

**Vermont Fire Service Training Council**  
*Minutes of the February 11, 2021 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	Absent
Vermont Fire Chiefs Association	Walter (Skip) Bothfield
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	Matt Miles
Division of Fire Safety Director	Michael Desrochers
General Public	John Marcus, Vice Chairperson
Commissioner of Public Safety	Absent

Other Attendees: Peter Lynch, Michael Skaza, Jessica Pomainville, Ben Whalen, William Jones, Terry Farr, 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 Collette and seconded by Estey to accept the October 8, 2020 minutes.***

***Motion passes unanimously.***

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

The Director sends out the weekly legislative calendar to the Coalition which details what the committees have on their calendars and offered to send it to Council members.

The USAR and Haz Mat teams have been relocated from Milton to Colchester. This will save money by moving them from a rented space into a state-owned facility. Patrick McLaughlin is the new Chief of the Vermont Hazardous Materials Response Team. There is a State hiring freeze in place however the Division of Fire Safety has received a blanket waiver to fill Fire Instructor, USAR, and Haz Mat openings.

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Prior to COVID the Division was looking at strategies to save money. One of these strategies was to move the Division of Fire Safety Central Office to DPS Headquarters in Waterbury. The first floor of DPS Headquarters is currently vacant.

The Director publicly thanked the Academy for all the work they have done in the last year to keep Fire Service Training up and running.

The Director announced that Ben Moffat is the new Barre District Manager and is now the new representative on the School Crisis Training team.

H56 – (The Bluelight Bill) has been introduced to the legislature again this year. Butch Shaw who is a representative from the Pittsford area has reintroduced it. Shaw is now the Vice-Chair of Transportation which is where the bill was last hung up.

H16 – Fireworks bill will require a purchaser of Fireworks to produce a municipal permit prior to being able to possess or purchase the Fireworks.

The Director recently testified in support of funding for the dry hydrant program. The funding would designate \$100,000 to be used towards design, installment, repair for the dry hydrant program. There are Federal funds also added to this \$100,000. He does not see there being an issue with the funding being approved.

A Capital Bill request has been submitted totaling \$50,000 for the Pittsford Complex. \$15,000 is earmarked for an assessment of the shooting range structure at Police Academy. \$35,000 is earmarked for a feasibility study on the Main Building and West Cottage.

The Executive Order to create an Agency of Public Safety has been changed into a Bill. The Commissioner is willing to speak to the Council about this. This will have no effect on the Fire Service Training Council. This has been a long-coming modernization. This is not a cost-saving strategy but it is intended to modernize and enhance the Department. Positions will not be cut but instead it will add positions. It will go through the legislative process.

Collette asked if DFS is going to be getting funding for some IT upgrades like State Police are. The Director tells him that DFS will not be and that he is under the assumption that this funding is for Spillman to be replaced by Valcour.

The Division is facing a \$950,000 budget deficit due plan review revenue shortfalls as a result of COVID in the third and fourth quarter of FY20. The Director is not in the position to raise fees on the business community.

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

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There are five Firefighter I programs in progress with 128 students enrolled. All programs are being delivered virtually at this time due to COVID.

The Fire Instructor I program just ended which was delivered using a virtual format. Students came together for testing during the first week of February. Testing was in groups of four to split up the total number coming together at the same time. 15 of the 18 students were able to complete testing last weekend.

There is one PADO program on hold and three others waiting to start.

There are 13 other courses and programs on hold or requested.

National Fire Academy courses that were scheduled to be held in October, January, and February and have been rescheduled to April, May, and August. The Fire Inspection Principles course is on track to be June held June 14 – 19<sup>th</sup> in Lebanon, NH in cooperation with the New Hampshire Fire Academy.

Development of the First Responder Leadership Academy, which was started in the Spring of 2020, will resume in the Spring of 2021. Dan Batsie is now a Director and Will Moran has been hired to take his place as EMS Chief. The Fire Academy will continue working with the EMS Office on this important project.

The Fire Academy has funding for Fire Officer I/II. The Academy is looking to see if some part of the training can be done virtually. There is a conversation about what that looks like in a hybrid model and what schedule will work best for all interested candidates. The Academy is willing to entertain suggestions and comments on what this should look like. The Academy will lose some of this funding at the end of September however there may be the opportunity to get an extension, so the Academy is looking at the possibility of starting one in mid-August.

