

Report of the Fire Services Study Committee
December 2018

Introduction

The Fire Services Study Committee was formed by a warrant article at the March 2018 Town Meeting. It was tasked with finding the advantages and disadvantages of either contracting with the Lisbon Volunteer Fire Department for services, or continuing to maintain the Landaff Volunteer Fire Department.

The amended warrant article authorizing the Committee reads: *“To see if the Town will vote to establish a committee to review Fire Department Services, including pros and cons of an agreement with the Town of Lisbon for fire protection for the Town of Landaff; as well as the pros and cons of keeping the Landaff Volunteer Fire Department. Said committee to be made up of 2 people appointed by the Selectmen, 2 people appointed by the Landaff Fire Department and 1 person appointed by the Moderator. This committee shall have a hearing late summer 2018 to report on their findings to the people of the Town of Landaff. All committee meetings shall be open to the public. A written report shall be given to the Town by December 1, 2018.”*

The Committee has sought to compare the two proposals on a factual basis. It has been generally successful in that effort, but, due to the subjective nature of the issues, the Committee has, in some cases, needed to rely upon informed opinions. We have sought out individuals and organizations that we feel are well qualified to express those opinions.

We have met in public sessions, generally on a biweekly basis, since early April 2018. A well attended public hearing was held on September 13, 2018. We have also met with the Lisbon Select Board and Fire Chief, the Lyman Select Board, Chief Mike Sitar of the Northfield/Tilton Fire Department, Bath Fire Chief Willie Minot, and Bethlehem Fire Chief and President of Twin State Mutual Aid Association Jack Anderson. Other contacts have included: representatives of the insurance industry, including the ISO agency which provides risk assessments for the insurers; the Saco Valley Fire Association; Sugar Hill Fire Chief Allan Clark; the Landaff Select Board; the Landaff Volunteer Fire Department; and the Landaff Volunteer Firefighters Association

The Committee is not a decision making body. This is a report of the information that we have been able to compile. It is not a recommendation for either keeping our own fire department or contracting with Lisbon. We trust that the citizens of Landaff, when they consider the facts, will be able to make an informed decision, and we hope that we have been of assistance.

We would like to thank all who have assisted us, including the many citizens of Landaff who have contributed to our efforts.

Overview of Fire Services

Fire services in much of the North Country are provided by volunteer departments. Recruitment and retention are ongoing issues with all departments, and roster numbers can, and do, fluctuate. All members contribute at some level, and are vital to the success of the department, including older less active members who may be able to provide a wealth of first-hand experience and knowledge to assist younger members. Most departments have at least several firefighters that have received Level 1 certification, which is a 216 hour commitment, as well as other firefighters that have received varying levels of training. Firefighters are assigned tasks based on their training and skill levels. Continued training is encouraged and opportunities for outside and in-house training are provided.

None of the departments have the ability to handle all possible contingencies without assistance from neighboring departments. Jack Anderson (Bethlehem Chief & Twin State Mutual Aid Association President) said that fire service gets more complicated every day, with no small town able to support a fire department that is able to stand alone, without mutual aid. He said the demands on the fire service are large, and it becomes more important for all of the towns who have fire departments to maintain them as best they can. Willie Minot (Bath Chief) also agreed, saying that no area fire department can stand alone, and that usually two to three departments are needed for a serious alarm. He said that the number of firefighters responding is about five or six per department, but that fifteen or more may be needed.

The present Landaff Volunteer Fire Department appears to compare favorably with most area departments. They report good turnout at regularly scheduled training sessions. Their call records indicate that they usually have a timely response with sufficient personnel. The department reports that typically six to nine firefighters are able to respond. There appears to be a high level of commitment, despite the fact that they receive no compensation. Jack Anderson said that Landaff more than meets the minimum standards for Twin State. He said that the real core of a department is the group of dedicated volunteers; “when you get people like that who want to volunteer for their town, and neighbors through mutual aid, you are truly blessed”. Both he and Willie Minot remarked that the Landaff Fire Department is a great resource and valued asset to the Twin State Mutual Aid. Jack also said that fire departments are expected to do everything with very limited funding. He said that he has known Landaff people for a long time, and they work diligently to do a lot with very little.

