

TOWN OF MOUNT DESERT

Community Forum

April 27, 2021

Via Zoom

This interactive forum will discuss the proposed Warrant Article to conduct an engineering study for a proposed addition to the Northeast Harbor Fire Station. This addition will provide accommodations to house Firefighter/EMS personnel working twenty-four-hour shifts.

Background- In January of 2023, the Northeast Harbor Ambulance Company will cease operation. Ambulance/EMS services will be absorbed into the Mount Desert fire Department. To provide twenty-four hour, seven days a week coverage, facility upgrades to both the Northeast Harbor, and Somesville fire stations will be necessary to accommodate personnel working overnight schedules.

Here are some questions about the project and answers from fire Chief Mike Bender. If you have other questions, you may contact Chief Bender at firechief@mtdesert.org The Chief will respond to these additional questions at the Forum.

1. Why don't we just build living quarters in Somesville or Seal Harbor? Why a new building? *I believe we have abandoned the whole new station approach. Over 50% of our fire calls are within the village of NEH with 25% in the Somesville/Hall Quarry/Pretty Marsh area. Strategically, you would place your resources as close as possible to where your highest volume of calls are. With NEH by far the busiest and Somesville as the second, it makes sense to try and place your apparatus and responders in those areas.*
2. Are that many garage bays necessary? *We plan on housing a ladder truck, an engine, an ambulance (with a possibility of 2), a rescue boat and perhaps the departments tanker in NEH. If or when the tanker is not in NEH, we would park our utility vehicle(pickup) in a bay during inclement weather. In Somesville, we will have an engine, a tanker (either ours or maybe Bar Harbor's) and an ambulance. This would be a minimum of 4 vehicles, possibly 6 in NEH and a minimum of 3 in Somesville. Yes, that many bays are necessary.*
3. What are the advantages of building this in NEH rather than Somesville or at the town garage? Why don't those other sites work? *I believe this has been addressed by the latest changes we have been discussing. We are adding on to the existing building in NEH to provide quarters and looking to renovate the Somesville station to do the same. The reason for the renovation is addressed in the #1 question above. The NEH renovation should be the least expensive option out of the last 8 we have been looking at for the past 17 months. We do not have a figure for Somesville yet.*

4. How does this plan fit into a potential island-wide Fire Dept? Will it become unnecessary? *Both the NEH and Somesville station will be necessary if a MDI Fire Dept. ever happens. An island-wide fire department has been in discussion for the past 2 to 3 years and in my opinion is not going anywhere. There are some towns on MDI that are not showing any real interest in pursuing this right now. As far as anticipating for the future needs of public safety within the Town of Mount Desert, I do not think it would be wise to plan your infrastructure around something that may never happen, or at the very least is years down the road. Let's stick to what we know.*
5. What's the harm in waiting a year or two? *The fire department is not gaining new members as fast as it is losing them, due to aging out and other reasons. The Northeast Harbor Ambulance Service has notified the Town that will stop providing Emergency Medical Services to the town by January 2023. It is my opinion that the fire department will be seriously understaffed within a few years, if not sooner. If we do not plan to address these two issues now, there is a very real possibility that fire calls, motor vehicle accidents, water rescues, emergency medical calls, and other urgent calls for help will go unanswered by local first responders. A delayed response, even a few minutes, may cost lives or property. If the Town wants to wait (I really don't see the advantage to waiting) one or two years that's fine. I do not want to be the one who has to answer an angry or distraught taxpayer of why a delayed response costs someone their home, livelihood or worse, a life. Especially when it has been well publicized and documented that we knew this problem existed.*
6. Is there a timeline on an island-wide department? No. See question # 4 above.
7. Why does the plan call for a dedicated space to fill air tanks when we already have a truck that does that? (this is an actual question I received from someone) *The mobile air supply truck was purchased in 2001 because MDFD was the first department to switch their self-contained breathing apparatus over to a higher-pressure tank. At the time, there were no compressors on the island that could fill our tanks, so we thought it best to make this purchase and bring our own tank-filling capabilities with us if we go to other towns. Since then, most of the other towns on MDI have upgraded their compressors to be able to fill the higher-pressure tanks. Since we will probably not have the personnel to drive all these apparatuses in a few years and the diminished need to have mobile air unit, there is a real likelihood that this vehicle will not be replaced when it reaches its end of service life. This is the reason to provide a compressor and cascade system in a fire station.*
8. What would placing all these resources in NEH mean for the future of the stations in Somesville and Seal Harbor? *Again, I think Somesville has been addressed. Seal Harbor is another issued. There are 3 on-call firefighters left to respond to calls out of that station. 2 live in Seal Harbor and one lives in Otter Creek. The youngest is 60 years old. Given the housing situation in Seal Harbor (rising costs and a transition to a more seasonal-only village) there will soon be no one living there that will be part of the fire or EMS departments. At that point, the decision will need to be made as what to do with the Seal Harbor fire station, including closing the building.*

