

Georgia Fire Department  
Regular Business Meeting  
October 1, 2015  
Approved: November 5, 2015

Present: 20                      Excused: 13                      Absent: 4

Meeting called to order by Scott Richards at 7:53pm.

### **Old Business**

- Minutes of the previous meeting read by the secretary. Motion to accept made by Russ Hardy, seconded by Robert Williams, motion passed.
- Fire prevention starts Monday. Heather is looking for additional volunteers.
- Remember to fuel up and wash trucks and ensure all equipment is clean and back in service after calls.
- Scott thanked all those who helped with the Soccer Jamboree, Fall Fest and Franklin Lamoille Fire School on behalf of Keith.
- Reminder that the confidentiality agreements need to be signed. Objections to the new policy as currently written were expressed by multiple members. Richard McGrath read a dissenting opinion regarding the policy (see attached). Discussion followed.

### **New Business**

- Makeup class for harassment training is on October 28<sup>th</sup> at 6:00pm.
- Monthly training will be SCBA.
- November training will be Hazmat and will begin at 6:00pm.
- Pump testing completed on both engines this week. Both trucks passed. Engine 1's left rear discharge is out of service and the intake gauge is not working.
- Tanker 1 had a recall pertaining to the chassis corrected. Another recall notice has been received from EONE for a computer issue.
- Justin Hemond read a statement (see attached) to the department and resigned his position of lieutenant.
- Heather Grimm, Andrew Vincent, Brittany Bull, Andrew Dunsmore, Chris Gonyeau and Brian Bechard read letters addressed to the department (see attached).
- Discussed changes to special active status and recent decision by the officers to prevent members of this status from performing duties utilizing SCBA.
- Concerns were raised regarding the current operating weight of the brush truck. Scott will coordinate with Keith to have the trucks weighed.
- Request was made for a fire extinguisher training.

Motion to adjourn made by Robert Williams, seconded by Andrew Vincent, motion passed. Meeting adjourned at 9:47pm.

## Issues with GFD

Dear Georgia Fire Department Officers,

I am writing this letter to you to hopefully make you aware of the some of the issues that have come up over the past few years with this dept.

One of the major issues that I have noticed, that has greatly impacted many members on this fire dept., is the major lack of communication between the current officers and other members on the dept. I know as a dept. we brought this issue to your attention before and we as a group said we were going to work on the communication amongst each other and the communication with the select board. I myself along with other members have found the lack of communication amongst ourselves to be lacking quite a bit. For example last month's Fall Fest event and Soccer Jamboree, there was no email sent out to members reminding them of these events. This would have also given members who were not at the business meeting the opportunity to know about the events and probably would have brought more participation by members. I myself was not at the business meeting last month and only found out about the fall fest through a text message sent to by the Auxiliary. If my wife had not received this message then I would not have known about the Soccer Jamboree or the fall fest and would not have shown up.

Another major issue I have is the **Special Active** member Policy Change. This policy change was brought to the attention of the fire dept. in our August business meeting with very little discussion on why the decision was made to change the policy. As a member of this dept. for 7 yrs now I find the change of policy very upsetting. I have been allowed to wear an air pack for the past 6yrs now after have taking a course equivalent to the 45 hr course we have done in the past for **Special Active** members as well as going through to the dragger trailer and completing that portion of fire one. I feel that as officers you should have come to the member's listed **Special Active** and discussed with them how they felt about the change and what they thought they should do before making any changes. My understanding of the reason for this change, brought to my attention by other members of the fire dept. as well as officers, was because of some particular individuals on the dept., the officers and other members, felt should not be allowed, at that point in their fire service career, to wear an air pack or go interior. If this was the case then those particular members should have been talked to and a plan of action should have been created. If you ask a number of the members on this dept. a majority of them will tell you that they feel more comfortable going interior with a **Special Active** member then they do with particular members that are Firefighter 1 certified. I as a **Special Active** member was very upset with the way this policy was handled.

Finally my last major issue I have with the fire dept. is the respect in the workplace. I find it very unprofessional for fellow members of the dept. to have total lack of respect for someone else because they have a different opinion than yours. We as a dept. should be listening to everyone's opinion and taking them into consideration. By doing so we as a group can come to a solution that works for everyone not just the one person who thinks they know it all and wants to control everything and everyone. I also find that the disrespect from certain officers toward other members on the dept., just because they hold a position of authority and think they are better than those particular members, to be very disrespectful and unprofessional. As has been said before in previous meetings we are a family and we work as a team to keep this family together. If you have certain individuals who continuously criticize what others have to say and think that those members are lower than you just because you have a title does not make you a good leader nor does it make the members want to listen to you and follow you as a leader. As a leader it is also your job to handle issues that are brought to your attention, without any bias, no matter if the individuals involved are friends or not. It is your job to handle the issues the same way as you would with anyone else.

