

Special Littlefield Township Board Meeting

October 31, 2019 TIME: 7:00 PM

Meeting called to order by Damien Henning, Supervisor. Present: Kim Shomin, Treasurer, Sondra Festerling, Clerk, Dean Morford, Trustee, and Katie Derrohn, Trustee. Guests: Douglas Stutesman, Bob Wurst, George Kirkby, and Kim Morgan all from the Fire Board.

The purpose of this Special Meeting is to consider the fire chief position for the Alanson/Littlefield Fire Department. This meeting came about after the Fire Board Meeting that was just held and attended by both D. Henning and K. Derrohn. After the meeting was felt that the Department is headed in a trajectory that is not good and it was hoped that Art Drayton would be in attendance tonight. D. Henning stated that he did talk with Art last night to let him know what the Board was going to be talking about tonight, and to invite him to attend. D. Henning was going to offer Art the opportunity to go into closed session if he wanted to. D. Henning wanted to wait a few minutes to see if Art would be attending.

While waiting, it was mentioned that the EMS was shut down as of Monday morning do to the letter of resignation from Brian Johnson as a Township Employee. This has created a ripple effect within the Township since his duties included cleaning the Township Hall, Library, Fire Hall, Cemetery Work (lawn maintenance, grave prep, and burials to name a few), he was considered a 1/3 employee to the Village of Alanson for plowing in the winter, along with any other miscellaneous jobs that would come up. The position also allowed for Brian to jump over to the Fire Departments EMS-First Responder calls any time the tone ringed during normal working hours. The Township will be trying to look for someone who can fill all of these rolls. These are very, very, rare people to hire. We felt extremely fortunate when Brian did come on to fill all of these different positions when Jim retired, and we are not sure we will ever be able to find someone like that again. At one-point D. Henning thought he had him talked into hanging in there with us over becoming a plumber's apprentice while things were flushing out, but it didn't go that way. As Brian said in the meeting, it was his treatment. We have to be sensitive to how our volunteers are being treated.

D. Henning stated that Art has worked hard as the Fire Chief. He has even spent vacation time checking Knox Boxes with his sons (Brian & Adam) when Adam came home for a visit. D. Henning said he wont discount Art's effort to the Fire Department, but whatever is going on right now with the department, it's not working. D. Henning asked if anyone else wanted to add anything. S. Festerling said that we need to bring the fire department: the volunteers, the fire board, and whoever holds the fire chief position back to the unified force that I saw when I first came on the Township Board. D. Henning stated as it was before we built the new building. D. Henning stated at their meeting he could see there is different factions within the department but he felt like they always have been there. K. Derrohn stated that if it has gotten worse and the Fire Board was aware of it then they needed to step up and do something. D. Henning asked the Fire board if they were just as surprised as he and K. Derrohn were. George stated he was surprised. D. Henning asked Bob if he was surprised -stating that he was on the force in the past just like Doug was and knows the department in that perspective as well. Bob responded that in a leadership roll you will always see the different personalities: the jealousy that can arise, the different levels of education people have, and then the people who are considered more hands on. The EMS numbers have fluctuated for years, whether it is due to needing personal time off, moving away, or a whole list of other reasons. It takes a special type of person and dedication to fill the position for this service. There has been a lot of friction lately. D. Henning stated that when he was at the fire meeting, Art had to of lifted his hand up twice as if to say he has had it 'up to here', so his frustration level is high as well. D. Henning did go on to say that he isn't saying that this friction wouldn't have happened no matter who was in the Chief position, but the question now is if Art would be the guy that can bring it back and build it back up. Art pointed out a few times at the meeting that he was turning 62. D. Henning stated that when he invited Art to attend tonight's meeting, he basically said that if we can find someone that can do the job better then go ahead-more power to you.

Doug stated Art is great at getting things done in the apparatus area-getting the stuff that has to be done, done, but on the personnel side of things he is very short and doesn't complement. Doug said that the personnel side of things is where the problems are, that no matter what anybody did he would call them out- even if it was at a meeting. The personnel have gotten tired of it. He went on to say that you can't treat a volunteer organization in that manner and expect people to be happy enough to stick around. There is an animosity that seems to be trickling down from the top to the guys and gals on the department and it is not getting any better, unfortunately. Doug has noticed that when he has come down to the fire hall on a weekend there is very, very few firemen and their families, if any, down to the hall like there was in the past. He said the only people you see anymore is Fred and Wade. Mike B. & Brian D. have been there lately too since they were working on getting the transmission back into the truck. D. Henning responded that is the type of dedication that is seen from Art and his family.

