

Council workshop on fire horn draws few residents

By Phil Zahodiakin

Of the two approaches that the fire department could use to silence its fire horn, one would impose serious financial burdens on the town and local businesses, and the other would increase the risk to public safety, while sparking an increase in fire insurance rates.

Those were the key messages from a recent Town Council workshop on the controversial horn.

The council had scheduled the Oct. 21 workshop, which included fire department officials, to address complaints about the jolts of noise from the horn. However, Council President Julio DiGiandro announced at the outset that he was shifting the focus of the workshop from public complaints to public safety.

Only five opponents of the horn attended the meeting, but Grinnell Avenue resident Martin Hellewell spoke for all of them when he demanded speedy relief from the noise. "You are elected government," Hellewell told the council members, "The fire department is not. My family and I have suffered for 40 years, and it is up to you to respond."

Narragansett Avenue resident Connie Slick said that the volume of the horn at her house is "never below 100 decibels" – a level, she said, which exceeds federal and international safety standards and threatens to cause "spontaneous deafness" in people assaulted by the blasts.

Slick asked fire department officials if "we, as a community, can help in fundraising efforts to eliminate the horn."

Assistant Fire Chief Howard

Tighe told the *Press* that the department, whose annual budget is \$300,000, raises approximately \$50,000 a year in donations from its fundraising. But that amount is far short of the funding that would be required to potentially silence the horn by replacing all of the island's hard-wired alarm boxes with radio boxes.

The cost of replacing the boxes would exceed \$1 million, a number based on the following price tags: \$10,000 for each radio box that would have to be installed in the 47 businesses and 14 town buildings that now have hard-wired alarm boxes – and 33 more to replace the street boxes. The fire department would also have to buy two receivers (including a redundant receiver) at a cost of \$50,000 each.

What would this expenditure buy?

It would theoretically allow the department to silence the horn because incoming signals from the hard-wired boxes automatically trip the horn, which repeatedly blasts the numeric code assigned to each box. The replacement system would allow the department to disconnect the horn and remain in compliance with a state law requiring direct, firehouse links to all alarm boxes.

But the radio system wouldn't solve the problem of unreliable pagers.

The pagers are supposed to beep when the horn goes off, alerting the volunteers to an incoming voice message apprising them of fire locations. However, as Tighe told the council, "The system is more than 30 years old, and it's failed four times in the

past six months."

Tighe added that the police department, which handles fire-dispatching duties from 3 p.m. until 7 a.m., has to call him in the middle of the night.

"I go to the firehouse and reset the system," he said.

Because of that unreliability, as well as lightning strikes or other potential disruptions to the system, relying solely on the pagers for communications with firefighters is not feasible, said Chief James Bryer.

"I need a system that's 100 percent foolproof and reliable," he told the council. "Our pager system is not foolproof because of all the 'dead zones.'"

One way to increase the reliability of the paging system would be to install "repeater" antennas. Tighe told the *Press* that the antennas would cost about \$250,000, and that the replacement pagers necessary to pick up their signals would run "about \$500 a piece for our 100-plus volunteers."

It's unknown, however, if the repeaters would raise the reliability of the paging system to the standard demanded by Bryer.

Any questions about the reliability of the pagers could have

an impact on the fire insurance premiums paid by island residents and business owners. Residents opposed to the horn have argued that other communities with volunteer departments rely on pagers – and that Jamestown should, too. But a reduction in Jamestown's fire-protection rating resulting from an unreliable pager-only system would hit the pocketbooks of all property owners – especially those who live near fire hydrants.

The ratings – from "1" down to "10" – are set by the Insurance Service Organization, which rated Jamestown as a "5/9" in its previous assessment. The area north of Weeden Lane is a "9" because the homes and buildings there are all more than a mile from a municipal hydrant, although other criteria, such as communications, also affect the ratings. The area south of Weeden Lane has a "5" rating."

However, Tighe warned the council that the entire island might be rated a "10" if the department turned off the horn and relied solely on the existing pager system. If that happened, everyone could see their insurance bills jump, with property owners south of Weeden Lane facing potential increases as high as 50 percent.

But the fire department is sensi-

tive to the horn issue, and is planning or considering such steps as:

- Eliminating one of the two daily test blasts. The department has traditionally tested the horn

See "Fire Horn" on page 11

COWARDICE

An unsigned or anonymous letter is an unmistakable indication that the sender lacks moral courage.

Mass-mailing an anonymous letter in a political campaign, timed so that the victim of the letter has no opportunity to respond, is a classic political "dirty trick".

The perpetrators of such a dirty trick are not the type of supporters that a politician interested in good government would want.

It is most unfortunate to have a political campaign marred by this type of activity.

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