With that being said there are many more issues that other members have brought to your attention. I hope that by a number of us bringing these issues to your attention, you as officers will take what we have said into consideration and hopefully work to resolve these issues. By working to resolve these issues, I think you will find more participation by members with events, fundraisers, and even more attendance on calls.

Thank you,

**Special Active Member**

**Andrew Dunsmore**

10-1-15

Dear Georgia Fire Officers,

I believe that this fire dept. has gone down hill over the past year. We do not have that family feel that I believe we had when I first joined in 2007. There seems to be very little or no communication between the officers and the members.

My other issue is the elections: I was not on the email list and get any of the communication about applying for the position. When I found out I asked if I could have a chance to run for the vacant position. I never heard back, then to find out another member had inquired about the same thing. So why was that position left vacant?

When did members that were able to wear an airpack and go interior all of a sudden not be allowed to? Do you not realize that the response from members has gone down?

I have talked to other members and they pick and choose what calls they want to go on because of all the policy changes and the way we are treated!

Another issue is I have is complaints brought forward are not taken care of or resolved in a timely manner or swept under the rug!

Andrew Vincent  
firefighter

10/1/15

In April we came to the Officers and explained one of the displeasures from many members. A letter, signed by 11 members, was presented to the chief and submitted to the Select Board..

The Select board responded, a month later, with a letter stating that our letter referred to a personnel issue and could not be discussed with the department members. The chief did not respond to the members due to the letter from the select board.

It was obvious from the April meeting that a number of senior fire Dept. members here felt the letter was presented from just a few people - that isn't correct.

Following our April meeting, some members, who signed the letter in April, were approached by senior fire department members. The senior members accused some members, that signed the letter, as being forced into signing the letter and didn't even know what was written in the letter. The members that signed the letter, knew what they were signing.

The response from the Select Board and the Chief didn't help resolve concerns.

Members continue to talk about how upset they are.

They came tonight with examples of why they are upset and disappointed.

We have members hesitating to respond to calls due to the atmosphere at the fire department. We have members thinking about stepping out of the fire department which is very unfortunate.

In my years of service to the Georgia Volunteer Fire Department, I've missed many events with my family and I've been away from my family many times due to the fire department. However, my wife and children accepted that from me and they have been strong advocates for the fire dept. My family has always felt like they were part of the Fire Department family. The past few years has given me reasons to sit back and reevaluate what to do.

I have a few disrespect scenarios to mention. These examples are what happened on calls and have been discuss among members.

- Three people in a truck -- the driver asked the two riders to swap positions because the driver did not want to sit next to the person in the middle
- 4 people in a truck- responded to call- call was cancelled and truck returned to station.. Upon returning to the station, another member's vehicle was in the driveway. Comment was made in the truck - "glad we didn't wait any longer before leaving for the call."
- Arriving to the station for a call - truck is waiting for more firefighters to board and is ready to leave. Late arriving members arrive and are putting their gear on. Member in the truck starts swearing and yelling at the late arrivals to hurry up and get in the truck.

FYI --The people making the above three comments: are officers and past officers.

Our firefighters need to have confidence that everyone has their back so our members do not and should not have these comments made to them or anyone else in the department.

Thank you for listening

Firefighter

Brian M. Bechard

Dear Georgia Fire Department,

I am writing this letter to you to make everyone aware of the some of the issues that have come up over the past few months I have been on the dept.

First off Being a probationary I understand that I'm not able to do a lot of the things most of you can, but that doesn't mean I should be treated like less of a member of this department. Like being told I'm not qualified to go on interstate calls even though in our by-laws it states any member 18 an older is allow to go on interstate calls. Also the fact I got pulled off a truck after being fully seated and buckled up, for a first responder to be put on the truck for the accident, even though after many discussions it was settled or I thought it was settled on first responder's responding in personal vehicles if needed, to make room for fire fighters on the trucks. Most of all being a probationary I should be looking up to my fellow officers and other members for support. As well as being able to openly talk to them and feel comfortable and confident that they are going to respect me and treat me like a member.

Secondly, due to how certain members act out, it makes other members, myself included, not want to respond to calls. Being yelled at to hurry up or move your ass is extremely unprofessional an uncalled for. Our safety comes first if we get injured trying to rush that doesn't do any good. That's one less member on the truck for the call.

Finally, there is a huge lack of communication between the current officers and other members on the department, For example last month's Fall Fest and Soccer Jamboree, there was no email sent out to members reminding them of the events taking place but an email the night before was send out about the 9/11 remembrance at the station, for members who weren't at the business meeting like myself due to fire classes it would have given me the opportunity to show up an help out my fellow fire fighter members. Along with a lack communication on calls an members having disagreements on scene or when officers tell certain Members that they are not allowed to do something an then the officer turns around an does it himself It's unfair.

