

**Vermont Fire Service Training Council**  
*Minutes of the October 8, 2020 Meeting*

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The meeting was held virtually with a conference call-in available and called to order by Christopher Corbin.

**ROLL CALL:**

**Organization Representatives**

Vermont Career Chiefs Association	Aaron Collette
Secretary of Education	Rob Evans
Vermont Fire Chiefs Association	Walter Bothfield (Skip)
Commissioner of the Department of Forest, Parks & Recreation	Lars Lund
Professional Firefighters of Vermont	Christopher Corbin, Chairperson
Commissioner of the Department of Health	Absent
Vermont State Firefighters Association	F. Tom Estey
Commissioner of the Department of Labor	Dan Whipple
Vermont Domestic Insurance	Absent
Division of Fire Safety Director	Michael Desrochers
General Public	John Marcus, Vice Chairperson
Commissioner of Public Safety	Absent

Visitors: Peter Lynch, Michael Skaza, Jessica Pomainville, Ben Whalen, William Jones, Robert Sponable, Gene Perkins

**Point of Order: Skip Bothfield will be the voting member for this meeting and Gene Perkins will be a member of the Public.**

**Modification of Meeting Agenda:**

None.

**Approval of Minutes:**

***Motion made to by Lund and seconded by Estey to accept the June 11, 2020 minutes. Motion passes unanimously.***

**Report from the Executive Director of the Division of Fire Safety:** Michael Desrochers

The Director thanked first responders and the Fire Academy for all the hard work. Bob Sponable has been very helpful to the Director throughout the pandemic keeping the Central Office going. Some of the work that has been done by the Division includes an online payment portal that has been set-up for the Regional offices to accept fees for permits, licensing extensions have been made, and online continuing education classes have been created to meet the needs of the trade professionals that the Division regulates. The Director thanked Rob Evans for the partnership with the Division of Fire Safety on assisting the Division with distributing guidance to the schools for fire and lock down drills. The Division of Safety

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budget is facing a significant deficit due to lack of revenue being received through plan review. Todd Cosgrove has retired as the Hazardous Materials Response Team Chief and Patrick McLaughlin has replaced him. In the interim Patrick is serving as both the Haz Mat Chief and Regional Manager.

The Haz Mat Team and the USAR Team have relocated to an AOT building in Colchester. The warehouse has been moderately renovated and can fit the USAR and Haz Mat team at no cost except for utilities which will be a substantial savings. The long-term goal is to move the USAR and Haz Mat Team to the new State Police Barracks in Williston.

Deputy Director Sponable: Fire Prevention week is currently underway. The annual Fire Safety calendar program is still going to be held this year and the Division has been in contact with the schools. The Division is working on how to hold the calendar program award ceremony virtually. The Division will be posting Fire Safety Prevention brochures and information to the Division website that will be available to teachers and local fire departments. Modifications have been made to school evacuation drills so schools may choose not to empty the entire building at the same time however the Division wants schools to practice emptying buildings in sections and in lieu of that. The Division is going to include some short five to ten-minute Fire Prevention messages that will be available for schools to use. Any questions can be directed towards Mike Greenia who can also point teachers towards videos and links to good information. Rob Evans asks if the Division can provide the information on drill guidance to the Department of Education so that it can be posted to the Department of Education as another reference point for schools.

### **Report from the Chief of Training: Peter Lynch**

There were 105 students enrolled in Firefighter I when the Academy had to stop all classes in March of 2020 and 88 students returned to finish in the summer of 2020. Only one out of the 88 did not successfully pass the examination process.

Of the 17 that did not come back, 9 are returning this year to finish up. The Academy was very successful in trying to get everyone through and back to finish. The Academy will try to work their best with those still remaining to help them finish.

Any courses or programs that were awarded in the 19-20 season will be honored in the 20-21 season. Requested courses or programs that the VFA had either started or were getting ready to start will be honored.

There are five Firefighter I programs that are getting started. There was an overwhelming enrollment response to our programs this year. The student numbers are exceeding our ability to accept them all. Ryegate, Colchester, and Stowe all exceeded the maximums that were established due to COVID. The Fire Academy has had to work with our partners to get through those issues and enroll as many students as possible. The VFA will continue to hold classes so long as it is safe.

