Johnson translated... There is a pending of a waiver and release of claim and Aversa is recommending that the Board entertain a motion to have Chief Buonaccorsi negotiate that motion. The claim is from Laura Sink, the possible claim. Webber – do you want me to make that motion? Johnson assented. Webber – I make a motion to have Chief Jon Buonaccorsi negotiate on behalf of the District for relief and waiver of claims with Laura Sink. Seconded by Archibald, motion carried unanimously.

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Aversa – Mr. Chairman, One follow-up, is it the Board's pleasure to bring that back to the Board for final approval or does the Board want to delegate that authority to Buonaccorsi to authorize -----hard to understand. Johnson – If after the Chief has negotiated, do you want the final settlement to come back to the entire Board for approval for approval or do you want to designate a Board member to review and approve? Archibald – I'm okay with it coming back to you (Johnson) for review and approval. I feel really strongly about that negotiation, the money, you know our situation financially, you're very aware of that Chris (Johnson) and our deep concerns about spending more ____, so I'm confident (?) that you have enough information to assist John and approve whatever Jon agrees with. Dorney, agrees. Archibald, I move that once Jon makes a decision with regards to the financial settlement, that Johnson can represent the board [with regards to final approval]. Second by Dorney, motion carried unanimously. Aversa made a comment that was not understandable. Johnson replied to Aversa, that basically the Chief would negotiate with you and Laura and for final approval I [Johnson] will review and approve on behalf of the Board. Aversa – Oh, okay thank you.

Johnson – is there any more discussion regarding the investigation. Archibald – I'm pleased with the investigation. There will be some public information available as soon as this draft is all done and people can request that people can request that if they want more information, that will be available. Webber – To echo what Sue said, there will be a public document available. It's being looked at by a lawyer and it would be a be a document that is available on public request to indicate the reasons. And, just keep in mind that we still have our auditor's report/investigation that is not completed yet, so that's our next step.

Adjournment – Motion by Dorney, second by Archibald, Motion carried unanimously.

To: acting chief Jon Buonaccorsi,

Cc: SEFD Fire Board

This department, as it stands now, would not exist if it were not for the tireless work, dedication, and sacrifice made by Joseph. He is responsible for forming the department. He is responsible for bringing millions of dollars to the department. He has worked tirelessly securing grants and donations. He has formed alliances with other departments to secure grants that would not have normally come to smaller departments.

Personally, I know very few men that are as honest as Joseph, and to see him accused of stealing from the department I find incredulous. If anything, Joseph can be honest to a fault. He goes to great lengths to make sure no rules or laws have been broken for the sake of the department. On occasion I think he has gone a little too extreme to make sure we adhere to them.

I understand you have accused him of inflating his salary without your consent, in essence stealing. I do not understand how you did not know of the increase if you didn't give it to him. I would think an increase would have been obvious if you reviewed the financials. Every month all of you sign a statement that you verify the financials are correct. This has gone on for two years. That means you agreed the increase was approved by the board or the members of the board did not read the financials and signed them as being true. If I understand the law correctly, you may have even broken it by verifying the financials were correct without looking at them and signing.

Now about the investigation you are spending a lot of money for. I was a police officer in Nevada for over five years. Before I moved to Sonoita I worked for a private investigating firm in California consisting mostly of retired Los Angeles Police detectives and Los Angeles County Sheriff detectives. What was conducted by the investigator/attorney you hired was not an investigation. It was no more than a series of interviews. When I had a conversation with her, she informed me that she only talked to people who were referred to her by the complainants. In other words, the complainants contacted people and had them contact the investigator or gave the investigator information on how to contact them. This is not an investigation. It is nothing more than a series of interviews of people hand picked by a couple of people who had a grudge with the chief. In other words, a rail road to get rid of the chief by a couple of disgruntled former employees.

A member of our community attempted to contact the investigator without getting a response. They have some information, that if followed up on, could have greatly impugned the veracity of one of the complainants. It could have involved money issues.

In an interview with a PRT reporter they informed me they had a "deep throat" within the department. Later I discovered they had a good friend on the board. Coincidence?

After belonging to this department for nearly twenty years it is with a heavy heart that I hereby resign from the Sonoita Elgin Fire Department due to a toxic work environment. In the past six months I have watched the board, along with a few vindictive employees, tear down the reputation of the department and a good, honest man, Joseph De Wolf.

Respectfully,

Dennis Conners