As mentioned above, due to of the nature of volunteer fire departments, rosters tend to vary; the latest information provided to the Committee indicates that the Lisbon Fire Department roster totals 16 members, with 10 having Level 1 or higher training and 5 who have committed to pursuing Level 1 training in the near future. The Lisbon numbers were provided

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this past summer. The latest Landaff numbers were provided just prior to this report. They indicate that the Landaff Fire Department has 9 full members with Level 1 or higher training, 3 members in training, 5 applicants, some with training, in the process of becoming full members, and 1 administrative support member.

The Landaff Volunteer Fire Department is a member of the Twin State Mutual Aid Association, which combines the resources of twenty-three departments in New Hampshire and Vermont. Benton and Lyman, without their own fire departments, are associate members. Twin State provides dispatch services and coordinates the departments for joint response efforts. Twin State also maintains a training facility in Bethlehem and provides a variety of training opportunities.

When comparing fire departments it is important to note that by maintaining its own department, Landaff presently has the unlimited benefits of the resources of all the surrounding departments. Since Landaff is an active, dues paying member of the Twin State Mutual Aid System, Landaff is able to receive the benefit of those resources without being subjected to per call/incident charges. Lisbon responds to all first alarms in Landaff under the Twin State agreement. There are no additional charges for this assistance.