The Pumping Apparatus Driver Operator program is very popular. The VFA only has one trailer and limited instructors so the Academy is trying to figure out how to financially purchase an additional trailer and train more instructors.

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The Academy wanted to hold five Rapid Intervention Crew Training courses around the state in the Fall of 2020. The Academy tried to place the courses in locations where the VFA has not recently held courses. Interest in the RIC courses was very limited. The Academy believes that it is because it is a new course and that interest will pick up as people see it. The Chief of Training feels as though it is very important that firefighters see Module 1 so we will continue to advertise it.

The National Fire Academy two-day course scheduled for late October has been postponed to January due to COVID. Six two-day NFA course offerings will be held between January and August of 2021 all around the state. The six-day Fire Inspection Principals course is being held in conjunction with the New Hampshire Fire Academy and scheduled for delivery in early December in the Lebanon, NH area. Due to the pandemic the NFA is willing to allow a 10 student minimum and at this time the VFA has 11 applicants. Three State weekend is scheduled for August of 2021. The 2020 Three State weekend was cancelled due the pandemic.

The Fire Academy spent the Spring and Summer of 2020 preparing a Pro Board Rope Rescue Awareness and Operations program. The VFA was successful in securing an HSU grant to allow the Fire Academy to put a number of VFA instructors through the program and then Pro Board test them. The first certified Rope Awareness/Operations Pro Board program was held last month in Barre. There are some adjustments that need to be made however it was a successful program. The Academy has applied for additional HSU funding to provide more Rope Awareness/Operations programs and increase our instructor staffing levels.

National Fire Academy funding has been secured to support a Fire Instructor I and Fire Officer I/II programs this year.

Officer 101, which are short leadership classes, that were being developed almost 18 months ago and have been put on hold due to the pandemic. Hopefully work will resume on that project this winter. Module 1 is mostly complete, however, it needs to be vetted by a Subject Matter Expert (SME) group.

All courses and programs are following the COVID guidance. The Academy is being held to the same standard as colleges and schools. Masks are required, temperature checks are being performed before entering, and social distancing is being practiced.

The IFSTA Firefighter curriculum work has been completed and it is in use for this year's programs. There was extensive vetting of the chapter materials by SME's. Modifications were made to several chapters to meet Vermont's needs. Those underwent internal review at the VFA and then went for final review in front of an SME group. As part of the IFSTA roll-out the Fire Academy held two online IFSTA roll-out meetings. A total of 62 instructors attended this. A virtual instructor workshop was held teaching different and alternative instructional methodologies other than PowerPoint based on common adult learning styles. This workshop was well attended by our instructor group.

The memorandum on the East Cottage building has been signed and the wastewater permit is in hand. A pre-bid meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, October 13, 2020. Bids are due the end of

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October and a contractor should be chosen by mid-November. Construction is expected to begin at the end November/beginning of December. The total occupancy is 25 with twelve 2-person bedrooms and one single occupant bedroom set up for an RA. There is common space including a small kitchenette. The hope is that construction should be completed by December 2021.

All six Regional Fire Schools were cancelled in 2020. A meeting was held in September and there is an uncertainty surrounding the use of the school buildings for venues that have been used in the past. Some schools are looking to seek alternative sites. There is another meeting in December to finalize what the school's intentions are for 2021.

The Academy is up for Pro Board reaccreditation this year. The plan is for the Pro Board to visit in December so that in January when the Pro Boards meets, the VFA's reaccreditation can be approved. However, with the current travel rules, it will be very difficult to get a reaccreditation committee to come to Vermont to conduct an audit of our facility. Pro Board is currently trying to figure out a plan to be able to send an audit team to us. Conducting the visit virtually is not the preferred answer to this problem.