We are Outcasted because we do not fall behind certain people and we are not in the popular group. This used to be one big family an now everyone just plays favorites and it's tearing this department apart.

Thanks,

Brittany Bull

October 1, 2015

GFD Officers/Officials

I am writing this letter to express my disappointment in the GFD management team. I and many others have requested a meeting with the select board and officers to address concerns but that has yet to happen. I have verbally expressed my disagreement with appointment of officers this year. The board stated they didn't want voting because it is a "popularity contest" however these appointments appears to be just that. When I spoke to two board members asking them what my credentials were they did not know my credentials. I was overlooked for officer yet I have many accomplishments throughout my career and higher certification than others that were appointed (no offense to those appointed). This was also the case for other employees. The process needs to be improved, maybe a committee would be a better option.

This is just one example of the many double standards for employees by management. People have been given ranks that are not per GFD town policy, poor treatment of fellow employees has had little follow through. Concerns for safety such as 6B1 first due to interstate calls and possibly being overweight, damage to trucks after accidents remaining in service without repair or proper evaluation has created a distrust in management not fully protecting employees. Continued changing of policies without proper discussion and explanation after we were told a few years ago that communication would improve.

I could go on and on with examples however I should get back to my main concern. The lack of communication by the management team is creating a significant distrust and concern for safety from the general membership. Many months ago members requested to meet with officers and select board, which was denied. With continued request we were told a date was being worked on, and then we see that the select board and officers did meet just days after a GFD business meeting with no mention of this planned meeting to the membership. When a group of employees continue to request to meet with their superiors it is in the best interest of that employer to meet. As the months have gone by I have seen more members becoming more frustrated and less active. I hope this can be turned around before it is too late.

Sincerely yours,



Chris Gonyeau

Georgia Fire Officers,

Today, October 1<sup>st</sup> 2015, I would like to address with you some issues I have with my employment/position on the Georgia Fire Department. It is my intent to notify you of issues that directly affect operations by fire members.

\*The first issue I wish to address is the removal of Special Active Members. In the Town of Georgia Fire Department Policies & Rules, Article 4, section 2, paragraph 21 it states: "The fire department Policies and rules may be re-written and offered as a recommendation to the selectboard by a sub-committee, if approved to do so by a vote of the department employees." This was never brought to the department members for consideration. I feel this shows a lack of respect of our input into department matters that directly affect our everyday operations.

The next issue I have is with the continued lack of communication between the selectboard, officers and members. We (the members) have consistently asked for information and we have yet to receive answers. Members, including myself, are feeling that our voices are not heard and our positions are not being represented.

The last issue I am bringing before you tonight is the feeling of retaliation to members who have expressed their displeasure of current events as well as those who have made complaints of any kind. This needs to be addressed immediately!

Thank you for your time,  
Heather Grimm

10-1-2015

Since I have been on the department I have enjoyed helping the community and gain many friends in the process.

In the last few years I have been busy with work and family life and have held the 602 position. I feel that I haven't helped out enough I don't get talked to about upcoming trainings or if I have any ideas on what we should do for a training. I

have been the one to get cars in the past but only because I was asked.

The last car I got I paid for it and wanted to see it get cut up but all I got was a ~~text~~ to come pick it up.

Communication in the Department needs to be fixed and peoples questions should be answered.

James Johnson

## GEORGIA FIRE DEPARTMENT CONCERNS

RICHARD J. MC GRATH

October 1, 2015

A recent decision was made by the Select Board of the Town of Georgia Vermont, that requires the members of the Georgia Fire Department to read and sign a document, "TOWN OF GEORGIA FIRE DEPARTMENT CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT" that stated in essence that nothing could be posted to social media without the consent of the Chief or a designee. This has given a rise of concern on my part.

I agree with the first part of the second paragraph that states: *"Accordingly, I will not disclose confidential identities or jeopardize fire operations and/or investigations. This includes, but is not limited to, written, auditory and/or visual messages communicated via or on Department resources or via personal devices, such as cell phones, PDA's etc. and/or social media (Twitter, Facebook, Myspace, You Tube, etc.)."*

I feel that this section is important to protect the Town and Department from litigation resulting from information released via social media. As an example, a recent picture of a fatal accident in a nearby town was posted on "social media". A portion of it showed the deceased and it was reported that the family recognized the person *before* they were notified by authorities. The lawyer for the next of kin has indicated a great interest in pursuing this case.

I know of one Department which has banned all cell phones and cameras from being brought on board trucks responding to a call. This was instituted to prevent any occurrence of this type. This is a hardship for members to contend with, but there is a Department-owned cell phone on board the trucks which is available to any member who needs access to make a contact via phone.