Costs

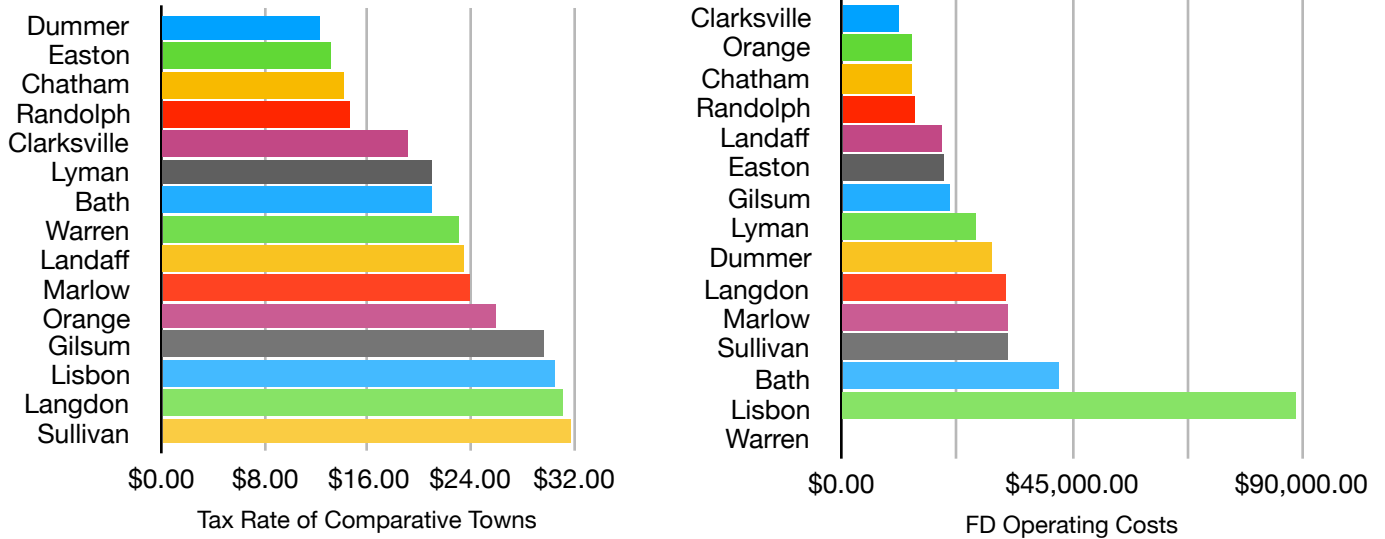
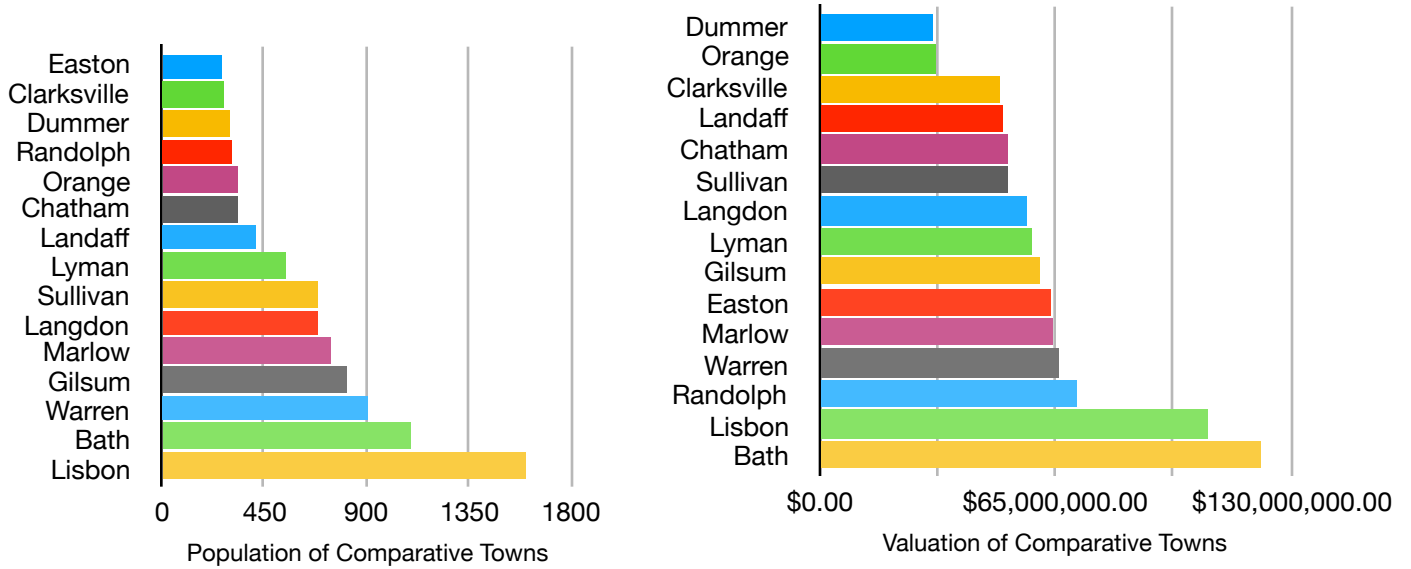
On average the annual costs for the Landaff Volunteer Fire Department have been about \$30,000. That figure includes \$20,000 for operational costs and \$10,000 for capital expenditures. Those figures represent about two percent of the combined school and town budgets. Historically a portion of the costs have been provided from funds raised by the Landaff Volunteer Firefighters Association, and other donations, thereby reducing the expense to the taxpayers.

We wanted to know how those costs compared to what other towns were spending. Basing the comparison on similar populations and tax bases, we found about ten comparable New Hampshire towns. The comparison showed that Landaff's figures were about in the middle of the spending range.

If Landaff continues with its own fire department it would seem reasonable to assume that those costs, with adjustments for inflation, could be maintained. An unknown future cost would be for the renovation, or replacement of the present station structure. The Committee has explored some options which are included later in this report. An advantage of retaining the existing fire department would be that the voters of Landaff would continue to exercise control over any budgetary concerns.

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Comparative Town Study Data



These charts depict various data comparisons between the towns. The FD operating costs do not include Capital appropriations.

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Town Expense Impact Worksheet

How to estimate how a town expense will affect your tax bill:

Town expenses are divided among property owners based on their Net Value Assessment that appears on their tax bill, divided by 1,000. The selectmen and the state work together to determine the amount of money to be raised from taxes, then divide that amount by the total number of taxable thousands. See page 20 of the town report. Landaff has a \$50,708,190 Net Valuation, for this example we will round to \$50,000 thousands for the town of Landaff.