The Academy has transitioned to the IFSTA Firefighter curriculum. All changes and updates have been made to the curriculum. The Academy knows that changes and improvements may need to be made as we begin using it in the field. Certification test banks have been reviewed and validated.

The Vermont Fire Academy staff has been working on the following things to assist with the COVID-19 response:

- Development and implementation of guidelines and procedures for the Fire Service.
- Daily/weekly bulk situation reporting, 150 messages sent to date.
- Weekly briefings with fire service organizations.
- Direct contact with the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) and the Department of Health. Dan Batsie and Mike Cannon have been extremely helpful to the Fire Academy.
- The implementation and support of a county wide fire service information network. Many folks have helped the Academy share and collect information. Addison County has been very successful in this.
- Conducting Fire Department Capabilities surveys.

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- Most importantly there were hundreds of one-on-one communications that occurred on a weekly basis during the pandemic. The Fire Service able to pick up the phone and speak to someone who is looking for information or assistance and this has been very helpful.
- Assistance in distribution of Personal Protective Equipment to the Fire Service. Chief Collette shared information on mask distribution that helped other departments.
- Storage and distribution of hand sanitizer to all emergency responders.
- Staffing the SEOC one day per week since October for the Division of Fire Safety.
- The Academy has reassigned one staff member to the Department of Health to perform contact tracing five days per week for three months.
- Assisting individual departments in the initiation of COVID-19 testing and quarantining guidelines.
- The development of a scheduling process for vaccinating firefighters, and the initiation of that process in cooperation with the Department of Health and Vermont Emergency Management. When the hospitals stopped vaccinating first responders, Dan Batsie, Michael Cannon, Michael Skaza, and Ben Whalen worked to create and utilize a system to continue to vaccinate responders who missed getting the vaccine in the initial roll-out. Through this process, hundreds of first responders were able to get vaccinated.

Renovation of the East Cottage has begun. There will be 12 student rooms to accommodate 24 students and one Fire Academy Staff member (RA). VMS has been selected as the contractor. The expected completion date is late Summer/early Fall. Since the project came in under budget they were able to add a stair remodel project that will serve the second floor of the Main Building over the kitchen as well.

The Academy is currently using a 25-year old data base and the testing component of the database is no longer supported by the software vendor. The Academy has performed extensive research on a suitable replacement application and worked with Agency of Digital Services to being the procurement process for a replacement. A request for proposal has been drafted and bids will be solicited. The proposal calls for a complete records management system to perform training record management, scheduling, training resource management, document management. The application will also have a public facing portal where our customers can access their records, request training, and apply for recertification. This is a much needed improvement that will allow us to realize efficiencies at a time when we are unable to grow the size of our staff. The question is asked about how far back with the data go? That is still to be determined and will be managed in the implementation phase. The goal is to only bring clean data into the new system while providing as comprehensive of a training record as is possible.

Pro Board Re-Accreditation has been put on hold for the following reasons:

- 1) The Committee on Accreditation for Pro Board has to come to the Academy to do an on-site audit and with travel restrictions these visits had to be put on hold.
- 2) Pro Board has a new requirement of reporting data which the "old" database did not allow for so by hand the VFA staff has had to put together that information.

The Pro Board has issued blanket one-year extensions to all agencies due for reaccreditation.

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At this time all Regional Fire Schools planned for 2021, with the exception of North Country Regional Fire School, have been cancelled.

The Director asked that Chief Lynch shared some legislative information that you may be interested in:

S.42 – This is Responder Wellness Bill has been voted out of the Health and Welfare Committee with unanimous approval and then moved to the Senate floor for consideration. The Senate Government Operations Committee has also approved this Bill. The Bill should be able to make it through the Senate floor and crossover to the House in this session.

H72- This is a Bill on Fire and EMS training at Technical Centers and is still on the wall. It speaks at placing Firefighter I and EMS programs in technical center and schools without a clear funding source. It is unclear if it will get looked at this year. If it does come off the wall, then the Fire Academy will ask that a summer study be conducted so that the Academy can better understand what the financial impact would be.

