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Upcoming selectmen's meeting stirring controversy among Bow's firefighters

By CASSIDY SWANSON
Union Leader Correspondent

BOW — The Board of Selectmen meeting scheduled for Tuesday is expected to raise the ire of those connected to the Bow Fire Department, over what Town Manager David Stack is calling an “organizational analysis of the fire department.”

Though an agenda has not yet been posted for the meeting, concern is already growing that the board may be looking into hiring a full-time fire chief. At the annual Town Meeting last March, more than 700 community members voted down the prospect of hiring a full-time chief.

On Wednesday, Chuck Douglas, chairman of the Concerned Taxpayers of Bow, said that Ted Bardwell, president of the Bow Volunteer Firemen's Association, appeared before its last meeting. Bardwell, who has been a Bow volunteer firefighter for 52 years, presented several issues of concern to his association, including a “rumor” that the town would be appointing a full-time fire chief.

Bardwell declined to comment.

“(Ted) said, ‘We are concerned that there is still talk about the full-time appointed fire chief, when we, at town meeting in March, overwhelmingly voted that down,’ Douglas said. Bardwell was informed that the issue would be addressed at the board’s Aug. 26 meeting. Douglas said the lack of support from the taxpayers for hiring a full-time chief had to do with issues of money and control.

“A full-time chief would be appointed by the town manager,” he said, suggesting that the fire department should be able to choose its own chief. As for the money, he said, “We just don’t see the need, as concerned taxpayers of Bow ... for someone to sit there when we only have one structure fire a month.”

Douglas said he did not believe there would be a specific agenda item pertaining to the issue; rather, that concerned citizens would be there to have their say.

“Folks are going to show up at the meeting on the 26th and basically just remind the selectmen and the town manager that town meeting counts,” Douglas said. “We shouldn’t be countermanding the views of the taxpayers.”

Stack said that, under the town manager form of government, the manager, under the board’s direction, does have hiring authority and oversight for the fire chief position. He added that he and Board of Selectmen Chairwoman Jill Hadaway had discussed putting an item on the Aug. 26 agenda to see if the board would like to conduct an organizational analysis of the fire department, with the help of an outside firm, to give a “roadmap” for improving efficiency.

“The firms that I’ve seen do this bring in people that are well schooled in fire service and public safety,” including former fire chiefs Stack said.

Stack acknowledged concern that the board is considering hiring a chief again after the taxpayers already voted it down.

“We talked about this just for continuity, just day-to-day administration and management of the department,” he said. Stack added that current fire chief Dana Abbott does a good job, but also has a full-time job and is only able to do his duties as chief in the evenings.

Stack said that Abbott previously expressed interest in hiring a deputy chief from within the department and eventually promoting that person to chief. However, Stack said, he is “not sure that’s the best way to go.”

“If we had a study done, we could look at that (option) and see if that’s what makes sense for the town,” Stack said.

Stack said the reason for the proposed study is to ensure that the town is fulfilling its responsibility to the taxpayers, and that the town is “providing these important services in the most efficient and cost-effective manner.”

Stack said the agenda for the Board of Selectmen’s Aug. 26 meeting would be posted today or Friday. The meeting is scheduled for 6 p.m. Tuesday in the Bow Municipal Building, 10 Grandview Road, meeting room A.

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