I, however, do not agree with the second part of the second paragraph that states: *"Any written, auditory, and/or visual messages communicated by a member that are relative to the Town of Georgia Fire Department in any capacity are the sole property of the Town of Georgia Fire Department; this includes, but is not limited to, written, auditory and/or visual messages communicated via or on Department resources or via personal devices and/or social media networks."*

The portion that declares *"messages communicated by a member that are relative to the Town of Georgia Fire Department in any capacity are the sole property of the Town of Georgia Fire Department"* seems to be most problematical. It is the term "relative" that needs definition, and that the term "any capacity" is broad reaching and subject to interpretation. Does this mean that postings related to Fire Prevention, Fire Department Events and Seasonal Fire Safety Tip Posters can only be viewed on the Town Web Page?

The Georgia Fire Department does NOT have a Website – a source that would be dedicated to its passing on timely information. This would be in the complete control of the Department.

I will no longer post NFPA Fire Safety Tips on the Town Website, which I have been doing for at least the past 10 years because these have not been sanctioned by the Chief or a designee.

The Fire Prevention Week programs, soon to be given at the Georgia School, could be subject to the restrictions outlined in the "TOWN OF GEORGIA FIRE DEPARTMENT CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT". These programs could fit the "any capacity" phrase. And if so, then the information passed on to our school children would require "specific written authorization from the Fire Chief or his/her designee".

The third paragraph is understandable because of the "HIPPA" Laws. I realize that the Georgia First Responders have to abide by this Federal Law and are sworn to uphold it. But I'm not completely sure if fire fighters from the Georgia Fire Department have been sworn, by signing a document, to also uphold this law. I don't personally recall having done so. This "TOWN OF GEORGIA FIRE DEPARTMENT CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT" contains the wording that would ensure all members comply.

The fourth paragraph seems to be necessary because of today's litigious climate. Any evidence of wrong doing by a Fire Department or any of its members at a "scene" could be subpoenaed by authorities, state agencies or lawyers. This would include written, auditory and/or visual messages communicated via or on Department resources or via personal devices and/or social media networks. In order to "protect" the Town and/or the Department, it would be advisable to provide a "single" source of information; i.e., interviews at scene by media, comments on current events and position of the Department on State mandated rules and regulations. This type of information should come from the Chief or designee only.

However, I would be remiss if I didn't bring to the attention of the writer of the "TOWN OF GEORGIA FIRE DEPARTMENT CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT" an article that appears on the National Labor Relations Board website: (<https://www.nlr.gov/news-outreach/fact-sheets/nlr-and-social-media>). A portion of this article reads as follows:

"The National Labor Relations Act protects the rights of employees to act together to address conditions at work, with or without a union. This protection extends to certain work-related conversations conducted on social media, such as Facebook and Twitter. A report issued Jan 25, 2012, underscored two main points regarding the NLRB and social media:

- Employer policies should not be so sweeping that they prohibit the kinds of activity protected by federal labor law, such as the discussion of wages or working conditions among employees.
- An employee's comments on social media are generally not protected if they are mere gripes not made in relation to group activity among employees."

In another report from "Firehouse.com" on June 1, 2014:  
(<http://www.firehouse.com/article/11355042/fire-law-and-social-media>)

"The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), an independent federal agency, has determined that many confidentiality agreements in general, found provisions objectionable because they are too broad and could be construed as limiting employees' right to organize or speak out on health and safety issues. It seems likely that many current corporate social media policies will not be acceptable to the NLRB. Likewise, it is reasonable to conclude that many current fire department policies would not be acceptable to the many state regulators who follow NLRB policies.

The act does not apply to public employees directly, but most states have laws that protect them, according to Eric Meyer, a partner at the law firm of Dilworth Paxson in Philadelphia. Further, Meyer notes, the constitutional right to free speech especially may protect the right of public employees such as firefighters to speak out on matters of public safety and health.

The NLRB has published decisions since then making clear it will tend to follow its acting general counsel's guidance. The acting general counsel's opinion is controversial and confusing in places, but provides guidance about the direction of the law related to social media and ought to be considered by fire departments as they draft social media policies. Departments must be careful in developing policies to ensure that any restrictions on employee activities are narrowly drafted so that they cannot possibly be construed to restrict their rights to organize or take collective action. Clearly, the NLRB's actions make drafting social media policies that will pass legal muster more difficult."

The last sentence of the fourth paragraph, "*I also understand that failure to sign this Agreement may result in disciplinary action up to and including my dismissal*", gives me cause for concern. This "Agreement" may not be a legal and binding document. If, in its review – and I strongly recommend a review – it is found to be invalid, will the original signed documents be returned to the signers to be destroyed?

Lastly, I have signed the "Agreement". I did that the night it was presented to the members. I don't regret signing it, but in retrospect, I feel that there are areas that need to be defined.

Respectfully yours,

  
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