<u>Amount to Raise</u>	<u>Thousands</u>	<u>Rate per Thousand</u>
\$50,000.00	\$50,000.00	\$1.00
\$40,000.00	\$50,000.00	\$.80
\$30,000.00	\$50,000.00	\$.60
\$20,000.00	\$50,000.00	\$.40
\$10,000.00	\$50,000.00	\$.20

Example: your house and land are appraised at \$200,000.00, and then you are assessed based on \$200 thousands. The following chart shows the relationship between money to be raised and your tax bill.

<u>Amount to Raise</u>	<u>Tax Rate Change</u>	<u>Your 1,000's</u>	<u>Tax cost</u>
\$50,000.00	\$1.00	200	\$200.00
\$40,000.00	\$.80	200	\$160.00
\$30,000.00	\$.60	200	\$120.00
\$20,000.00	\$.40	200	\$ 80.00
\$10,000.00	\$.20	200	\$ 40.00

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The costs associated with a Lisbon contract are uncertain as the proposal that Lisbon provided last year is no longer valid. Lyman's annual base cost is \$14,500, which was calculated according to population, with additional per hour costs for equipment and personnel. The current per hour equipment costs are tanker \$150, engine \$300, and ladder truck \$350. The per hour rates for personnel are chief \$27, non-certified firefighters \$12, and certified firefighters \$15. The Lisbon Select Board indicated that any future contract with Landaff would use a similar formula, but did not specify an exact figure. As Landaff's population is smaller than Lyman's the base cost should be proportionally lower. The Lisbon Select Board indicated that capital expenditures and interest payments would not be part of Landaff's assessment, but did not clearly explain what figures would be used to determine the base cost. Because the actual costs would vary, depending on the number of calls, it is impossible to accurately predict the total expenses involved in a Lisbon contract.

Lyman, never having had its own fire department, has contracted with Lisbon for fire services for over 35 years. The Lyman Select Board indicated that they felt the charges had been fair, and that the town was pleased with the service. They provided a breakdown of charges from 2001 to date. The charges have gradually increased over that time period, with a previous limit on the annual amount for per call charges removed in 2016. The figures provided indicate the total costs, base cost plus per call charges, for 2016 were \$18,084.50; for 2017 were \$23,084.50; and for 2018, as of June 18, 2018, were \$18,858.00.

Any contract would be the result of negotiations between the Town of Landaff and the Town of Lisbon. Ultimately, the Lisbon Select Board and voters of Lisbon would have the final say on the terms and costs of any contract. Without its own department, Landaff voters would have limited choices if they were dissatisfied with those terms. Willie Minot pointed out that once you lose your fire department, the voters lose control of the costs.

An additional consideration when comparing costs is the possibility of per call charges from responding Twin State Mutual Aid departments. Twin State President Jack Anderson informed the Committee that it is likely that a subcommittee recommendation to begin charging associate towns for services will be approved at their December 2018 meeting. The allowable per hour charges for Twin State departments are \$175 engine, \$150 tanker, and \$20 for each firefighter. An addendum to this report will be provided to inform the Town of the outcome of the Twin State decision on per call charges to association towns lacking their own fire departments.

If Landaff no longer provides its own department it would become an associate town and be subject to those charges in addition to the current membership fee in the Twin State Association. Presently there are no additional charges for assistance from responding departments. Because of the isolation of the South Landaff area all calls there require a

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response from Mutual Aid. The dispatch system also initiates a Mutual Aid response from one or more departments for any serious alarms in other areas of Town. Bath Chief Willie Minot estimated that a major fire, in a town without its own department, could cost in excess of \$10,000. Sugar Hill's Allan Clark estimated that a small fire such as a first alarm chimney fire would cost Landaff around \$6000 per call. Jack Anderson explained that fire service is very expensive, Bethlehem's budget is \$85,000 and if they are going to support a town that won't invest in their own department, they have to figure out a way to cover their costs.

The mutual aid system is set up so that towns will keep their fire departments for the benefit of all. The recent large Main Street fire in Lisbon is a good example of the benefits. Eight towns, including Landaff, responded providing eight engines, three aerial ladders, three tankers, and over forty personnel. The Twin State responders worked for over six hours. Lisbon was not charged anything for that massive response because they maintain their own fire department. If charges had been assessed, they could have been in excess of \$20,000 for this one incident.

