

Mason's Island Fire District Special Meeting - March 19, 2016

Attending: Board members Jim McAuley, David Krupp, Bill Taylor, Ethan Tower, Tom Gram and Kristin Foster attended. Not in attendance: Gordon Kemp, Greta Jones and Lee Hisle. President Jim McAuley called the meeting to order at 10:00 am.

Jim McAuley opened the meeting with a brief statement regarding the history of increasing the mil rate in the district in 2012 to fund the road repaving project. He explained the work done by the Roads Committee (Jim McAuley, Rufus Allyn and Bob Martin) with Connecticut Water (CTW) and the current pipe upgrade being done by the Burns Company. He then opened the meeting to questions and comments.

Dan Van Winkle stated he had been attending meetings about 50 years and had never heard any discussion of fire hydrants, asked why we would go to the expense of fire hydrants and what need there was for them.

Jim McAuley stated the Roads Committee first met with CTW 11/10/15 and learned that they were very interested in replacing the water mains due to leaks and loss of water. The Roads Committee also learned that upgraded water mains would also make installation of fire hydrants possible. Jim noted there had been two or three fires in the past. Jim had called his insurance agent who said that Jim's premium would decline \$500 to \$3100 if hydrants were installed.

Rufus Allyn stated that part of the reason hydrants had not come up before was that when the Masons Island Company owned the water system there were no resources available to upgrade to water mains that could support hydrants. Installing hydrants was not possible.

Dan Van Winkle state he had not heard any "hue and cry" for hydrants and that for him it was not a concern.

Ethan Tower recalled that in the discussions before the vote on the road repaving last year there was some discussion about hydrants and the Board was asked to check with the water company about them. The Board had looked into them in the past but the water pressure problem made hydrants unfeasible. Now, with Connecticut Water's planned upgrades, they are feasible.

Dan Van Winkle asked what the issue is and stated he had not heard the fire company say they can't service the island.

Frank Hilbert, Chief of the Mystic Fire Department, commented that Masons Island was limited before, but with the new water mains there should be adequate flow. He termed installing fire hydrants to be a "no brainer". The insurance company rating should go to a 5 or 6 which should reduce some homeowners' insurance costs. If there is adequate flow, there is no reason you shouldn't put hydrants in.

Hugh McGee asked the chief if the fire company could not provide adequate fire protection now.

Frank Hilbert responded saying the time is of the essence in fighting fires and that it took more time to set up the tankers that are used when there are no hydrants. In the recent fire on Pequod Trail, it took ½ hour to get the tankers. Fires double in three minutes. It is both time consuming and labor intensive without hydrants.

Victor Baird asked about using salt water to fight fires and asked how many homes were within 800 feet of the ocean, the Ice Pond and the fire hydrant at the Gate House.

Frank Hilbert answered that the Fire Department can pump salt water and have plans to do so. He also commented that the Ice Pond connections had been silted up and not available much of the time.

Victor Baird said his insurance carrier said that companies in Connecticut are not required to provide a break based on the proximity of fire hydrants and that their rates were based solely on the fire department rating. He asked if the first truck that arrives from the Mystic Department had a water tank.

Frank Hilbert replied that the first truck has a 500 gallon tank which is a two minute supply to fight a fire. He also said that some insurance companies call the Fire Department and ask about hydrants.

Rufus Allyn commented that just because you are on the water front does not mean that you have a viable alternative. If you are on a marsh or a substantial distance from the water or at low tide there can be difficulties. While there are areas where salt water can be easily pumped, other locations have difficulty using salt water and you cannot count on protection using salt water.

Jeff Brown asked about the plan and the phases for repaving and installing hydrants.

Ethan Tower replied that the first phase of hydrants would involve Chippechaug and School House Road to Heron Rd. covering about 130 properties. There are some newer sections of 6" pipe on Money Point Road up to the Wheeler's house and that it may be possible to put in more hydrants in the first phase. If all of Money Point were done as phase 2, there would be 50 more houses covered. Next would be Nauyaug Point Road although there may be issues with water pipe running under the Ice Pond. Finally, Yacht Club and East Forest. The MIFD would also need to set aside money for repaving of the later phases. Alternatively, new pipe could be put in and the paving completed by the MIFD at a later date.

Jeff Brown asked if there would be a more definitive plan by the time of the vote at the annual meeting.