The Responder Wellness Bill had all the EMS funding portion removed from it. That part of the Bill was worrisome for the Fire Academy since it was funded utilizing the VFA's special fund. The EMS funding portion was placed into S124. At this time the Special Fund for the Fire Service is stable, and EMS will not be taking any more money from it than they are currently. The other bill that affects the VFA is the Fire and EMS training at Colleges and Technical Centers Bill (H707) this bill was moved to another committee and stalled out there.

There is currently a hiring freeze and the Academy has pending instructor applications. The Director has been trying to work on allowing the VFA to begin hiring again. The VFA was able to hire two USAR team members using dual employment waivers. They are currently Specialist who helped us in the Rope Operations program in Barre.

Kathy Pearson who worked in the Academy administratively has decided to winter in Florida this year and it is uncertain if she will return. In the meantime, we have distributed her job duties to other members of our staff temporarily. If she chooses to not return to the Academy, we will need to work to replace her since the work that she did on recertification was very important.

Matt Trombley and Kristy Oxholm have separated from the Academy because their busy lives did not allow them to instruct for us. Michael Delehanty and Ernie Cioffi have decided to step away as well.

The Fire Academy has received the following grants:

AFG - \$187,000 with a 10% match which is in our budget

NFA - \$20,000

The VFA has unofficially been awarded an HSU grant which will help the Academy with Ice Water Rescue, Rope Rescue, and Vehicle Rescue courses. All of these courses are within the VFA's strategic and five-year plan.

It looks like the Fire Academy will be able to keep the carry forward money from last year which

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is about \$120,000. This carry forward money is because the Academy had to postpone most practicals, live burns, testing, and other projects until the next fiscal year. This funding will be able to pay for last years outstanding training events. This will ease some budget troubles

The Academy was asked to cut the general fund by 5% which equals about \$25,000. The Academy figured out a way to adjust the budget to move forward without the \$25,000 and most likely the Academy will not see the \$25,000 in the next budget.

The Staff has made reductions so that the Academy is able to stay on task with our Strategic Plan despite the financial challenges.

Aaron Collette asks how many programs the VFA is holding this year. Five Firefighter I programs were held. Because the Newport City Firefighter II was cancelled due to low enrollment so the Stowe Firefighter I program was added. There is a discussion about holding stand alones and a Firefighter I challenge in the Newport area so that a future Firefighter II program may be held.

### **Report from the Council Chair:**

No report.

### **Committees:**

Certification Testing Committee - Due to competing demands on time and workload, the committee that was scheduled to work on the certification exam process has not been able to meet.

### **Unfinished Business:**

None

### **New Business:**

There have been a few challenges for certain individuals and organizations to gain certification when coming to Vermont from another state. Vermont has a yearly recertification process which many other states do not. This proves to be challenging when a firefighter comes from another a state that either has not gained their certification in the last three years or has not been recertifying on a yearly basis.

The following questions were asked: One, is there an aspect of the reciprocity process that is missing, that could further allow or enhance how people gain certification/reciprocity in this state when coming from another state? Secondly is there something that can be explored that would allow an outside Chief from another state coming into this state who doesn't have the appropriate certifications or maintenance, to just recertify with reciprocity in Vermont? Is there some sort of portfolio process that could allow that person to qualify for the reciprocity?

Christopher Corbin does not believe that changes can be made to reciprocity process at the Firefighter level. However, his constituents would like a follow-up on the process and the questions.

Michael Skaza agrees that the reciprocity process does serve the intent of the Council and gives

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the Academy the opportunity to recognize accredited certifications that are earned in places other than Vermont.

There were 26 applications for reciprocity last year and 13 of those were approved for Vermont certification. Six were recognized as equivalency for pre-requisites (these were submitted so that applicants could enroll in a program that had a pre-requisite). Four were denied and in most cases, they were either not a resident of Vermont and not affiliated with a Vermont Fire Department, which are requirements of reciprocity, or they did not have accredited certifications. Three applications were not processed because they were incomplete, and the applicant never followed through to provide the required documentation.

The numbers show that we are certifying people through the reciprocity process. The Academy acknowledges that there could be challenges if a very experienced person comes in who doesn't have fresh accredited certificates but does have a portfolio that would equate to an Officer Level Vermont certification. The Academy would like to discuss this for the future.