H117 – This is the Firefighter Cancer Bill which is also on the wall. This Bill takes the legislation that is in place currently and modifies it. In one section, there is a piece that says you have to have pre-cancer screening in order to successfully receive compensation once you have been diagnosed with cancer. The focus is to try remove the pre-employment screening to pre-cancer screening.

The Academy's Strategic plan and five-year work plan has been updated taking into account COVID impacts, budget freezes, a possible move to an Agency of Public Safety, and a need to focus on grants. Of the 33 initiatives that the Fire Academy put forward seven have been completed, four remain in process, seven moved to in-process, three were assigned to 2021, five remain in future years, and seven of them were pushed to future years.

The Fire Academy is applying for an AFG grant that totals \$355,800. This money will go towards the purchase of two trailers, 10 smoke machines, class A props for the burn building, flammable liquids container prop, technical rescue equipment, and hose. This also includes the purchase of a Haz Mat tank prop for the Haz Mat team. Match money for the prop will come from the Haz Mat budget, while the match for the Fire Academy items will come from their budget.

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

No report.

### **Committees:**

Certification Testing Committee (Skaza) - 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.

Governance Committee (Desrochers) – A legislative safety report has been submitted. The committee is dealing with the mitigation of the PFO-S/A's testing reports and other testing that may need to be done. The Vice-Chair recently retired so they will need to replace that position.

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The Governance committee is responsible for the access and use of the complex however the committee does not regulate either Training Council.

**Unfinished Business:**

None

**New Business:**

The Commissioner is willing to meet with the Council to answer any questions regarding the move from a Department of Public Safety to an Agency. The Director offers to schedule a meeting with the Commissioner and the Training Council if they feel they would like to hear the Commissioner's point of view.

**Standard Operating Guidelines:**

All six SOG's were sent to the Council prior to the meeting and the Chair would like to ask the Staff to give a brief synopsis of the three for approval and then take a vote on them. All six SOG's are documentation of the way that the Fire Academy currently conducts business.

**Test Development and Review SOG** – the changes added general language to align with accreditation requirements. It also replaced the term project with product to align with new NFPA definitions.

**Course and Program Access SOG** – the changes added a section on how to access certification exams.

**Requesting and Awarding Courses and Programs SOG** – clarifies the notification process for awards for programs and courses to better reflect actual practices.

A discussion of whether the Fire Academy has concerns about having the resources to conduct Product-Based Assessments. This has not been a concern in the past as the number of certification levels that use Product-Based Assessments are limited and no change is expected. It was noted that page numbers need to be added to the documents.

*A motion is made by Marcus to approve the updates of the Test Development and Review, Course and Program Access, and Requesting and Awarding SOG's, seconded by Collette. Passes unanimously.*

*A motion is made by Estey to endorse the updates of the Certification Exam Evaluator Qualifications, Certification Record Retention, and Certification Exam Safety SOG's, seconded by Marcus. Passes unanimously.*

There is no discussion of the FYI SOG's.

**Coalition Report:**

No report however there is a meeting coming up next week.

**Vermont Career Chiefs: (Collette)**

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Bill Jones thanks the Career Chiefs for the recent training seminar.

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

The Convention and Cadet program have been cancelled for 2021. Tom Estey acknowledges and thanks whomever was able to get Firefighters added to the priority vaccination group.

**Vermont Fire Chiefs: (Bothfield)**

Distributes information that they receive using Google Groups.

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

Has been working diligently on the cancer Bill.

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

The Town Forest Fire Warden training will be conducted virtually and will be offered once for the whole state; however no date has been set. Dates for Wildland courses for VFA programs have been finalized; pending the weather. Dry hydrant programs are still moving forward. The Agency is waiting to see what their federal funding is going to be.

**Department of Education: (Evans)**

Absent

**Department of Health: (Batsie)**

Absent

**Department of Labor: (Whipple)**

The Responder standard has gained movement. Since the standard was in revision in the fall, they were unable to share with the public and this may be the case for a bit longer. He will share it with the Director when it goes into the public comment phase. Many states in the nation have done emergency rule making in response to COVID-19.

**Vermont Domestic Insurance: (Miles)**

Thanked the Academy for their work during the pandemic.

**General Public: (Marcus)**

No report.

The next meeting is scheduled for Thursday, June 10, 2021 at 10:00 am at the Division of Fire Safety Central office, in Berlin.

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