Bob Martin replied CTW has asked about our paving plan. If a customer is prepared to pay for the paving, it moves Masons Island up on their priorities. At our current rate of setting funds aside for repaving, it would be about two years for Phase 2, another two years for Phase 3

and two more years for Phase 4. There probably will not be more definition than that by the May 28th meeting.

Rufus Allyn pointed out that we don't have to do a full repaving after water lines are installed, but the reverse, paving before water lines are installed, is what we need to avoid.

Ethan Tower said that the water company must adhere to the standards set for WICA funded work. While CTW may want to do the whole island, some areas may not make sense. Some areas already have lines that meet WICA standards.

Mary McAuley said if we were planning to repave an area, the water company would want to install new water lines first.

Hugh McGee stated that the 1/31 letter said "before we begin, we must decide on hydrants" and asked what has changed.

Ethan Tower replied that if we wanted to get new water lines, hydrants and our repaving work done before the summer, we needed the earlier decision point. We did not ask and did not know that CTW would do the water lines first and come back later to install hydrants at no additional cost.

Hugh McGee stated he was troubled about the sequence of decisions.

Bob Martin apologized if there questions about the chronology. He said that people were informed as information became available. The Roads Committee first thought that MIFD voters needed an early decision to get hydrants. We went back to CTW and asked if they needed a decision in March and they replied no, that if the decision were in May, they would come back in the fall to install hydrants.

Hugh McGee said it was hard to believe that the water company changed its mind and then showed up with all the equipment now on Chippechaug so quickly.

Bob Martin replied that the water company was always going to proceed with the water line upgrade regardless of our decision on hydrants.

Hugh McGee stated the sequence was still not clear to him and that he wanted a clearer picture of what CTW is going to do.

Fire Chief Frank Hilbert implored us to install fire hydrants and stated that even if a home is 2000 feet from a hydrant, the fire company can put a relay pump on the hose line. Fire hydrants make fighting fire less labor intensive and faster. (Editor's Note – After this statement, Fire Chief Hilbert left the meeting.)

Dan Van Winkle asked if CTW had found any leaks.

Jim McAuley replied that so far CTW is just installing the new lines and has not removed any old pipe.

Dan Van Winkle asked about phases and stated we don't know what we are signing up for financially. He recommended that there be a phased approval with definite start times for each phase. He felt that things were too imprecise to vote on.

Ethan Tower replied that the first phase would cover about 50% of the MIFD homes and that we are trying to get more information from CTW to allow a more definitive plan. He also noted that we select the locations of the fire hydrants, subject to location of the water mains and natural obstructions.

Jim McAuley noted that CTW would not put in a hydrant without us telling them to.

Ethan Tower said that after the first hydrant is installed and operating, MIFD would have to pay the increased lineage fee for pipe installed that can handle a hydrant.

Bob Martin noted that the memo tried to define the costs of the phases. In the third column, with new pipe installed everywhere and 20 hydrants, the annual cost would be \$26,000. The middle column figure of \$16,000 is more likely as there will not be new 6" pipe everywhere.

Peter Van Winkle noted that the cost increase will affect the entire fire district although the later phases will not benefit.

Ethan Tower repeated the fire chief's statement that hydrants improve firefighting capability even if a house is 2000 feet from a hydrant.

Peter Van Winkle recalled a time when there was a fire on the island and the fire company could not find it. He stated there are a lot of factors involved.

Rufus Allyn stated that it is likely that some people will never have a hydrant within 1000 feet of their home. The plan is to put a hydrant at Crossover and Nauyaug Point which would be close enough to do a relay and provide an instant benefit to homes on Nauyaug Point. He also said that the Board would tell CTW to put hydrants at the end point of 6" mains, for example, on Money Point Road by the Wheeler's house.

Dan Van Winkle asked if the vote would decide where and when hydrants would go.

Rufus Allyn replied that the Fire District must request the hydrants. The hydrant by the causeway was tested and has a 940 gallon per minute flow. There will be another test after new lines are installed from Route 1 to Joy Street. The results of this test will determine the need to replace the line from the causeway to the gatehouse.

Ethan Tower commented that the water company wants to provide a flow of 1000-1500 gallons per minute to each hydrant and that there is pressure lost as you go further along a pipe.

Christie Williams asked whether residents will have any impact on the location of the hydrants.

