



## COLCHESTER FIRE DEPARTMENT



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**

**Colchester, Vermont – April 12, 2023**

### **Town of Colchester Announces Hiring of Two Full-Time Career Firefighter Positions**

The Town of Colchester Fire Department is hiring two full-time career firefighter positions. A career firefighter position hiring process is currently underway and will be filled as soon as possible. An additional full-time career firefighter position was approved for hire as of July 1, 2023. This follows the Town's creation of a hybrid career and volunteer town-wide department which began with funding in the town budget on July 1, 2020 with four full-time staff members. The career staffing of the department after the July 1, 2023 hire will be 5.5 including the Chief and another full-time position in the town who is able to leave their other duties to respond to fires.

The hire of the additional career firefighter position after July 1, 2023 (FY24) will be the Fire Department's sole request for additional staffing in FY 25, as it is not budgeted in FY 24, and is being funded a year ahead in response to the changing needs of the Department. The Town Manager, noted the importance of additional resources to the Department in the Town Audit dated December 15, 2022, under "Future Budgetary Issues," bullets 2 and 3:

"Fire Department Capital including air packs totaling about \$300,000 and a new engine which will cost about \$700,000. Much of this funding will be available from the Fire Capital Fund, Future operating costs and or response times are very dependent on the ability of volunteers to respond.

Police, Fire and Rescue staff resources to meet: 1) demands of significant new development being permitted; 2) increasing community calls for public safety services; 3) a reduction in available Fire volunteers, 4) additional needs such as community outreach workers.

The Colchester Fire Department is evolving with the community. An attachment to this release provides information on firefighting history, creation of a town department, town resources, fire, rescue and combined fire and rescue, and the future prepared by the Town Manager.

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Here is some information about firefighting in Colchester, including: History; Creation of a town department; Town resources; Fire, rescue and combined fire and rescue, and the future.

## **I. History**

In 1922, the Village of Winooski Falls separated from the Town of Colchester to become an independent city, which left the Town with little population and a very small tax base. Until 1951, residents who had a fire, had to call a Selectboard member who would call Burlington, Winooski the Town of Milton or the Village of Essex Junction to obtain fire suppression services. In 1951, The Malletts Bay Fire Department and Colchester Center Volunteer Fire Company began as volunteer departments. They received funding from the town, in the form of 1% of the total municipal service taxes. Our third fire department, SMCFR began in 1969 as a rescue organization and in 1970 as a fire department which still operates as an independent organization and as a battalion of the town fire service.

Unlike many communities, rescue in Colchester then evolved as a separate service than fire, first as a volunteer group from Malletts Bay Fire in 1962, in 1977 as a Town Department, with the first full time career staff member hired in 1998. In many communities, rescue is part of the fire department. In Colchester, in the year ending 6/30/2022, Colchester Rescue had 1990 calls, 941 more calls than Colchester Fire's 1,049, many of which are non-fire calls. Rescue in Colchester has a staff of six full time employees and 28 volunteers who do twelve hour shifts at the station.

We have a rich history of volunteerism in Colchester for which I'm very thankful. Our fire and rescue volunteers provide a highly valued service, create a sense of community, both within their groups and among the town. But our town has grown and so has the need for fire services.

## **II. Change**

In 2017, the Malletts Bay and Colchester Center fire chiefs first asked the Selectboard for two firefighters to augment our volunteer group of 90, to assist with coverage during weekday daytime when we did not have enough volunteers available to cover a structure fire, without mutual aid from neighboring departments. The town and the fire departments applied for federal grants for this for a few years, but no firefighter grants were given to any VT communities.

In 2019, the Selectboard proposed and in 2020 the voters approved, a budget for a town operated fire department. The budget included not just the two full time firefighters proposed by the chiefs, but three, plus a full-time chief making four total full-time fire department staff. In FY 20, the last year of the two independent fire departments, the budget was including capital, operating and funding for match to the grant, which never materialized. In FY 21, the budget for fire as a town department was \$207,248 or 20% over the prior year.

Chief Bourgeois brought together our two volunteer departments in the Village and the Bay, consolidated and rebranded the fire trucks, consolidated training and procedures, simplified dispatch procedures, and participated in the simplification of the Town's building code. He transferred responsibility for supportive services to other town departments including vehicle, facility and equipment maintenance; central services such as HR, IT, Finance; and collaborated on jointly managed services - such as capital planning, budgeting and purchasing. This gave fire staff

and leadership more time to focus on fire service. Chief Bourgeois did this consolidation work right at the onset of COVID, which made meetings, trainings and everything more challenging.

In mid-2022, we were faced with a decision regarding where to place resources, whether or not we should use resources to replace a \$777,000 fire truck or add staffing. Staffing seemed important to the Town Manager as it was not clear that we could staff our 8 trucks. We could have funded two positions for a number of years with the resources available. Although both staffing and a truck were noted as important, a departmental leadership decision was made that the more immediate need was the truck.

In FY 24, which begins July 1, 2023, the budget approved by the voters included a half-time assistant chief, who serves another half-time job with the town that he can leave for a fire. In total, along with labor performed for the department by other groups, the Town will be contributing \$1,497,426, an increase of \$487,775 or 48% more to fire services than it did in FY 20 when the town had two volunteer departments.