In talking with Art, D. Henning reported that Art acknowledges having a deputy chief, but the deputy chief hasn't participated as being a deputy chief. Scott Granger has been very ill, but has been the deputy even before his latest illness. Kim Morgan stated that there were many occasions, before the illness that Scott could have helped out, but Art wouldn't delegate. K. Derrohn commented that Art made Brian Johnson's life miserable. He would belittle him and not acknowledge the many great things he would do. When letters would come in from patients that Brian assisted stating how fortunate the department was to have him, Art didn't cut him a break-he was never seen as doing a good enough job whether it was as an EMT or as the township employee doing all the maintenance etc. K. Derrohn stated that if she would have realized that it was to the extent that Brian J. would leave, she would have said something and maybe we would have been able to keep Brian. It doesn't matter if Art was chief or not, you just don't treat people like that, but by being chief, it is his responsibility to make everyone come together. If you can't keep people together, either volunteer or regular employee, then you should step down from the position. It is not good when the people you are trying to lead won't come together for you. D. Henning stated that the one time a complementing letter came in on Brian J. and it was read at a township meeting, Art responded that will make Johnson happy. D. Henning responded to that saying it should make the Fire Chief happy as well. D. Henning then said Art may not be a complimenting guy, but he gets in, puts his head down, and works hard to get a job done.

Bob Wurst said he does know Art outside of the department and like it was said there are some people that don't know how to complement. There was a conflict between Brian J. and Art regarding Brian's job description and where each of their boundaries and guidelines were. Bob felt it might have been a lot easier to work with the two of them if there was a clear-cut responsibility of each. D. Hennig responded by clarifying that when he wore a uniform the Township made him available to be dispatched, and that anything he did for the township didn't have anything to do with EMS. The Township just made him available the same way we did for Jim Cantrell when he held the position. Once Brian was dispatched, he worked for the fire department which wasn't a part of his job description but it made running EMS during the day easier. D. Henning went on to say that Tom at 911 stated the Alanson Littlefield Fire Department was the gold standard in Emmet County because of our professional work ethics and dispatch times. Brian's job description was to clean the community building, library, firehall, cemetery upkeep, and help the Village of Alanson with the snow in the winter. If Brian was dispatched then the township made him available to go but he was being paid by the fire department for that dispatch. One of the contentions was what vehicle he was driving. One of the things D. Henning found out at the Fire Board meeting was that Brian was working his 40 hours for the township plus he was on call for 36 hours, plus working weekends for a while until he just couldn't do it anymore. Doug stated Jim Cantrell did the same thing of not running weekends. He also went on and explained that normally you would run with 2 EMS but a lot of times there was just 1. Brian would run by himself a lot of times and then on Thursday's Mrs. Manthei would be there in the afternoon until 6PM giving two people for calls. A discussion then started about the differences of a volunteer working inside the township and outside of the township. D. Henning reported that he understood that Brian was putting in his 40 hours for the township plus the additional 36 hours of on call volunteering. Doug confirmed that was true because he would be on some nights and weekends before the weekends became too much. Doug pointed out that the EMS schedule was working the 4 remaining people a lot. When you have only 4 people working to fill a 24-hour period

of time 7 days a week- it's a lot of hours. The Township Board had no idea that EMS had gotten that bad and didn't have enough to staff. Doug stated that a lot of fire fighters went and got their first aid so they could run with an EMT, but the firemen because of the animosity that has been going on decided to step away and only do fires.

The conversation then went on to talk about all departments are having trouble with maintaining volunteers. The question was posed if they were all having morale problems and answered as being unsure. The main concern for our department is the lack of morale and maybe if we can bring that up, we would have a better chance of maintaining our volunteers and potentially bring in new to fill the staffing voids. The discussion also went into the requirements of training the State mandates to be a volunteer in a fire department. The hard thing about being a smaller community is that we don't have the funding that the bigger communities have. We run as volunteers and the bigger locations like Detroit have staff/employees. Doug stated that he has heard of people placing an application with the department, and some more than once, but never received a call back or anything. Kim Morgan reported that a Facebook post was made on the departments page about the EMS shutting down, and it appears through the comments people are making that there are people questioning how to get more information in order to help out. D. Morford asked the question if there would be the possibility of having a personnel and training director that would segregate the duties a little bit from the Chief. Bob said he has noticed that Art has stepped back from EMS a bit and Brian D. has been doing the scheduling. If EMS personnel has issues, they will go to Brian D., but if it goes on from there, he was unsure. Bob stated that it is not all Art's fault that this has happened, and D. Henning agreed.