9. How does this project compare to fire stations in other communities in terms of size and cost?

These costs were determined by our design team based on current construction costs of similar type buildings. From what I have gathered for data from new fire stations recently built in Scarborough, Orrington, Newport and Farmingdale, these costs are middle to middle low in comparison. A lot has to do with what type of building is being constructed, i.e., is it metal, stick-built, traditional brick-clad, is the building green, and so on.

10. If we approve the engineering plans and eventually construction, how is it going to be paid for?

What will this do to our taxes? It is my understanding that the next phase of engineering plans will be paid for from the Capital Gains Reserve Account which should not affect the 2021-2022 taxes.

11. We may well be in need of 24/7 coverage before the building is completed. How will we address this? Have we got a plan for temporary quarters for firefighters in the interim?

We will have one, maybe two (Seal Harbor, Somesville) working fire stations within town that we can respond out of while construction is taking place in NEH. We will need to place our assets in either one or perhaps split between the two-fire station we have during the construction phase. Not ideal, but it is all we have to work with. Therefore, the stand-alone station would have been preferred but ended up being rejected by the BOS.

12. With the ambulance service coming under Town management, will all firefighters require training as EMTs?

Yes. Plans are underway to bring all full-time firefighters who are not currently licensed as EMTs up to basic license level by 2023. Going forward, all new hires will need to be licensed at EMT-B level or higher. I have also been in discussion with the Northeast Harbor Ambulance Service to see if any of their current staff has interest in cross-training as certified firefighters, maybe giving us more resources to fill positions.

13. How will the other stations (Somesville & Seal Harbor) be used going forward?

From question #8 above - *Again, I think Somesville has been addressed. Seal Harbor is another issued. There are 3 on-call firefighters left to respond to calls out of that station. 2 live in Seal Harbor and one lives in Otter Creek. The youngest is 60 years old. Given the housing situation in Seal Harbor (rising costs and a transition to a more seasonal-only village) there will soon be no one living there that will be part of the fire or EMS departments. At that point, the decision will need to be made as what to do with the Seal Harbor fire station, including closing the building.*

14. Can our town be confident that we have enough firefighters and EMTs to protect our citizens?

How will we replenish our forces as some retire or move away? I cannot and will not promise we will be fully staffed with firefighters/EMTs all time. As outlined in my 10-year strategic I presented

last year (and which is already outdated and in need of revision), I had planned to hire one more firefighter this year and two more next year, to staff the fire department 24/7 with two firefighters on per shift. Now with the ambulance service under the fire department's operations, that will need to be increased to 4 on duty, per shift. The budget is already set so I cannot increase the planned hires for this year. That will mean next year the fire department will need to hire 8 more staff members to be fully staffed by 2023. Not going to sugar coat, it, that will be challenge. And costly.

In Maine, filling these like positions within the fire service has proven difficult. I will say that our pay rate, retirement plan, and hopefully our appealing work environment will give the Town an advantage in this area. But again, I will not promise it will be an immediate success.

However, I can say with reasonably confidence that if we do nothing, then we will probably not have enough firefighters/EMTs to protect our citizens the way they should.

15. Will the concentration of our Fire Department in Northeast Harbor positively impact overall emergency response times to all areas of Mount Desert? *I hope this was answered by the change in plans to have full-time staff in both the NEH and Somesville locations and our recent discussions. If not please be more specific and I will answer the best, I can.*