Through the fall and winter of 2022-2023, it became clear that additional attention was needed to address: 1) our important relationship with Saint Michael's College Fire and Rescue; 2) mutual aid with neighboring departments which is common practice for all structure fires; 3) recruitment, training, engagement of volunteers; 4) exploration of alternative fire service delivery such as Winooski which has three firefighters who fill other town roles who are available to leave to fight fires, or paid on call staff as do many neighboring communities, or other options to provide fire coverage; and 5) understanding that many fire calls are not fires, to evaluate if there are calls we could address in different ways than sending a fire crew.

One of the full-time firefighters left to another community on March 6<sup>th</sup>. The position was immediately advertised. But, as is typical of town staffing, when an opening occurs, we take stock of evolving needs. The fire chief reviewed the applications sometime before March 22<sup>nd</sup>. The Town Manager and Deputy Town Manager met with the Fire Chief and Assistant Fire Chief first to discuss some of the challenges. On March 31<sup>st</sup>, the Town manager agreed the best path forward was to hire a career firefighter, the same position vacated, and authorized the Fire Chief to proceed with the hire.

### **III. Town Resources**

The Town of Colchester is fiscally constrained. There is no town department--public safety or otherwise---that is staffed to fully meet the needs of the community. Two communities with comparable populations, the City of South Burlington and combined Town of Essex/City of Essex Junction have—for all employees, not just fire and rescue--58% and 38% more full time staff than the Town of Colchester.

Management has asked voters to fund multiple additional staff members in a single year—even primarily public safety—and received no votes. This happened in FY 14 when we requested an additional police officer and public safety dispatcher in the same year. We are cautious of this constraint and have identified one of its sources: Colchester has the second highest percentage of low-income homeowners in Chittenden County, as noted [here](#). The Town continues to grow, not so much in population but in homes by about 1% a year. This creates more responsibilities for

municipal services every year. Town Departments have learned to take turns adding staff to try to keep up with municipal service demand increases, in order to avoid budget spikes.

**IV Fire: Fire, and Rescue.**

Unlike communities with combined fire and rescue departments, referred to as fire departments, Colchester has a separate town rescue department with six full time staff and 28 volunteers. Saint Michael’s Fire and Rescue has one full time rescue and 35 rescue volunteers, so in the town we have seven career rescue staff and 63 rescue volunteers. Saint Michael’s also covers Winooski which has no rescue department. As mentioned previously, the rescue portions of a fire department are busier than the fire side.

The Town has 5.5 full time firefighters and 43 firefighter volunteers. Saint Michael’s Fire and Rescue has one full time firefighter and 11 fire volunteers. This makes 6.5 full time firefighters and 54 fire volunteers in Colchester. An apples to apples comparison of our fire staffing comparing combined fire and rescue staffing as is the case in many neighboring departments would be total of 12.5 full time fire staff members and 117 volunteers.

**Colchester Volunteers in Fire and Rescue**

Entity	Rescue	Fire	Fire/Rescue
Town	28	43	71
SMC Fire and Rescue	35	11	46
<b>Total</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>117</b>

**Colchester Staff in Fire and Rescue**

Entity	Rescue	Fire	Fire/Rescue
Town	6	4.5	10.5
SMC Fire and Rescue	1	1	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>5.5</b>	<b>12.5</b>

**Community Comparison of Combined Fire and Rescue Staffing**

Community	Population	Career Staff	Part Time & Paid by Call	Volunteers
Milton	10,533	5	19	70
Willison	8,932	12	0	8
Winooski *	7,260	4	16	0
Essex Town & City of E.J. **	20,172	5.4	42	31
South Burlington	18,378	34	0	0
<b>Average</b>	<b>13,055</b>	<b>12.08</b>	<b>15.4</b>	<b>21.8</b>
<b>Colchester</b>	<b>17,249</b>	<b>12.5</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>117</b>

\* Firefighters are also housing and building inspectors; \*\* Essex Rescue with 8 employees serves four communities with 33,000 residents, of which 61% or 5.4 employees by formula is funded by the City of Essex Junction and theTown of Essex.

**V. Future**

For FY 24, which begins July 1, 2023, Police Chief Allen and I proposed a civilian evidence collection position which freed up a police officer from this more administrative role. The town also added a half time Assistant Chief to the Colchester Fire Department. The Town Manager signaled, on page 22 of the Town’s audit that we need additional resources in public safety coming in second and third, only after keeping up with inflation:

“Fire Department Capital including air packs totaling about \$300,000 and a new engine which will cost about \$700,000. Much of this funding will be available from the Fire capital fund, Future operating costs and or response times are very dependent on the ability of volunteers to respond.

Police, Fire and Rescue staff resources to meet: 1) demands of significant new development being permitted; 2) increasing community calls for public safety services; 3) a reduction in available Fire volunteers, 4) additional needs such as community outreach workers.”

As Town Manager, I have the highest respect for our public safety professionals, volunteers, career members, from new recruits to leadership. I would most welcome additional funding for public safety services.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Dawn York", is written below the text.