K. Shomin stated her feeling after listening to everything so far was that there aren't many people at this meeting and there isn't a lot of communication going on and it's hard to know how to resolve this problem. How would we say: Art you can stay or leave as chief without him being here, and how can we hear about the real problems and how many people are having real problems or bad feelings towards him? Bob stated that it is interesting to see how many were at their meeting and then how many were here tonight. K. Derrohn asked if they were told about tonight's meeting. The Fire Board responded that they didn't contact anyone. D. Henning stated that Fred H., Brian J., Scott L., and Art knew after him meeting with him last night for 20 minutes. D. Henning said his opinion was that Art figures what is going to be is going to be. K. Shomin said that we know his is doing the actual job but there is a problem, and does he want to stay and work it out or not. Is there someone else qualified to do the job? D. Henning stated there is someone else qualified. K. Shomin asked Bob what he thought. Bob stated that Art has worked hard to meet up to all the regulations and inspections to comply. Doug reiterated that when it comes apparatus and working function, he has done well but the personnel side is lacking. K. Shomin asked if we were to get everyone together and try to have them voice the problems as they see it and ask if Art can address the issues would that work. Multiple people felt that it is past the point of being able to fix the morale. People are afraid to come forward out of fear of retaliation. Art has been approached about different interactions that he has had with people multiple times, including his treatment of Brian J. K. Derrohn reported that the Township has now been brought into this and it is now our responsibility to find a way to bring everyone back together where they are comfortable to work together as a volunteer group and know that they are appreciated and wanted. We need a leader that can do that. Bob Wust agreed about the camaraderie and asked is there anyone who can do that and pick up the paperwork? D. Henning stated that Art has been doing this job for 8 years and has worked hard in this position but the personnel issue is overshadowing all the other good that has been done. Currently our department has 12 firefighters and 4 EMS and we can't afford to lose anyone else. There have been a few stating they may be leaving as well if things don't change and this is being heard through the community. K. Derrohn said a few of them stated just after the Fire Board Meeting that they worry about repercussions of speaking out at the meeting, and she worries that if they can't trust the Township to do something to fix the situation, we could lose a lot more. D. Morford responded that it might be valuable to present the Fire Department membership with a confidential questionnaire that would cover multiple topics of what could help bring the department back together and improve the morale. After discussing this further, it was worried that if we waited for responses before taking action, if we got them at all, would be a little too late and more loss could be seen. If we were to base our response to this

situation off of a questionnaire, we would have to involve a mediator to get everyone off to the side to answer. There is no big push to fill one out – we could lose more while waiting, etc.

Doug stressed that the firemen are way beyond being happy and its only going to get worse. A decision needs to be made and its not easy to do when we all agree Art has worked hard for this department and has put a lot of time and effort into it. Doug said that making this decision is not fun or easy but he thinks in a way it might come as a relief to him. He doesn't want to see him not participating in the department as with all in attendance tonight. George asked Doug what he thinks Art would say if he was to be asked. D. Henning stated this is a tough decision and not something any of us is taking lightly. In the discussion last night, he could see that Art really loves this Fire Department, and in parting, while shaking hands, Art said to him if we can find a better man for it then go ahead. D. Henning went on record that we are not trying to find a better man, we are trying to find a way to bring the morale up and Art is not built that way. He has a lot of knowledge that this department does benefit from. S. Festerling reported that she has had conversations with a few people from the department within this last year that have stated concerns and instructed them to try and solve the issue by taking it to the Fire Chief first. If they didn't feel they are getting resolve then their next step would be to take it to the Fire Board and the last step was to come before the Township Board and we would then get involved. It is a progression that needs to happen and the concerns to be addressed needed to be brought up and talked about respectfully for resolve. Apparently the first step was never done out of fear. S. Festerling said that after the Fire Board meeting, it has now come to our Board's attention and we do need to act on finding a resolve. There is no doubt that everyone serving the department love being a fireman and serving their community but the morale issue is now having an impact on whether or not they can tolerate staying on. D. Henning said he has also given the same instructions out when firemen have come to his office, but for whatever reason they didn't do it or it didn't go past the Fire Chief and onto the Fire Board because the Fire Board looked to be as surprised about what transpired as he was at that meeting. Kim Morgan said there was approximately 12 firemen at that meeting.

D. Henning stated that we just don't have the time to sit on this and wait for answers. S. Festerling felt that the people who were at the meeting were hoping for a resolve by now from the conversations she has heard about, and K. Derrohn felt the same. D. Henning asked Bob if he thought we had time. Bob's response was not a lot but if the firemen saw progression. D. Henning then asked if Bob thought Art could change the way he treats people and the response was no. Bob went on to say he has known Art and his family a long time and that he is very dedicated to the department but agrees something does need to happen. He also felt that it would be nice to have a Township member start attending some of their meetings. D. Henning stated that it would be easier to attend if the meeting was held later in the day. It was also stated that he is dedicated to this Township and this Township Board is dedicated to the Fire Department and has never said no to the Fire Department. D. Henning stated this meeting has accomplished what it was supposed to. It was called to talk about the fire chief and the position of the fire chief, and that the Township has their Regular Board Meeting next Thursday.

After further discussion, D. Henning said he would like to talk to Art one last time since he was not in attendance. He would like to be sensitive to Art but he does need to step down. If we can't change the way he deals with people. If people are leery of bringing their concerns to Art so it can be brought down to the Fire Board then we have a communication problem. The problem is the firefighters aren't communicating to the chief for whatever reason which means the Fire Board can't do their job and we can't do it either. The Township owes it to the taxpaying citizens who pays their money towards the township's fire department. D. Henning stated when coming into this meeting he was thinking one thing but now he is thinking differently. He went on asking for the ability to be able to talk to Art once more to offer him an option to step away from the chief position gracefully. D. Morford made the **Motion** authorizing D. Henning to meet and discuss with Fire Chief Drayton to inform him the Township Board would like him to step down as Fire Chief. Second K. Derrohn, Carried 4 Yes, 1 No.

Special Meeting was adjourned 9:00PM by D. Henning