Homeowner's Insurance

Due to the complexities of the insurance industry, it is difficult to accurately assess all factors involved in a change of fire service. It would be advisable for homeowners to check with their agents regarding their particular circumstances.

Coverage

Landaff Chief Jason Cartwright feels that Landaff resident volunteers, familiar with roads, locations, residents' names, local history of incidents, and locations of drafting sites, ponds and other water sources are better able to respond in a timely and effective manner. He also felt that, without the Landaff Fire Department, response times could be delayed in some instances, as during a winter storm with unplowed roads creating a challenge for crews coming uphill from Lisbon. He also felt that the loss of the Landaff Fire Department could delay responses in situations such as when major storms block roads with trees and debris, downed wires, and other effects that keep fire crews busy within their own towns. Chief Cartwright said that Lisbon, Bath, and other mutual aid towns are all very capable, but that there is increased risk that they may be tied up with their own calls. Chief Cartwright said, "Our department's strength has been the ability to provide a water supply to the scene, quickly and efficiently. It's

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sometimes unappreciated, when everyone thinks of firefighters running into buildings with a hose, but they need water, and it's a basic skill that we train for regularly, and are good at and have been routinely recognized for this service in mutual aid situations. Local fire departments would have to make major adjustments in first-on-scene assignments, shifting manpower and equipment to meet their needs. Now, when Landaff shows up, they get water, and extra manpower to help; whether it's dragging hose, or providing fans, setting up scene lights, providing equipment, or just directing traffic".

It is Chief Cartwright's opinion that the overall civic reputation of the town would be adversely affected by disbanding the fire department, and failing to provide our support to the mutual aid safety network.

Landaff Fire Department Assets

The Town of Landaff presently has approximately \$270,000 invested in Fire Department equipment, including the trucks, specialized hoses, air tanks, personal protective equipment, and other tools. The fire station and land is not included in that amount. If the Fire Department were to be disbanded, there would need to be a plan to liquidate those assets. Jack Anderson said that he thought that it would be difficult to liquidate the assets, and that the town would realize little because other departments either get it for free or are rich enough to buy new.

If the voters of Landaff should decide to shut down the fire department, Jack suggested that it would be difficult to start back, once gone. He said that to replace the equipment could be difficult and costly. It has also been suggested that once gone, it might be difficult to summon up the level of volunteerism that presently exists.

Public Trust

The Committee received strong input from citizens concerning a lack of trust in the Fire Department. Although this was not an area directly under the original purview of the Committee, it was apparent that this was an issue the citizens of Landaff wanted addressed. Perhaps this issue was reflected in the answers to a recent Planning Board survey question. The survey asked "do you feel that the community spirit in Landaff is still strong". When the same question was asked ten years ago 89% responded yes, while on the recent survey that number had dropped to 47%.

The issue developed over the last several years as the result of the complicated and contentious dispute regarding how to handle Fire Department donations and funds raised by

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the firefighters. Although the issue was ultimately resolved, by the establishment of a Trust Fund controlled by the Town with oversight by the Fire Department, we were told that many had become dissatisfied with and distrustful of the process. We asked the Select Board and the Fire Department/Association for details of the entire process. Both parties promptly responded with written statements outlining the events. Both accounts related the same events, but with notable differences of interpretation.

After studying those statements, the Committee feels that both parties were trying to look out for the best interests of the Town of Landaff, and felt that they were working in good faith to do so. The Select Board was doing its job trying to comply with recommendations of the Town Auditors. They felt a duty to safeguard what they considered Town funds. The Firefighters Association likewise felt a duty to safeguard the funds, which had been raised entirely by donations and fund raising activities; and kept in their accounts for the support of the Fire Department. At some point in the process communications broke down, motives may have been misinterpreted, and a general atmosphere of distrust evolved. This led to a prolonged dispute with legal expenses for both parties. With the advantage of hindsight, the entire process now appears to have been fundamentally flawed, and it is understandable that there had been a loss of trust.