The Council Chair opens it up for discussion so if anyone has any thoughts, concerns, or views on this either way, however the Chair is not looking for a rule change, but something that may allow for it within the confines of the Rules as they stand currently.

Collette asks if the Challenge process is advertised, if the Challenge opportunities are offered, and how often they are offered? The Challenge and Reciprocity processes are posted with details on the VFA website. The VFA guarantees the offering of a Challenge Examination at least once a year at no charge which is typically done in the Spring, after all VFA programs have concluded. That way if students are unable to finish a program but are able to get the training elsewhere, they have the opportunity to take the Challenge Exam. The Academy offers Challenge Exams for a fee on an as needed basis upon request.

Collette wonders if a quarterly Challenge offering would be beneficial to stop the number of a la carte requests the Academy receives. It is explained that the number of a la carte requests are very small, so the need for quarterly challenge opportunities is probably not there.

Part of the work the of Certification Committee is to decide if one certification exam per level can be given to anyone. If this can be decided on, then a separate challenge exam would become a thing of the past.

All information regarding the challenge process and reciprocity is on the VFA website, so departments can use that for information and if they have further questions, they should call the Academy directly.

A discussion was had by the group that the VFA does not offer Chief Officer (Fire Officer III and IV) certification however is there some training or portfolio requirements that could receive Fire Officer level Vermont certification without holding a Pro Board certification through reciprocity.

### **Standard Operating Guidelines:**

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All SOG's coming back to the Council have very minor revisions but the VFA thought it was important to bring them back to the Council with the revisions.

**Expiration and Regaining Recertification SOG** has been updated to reflect the rule changes that require firefighters to take the Challenge examination to regain certification. *A motion is made by Estey to approve the revision of the SOG, seconded by Bothfield.* Passes unanimously.

The Council Chair seeks a motion to **endorse the Course and Program Student Minimum and Maximum Requirements, the Make Up Process, and the Registration Process SOG** as revised. Chief Lynch reiterates that all changes are minor and aligns the SOG with what the Academy has been doing.

*A motion is made by Estey and seconded by Bothfield to endorse the three SOG's made and passed unanimously.*

There is no discussion of the FYI SOG's.

**Coalition Report:**

There has been one meeting since March. There will be a meeting held prior to the legislative session starting again in January. Leonard Howard will continue to be the President.

**Vermont Career Chiefs: (Collette)**

The November seminar has been postponed until 2021. The sponsoring hotel is allowing them to postpone.

**Vermont State Firefighters Association: (Estey)**

No report

**Vermont Fire Chiefs: (Bothfield)**

Distributes information that they receive it. There has not been a meeting in two years. There is not much interest in membership or attending meetings.

**Professional Firefighters of Vermont: (Corbin)**

No report

**Agency of Natural Resources: (Lund)**

It was an active fire season. The curriculum will not be updated this year. There are only three wildland instructors right now. Instructors will be reaching out to the leads to schedule a site visit prior to practicals. Due to COVID, ANR was unable to hold their usual Fire Prevention activities for schools.

**Department of Education: (Evans)**

No Report

**Department of Health: (Batsie)**

Absent

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**Department of Labor: (Whipple)**

There is conversation about OSHA adopting an Emergency Responders standard. He hopes to have more information about it at the next meeting. Director Desrochers asks if Dan can send out a link to the document or the rule. Dan was going to see if he could find a copy in the rule making phase on the OSHA website.

**Vermont Domestic Insurance: (Miles)**

Absent

**General Public: (Marcus)**

No report, however, he thanks the Division of Fire Safety and First Responders for working through the pandemic.

**Election of Officers:**

*Motion by Estey to nominate Chris Corbin as the Chairperson for the Council, and it seconded by Dan Whipple. Motion carries unanimously.*

*Motion by Estey to nominate John Marcus as the vice-chair and it is seconded by Collette. Motion carries unanimously.*

The next meeting is scheduled for Thursday, February 11 at 10:00 am at the Vermont Fire Academy.

*Bothfield makes a motion to adjourn the meeting, seconded by Marcus. Motion passes unanimously.*