Jim McAuley replied that the board would respond within reason and within reason will try to accommodate people. He invited those in attendance to look at the map he had marked up after the meeting. He wants a hydrant within 800 feet of as many homes as possible.

Christie Williams recalled a fire that occurred at the Beaumont house in the 90's. It took the fire company 15 minutes to arrive and another 15 minutes to set up the hoses to draw water from the ocean. There was substantial damage done in that time. Time is of the essence in saving houses, he continued, and if we can afford it, it is only common sense to install hydrants.

Dan Van Winkle noted there are a number of places without hydrants in the Stonington area and asked how they fight fires.

Jim McAuley replied that tanker trucks with 3000 gallon capacity are used. The trucks are refilled from the nearest hydrant. Also, ocean water can be used if a pumping truck can be put in position.

Harry White thanked the officers of MIPOA and MIFD for their work on this project.

Skip Watkins said he was bothered that CTW would have control of the project. They will do the work necessary to fix the leaks, but it will be hard to get them to finish the project.

Bob Martin replied that he did not want to over promise but that he and the MIFD officers would continue to work with CTW.

Skip Watkins asked when the two 2" pipes in the meter pit would be upgraded.

Bob Martin answered that if we go forward with the hydrants, they will upgrade those pipes. But they may not need to if we do not do hydrants.

Rufus Allyn concurred with this.

Dan Van Winkle asked if we install hydrants, why the cost of fire protection doesn't go down.

Mary Hargan recalled that there was a fire at her cottage that was dealt with using pond water. She asked what does that do to the pond.

Rufus Allyn answered that the pond is spring fed and that this, together with surface water would replenish the pond.

Hugh McGee raised the issue of the process and sequence of meetings that would be followed on the 28th of May, what the procedures for ballots would be and how everything would be orchestrated.

Ethan Tower replied that the current plan is to hold the MIFD meeting from 10-11 am, that the vote would initially be by a show of hands, but if the vote is close, then ballots would be used.

Hugh McGee asked how we would check that everyone is a valid voter.

Ethan Tower replied that the requirements for voting would be read at the meeting and we would trust our neighbors on the show of hands vote. If ballots are necessary, then everyone would need to be checked off, which will be very challenging since the MIFD only has the MIYC clubhouse for one hour..

Kristin Foster said the Board had considered having people sign in and indicate how they were qualified to vote.

Hugh McGee expressed his concern that if the district were to commit to pay charges forever, we should want to be sure that the vote is uncontestable and that the vote should be operated in compliance with Connecticut statutes.

Victor Baird stated that in the past, resolutions that were voted on used particular wording and that it is critical here with the different phases. Otherwise it would be open ended with the water company. We don't know the limits of the project, he said. They will replace pipes until the water loss is reduced, then they will stop installing pipes.

Rufus Allyn replied that CTW is trying to improve water distribution, for example removing dead ends by converting them to a “u” or loop and that circulation of water was also their concern.

Victor Baird asked how soon the precise wording of the resolution would be available.

Ethan Tower replied that the package is still being worked on but that it would be sent out thirty days before the meeting.

Victor Baird observed that votes could be driven by emotion and recommended that a secret written ballot be used. He said he was previously involved with a community safety issue that divided his then community. He said people feel freer to express themselves with a written ballot.

Dan Van Winkle recommended that there be a resolution with time lines for each phase and that there be a separate vote on each phase.

Ethan Tower replied that once the first hydrant goes in, that triggers the linear cost for all upgraded pipe.

Hugh McGee noted that some properties were owned by corporations or trusts who were not eligible to vote.

Ethan Tower responded that houses held in trust do not qualify the beneficiary of the trust to vote unless the trust contains unusual language stating the beneficiary is liable for property taxes. The same would be true for corporations. (Editor’s note – this is separate from qualifying by being a registered voter.)

Hugh McGee asked who would determine which houses are held in trust and urged strict compliance with voting requirements. He also said that failure to do so would give someone the right to contest the vote, putting liability for water fees into question. He felt if anyone unqualified votes, that everything would be invalid.

Ethan Tower responded that lists of registered voters and property owners would be available at the Annual Meeting to verify eligibility for voting.

Tom Gram stated that his reservations about the hydrants were gone based in the Fire Chief’s statements and that more people were living here now year round with children, and the risks were greater. He stated he supports the hydrant installation project

M/S/P to adjourn the meeting at 11:35.

Respectfully submitted

Bill Taylor