It is the conclusion of this Committee that none of the funds were misappropriated. With the establishment of the trust fund, the monies are now under Town control, and can only be used for the intended purposes. Going forward there is a procedure to differentiate between funds going to the Town and those going to the Fire Association. It is thought that these procedures will avoid future problems of this nature. Since the core issues were resolved, the Select Board, Fire Department and Association have been working in a cooperative manner for the benefit of the Town.

Everyone involved has a love of our town. The future of the fire service is the most important issue going forward. The Town needs to move forward and heal its wounds. There are many valid considerations that could affect the Town's choice of how to provide that service, but we need to find a way to put this unfortunate incident behind us as we make those decisions.

Community Spirit

The Fire Department/Association has been one of the primary groups involved in organizing and running the annual Old Home Day activities. The auction proceeds benefit the Firefighters Association, which in turn provides support for the Fire Department. The funds

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raised by the auction and other Old Home Day activities directly reduce the costs to the taxpayers for the Fire Department. The Association reported an average yearly profit of over \$8000 from Old Home Day for the years 2007 to 2012 inclusive. Maintaining this long running tradition could be challenged if Landaff no longer has its own fire department. The many opportunities for volunteerism, both in active and support roles, provided by the Fire Department may also be instrumental in maintaining a sense of community. How much value to place on these aspects of continuing to have our own fire department is a personal decision that each voter needs to carefully consider.

Recruitment and Retention

Chief Cartwright told the Committee that recruitment and retention is a constant concern, but that all volunteer departments have a natural ebb-and-flow of members. He indicated that Fire Department members are always alert to new people moving into town, and often approach them to solicit their interest in joining the department. They have had over the years, and continue to have, various efforts for recruitment with various levels of success. How to improve recruitment and retention is an ongoing topic of discussion at Twin State Mutual Aid meetings, so the department will always have support. In the opinion of Chief Cartwright, if the town truly supports the department, the town will always have members to serve at various levels of skill and commitment.

Fire Station

The present structure, built in the nineteenth century, was one of Landaff's original one room school houses. It has housed the Fire Department for approximately fifty years. Structural issues, as well as the lack of running water and septic, will need to be addressed in the future.

Several years ago a plan was drafted for a new structure, which would have also provided space for the Highway Department, Town offices, a kitchen and other public spaces. That proposal was never presented to the voters, as it was deemed too expensive at about \$850,000. In the meantime a Fire Department building committee has explored ideas for a less ambitious plan, which may cost far less. If the Town is committed to retaining its own fire department, the building committee could continue its work and bring some specific proposals before the voters. The voters have the final say on any proposal.

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There have also been discussions of possible renovations to the existing building. This needs considerably more study, but may be a way to keep costs down. At a minimum the following repairs, and/or improvements, are needed: a well and septic system; a small bathroom and emergency shower for the firemen to use after exposure to chemicals and other contaminants; a perimeter drain for the entire building to eliminate water seepage into the structure (the water floods a large area of the building in wet seasons); widening of entrance door to accommodate larger modern engines; an exhaust fan system to vent building when trucks are started; roof modifications and repairs to correct leaking issues; address mold caused by leaks and seepage; review insulation and upgrade if needed; and review electrical system and upgrade if needed (the present system was upgraded within the last ten years by volunteers).

Although it would be desirable to either renovate the existing station or build a new structure, the Fire Department has indicated that they continue to be patient and are flexible. As taxpayers themselves, they are sensitive to any effects on the tax rate. They have suggested that the project could be done in phases spread out over several years. The Fire Department Trust Fund was always considered by the members to be seed money to be used to offset future improvements. The Building Committee has explored various funding options that may be able to reduce the burden on the taxpayers.

Lisbon was unable to obtain grants for their new station construction cost; however they did obtain grants for emergency management equipment.

Additional Documentation

The entire final minutes of the Committee and other supporting documentation will be provided to the Landaff Town Clerk for archiving. Those materials will be available, at the Town Hall, for viewing by interested parties.

Respectfully Submitted,
Landaff Fire Services Study Committee

Doug Erb, Chairman
Richard Sagar, Vice Chairman
Don Beaudin
Kathy Parsons
Bruce Ulricson