RECORD OF PROCEEDINGS
SPECIAL COUNCIL MEETING
THURSDAY, OCTOBER 23, 2025 – 6:00 P.M.
MAYOR WILLIAM G. KOONS PRESIDING

MEMBERS PRESENT: Bell, Berger, Canton, Cavanagh, Galicki, and Porter

OFFICIALS PRESENT: Fiscal Officer Romanowski, Police Chief Rizzo

VISITORS: Mark Vedder, CVFD; Martin Wallenhorst, Sheerbrook Dr.; Jesse Phan, CVFD; Ryan Bradley, Royal Oak Dr.; Misha Alexander, Chillicothe Rd.; Bob and Jo Royor, Manor Brook Dr.; Cathy Hattenbach, Laurelbrook Dr.; John Catani, CVFD; Todd Lyle, 704 Bell Rd.; Jeremy Bond, Bell Rd.

The Mayor called the Special Council meeting to order. The Fiscal Officer read the roll.

ORDINANCES AND RESOLUTIONS:

Porter provided a third reading of an ordinance approving the Fire Protection and Emergency Medical Service Agreement between the Chagrin Falls Suburban Volunteer Fireman's Association and the Village of South Russell for a period of three years for fire protection and emergency medical services beginning January 1, 2026 for the sum of $604,826.70, the sum of $677,405.91 for the year beginning January 1, 2027, and the sum of $758,694.62 for the year beginning January 1, 2028, authorizing the Mayor to execute the agreement on behalf of the Village, and declaring an emergency.

Canton thanked the visitors for attending and stated that Council was elected to keep an eye on the residents' money. The ordinance that was just read will cost them approximately $500,000 more for Fire and EMS. He considered himself to be fiscally responsible but acknowledged that he heard the residents. He had spoken to many, and the common point was that it was a lot of money and a big increase, but they were willing to pay for it. Against his better judgment, Canton said he would hold his nose and vote yes for the ordinance. He felt that he let the residents down for the first time in 10 years by not having the political courage to do the right thing. 12-12-12 plus is absolutely ridiculous. Nobody buys a car or house without getting a better price.

Berger read the following statement into the record:

1. I want to thank Councilman Canton for his comments tonight. They represent a level of honesty not often experienced in the political world. His students should take note and appreciate the rare gem they have in Jerry Canton.
2. I am not against Chagrin Valley Fire Department despite accusations by the Mayor and others; to the contrary, I am on the record stating my belief that CVFD has operationally done an exemplary job in servicing the needs of our Village. I've never questioned their professionalism as firefighters and EMTs.
3. I have questioned and have serious reservations concerning the fiscal management within the CVFD and how it has been operated that has necessitated the unusually high increases in the proposed contract. As a private entity, CVFD has not been subject to the necessary oversight to ensure sound fiscal management and will not be subject to that needed oversight under the proposed agreement for the next three years. This is

not the opinion of one person. Others in the field with considerable experience as well as elected officials from other municipalities have expressed the same concerns. I've been made aware that CVFD now projects for the current fiscal year an operating deficit of more than $600,000. I'm told that CVFD has funded the deficit by using capital reserve funds intended for major equipment purchases to fund its current operating deficit. I don't see how this could have happened in a single year. CVFD must have known the problem existed long before June of this year yet did not inform the Advisory Board nor the member communities of their dire fiscal situation. There should have been oversight then. There needs to be oversight going forward. But there is no provision for enhanced oversight in the current proposal. I'm told the Advisory Board did not meet during the previous three-year contract until June of 2025. If that is correct, I can only ask why? What is the purpose of an Advisory Board that doesn't provide oversight? The fact that CVFD has resisted and continues to resist the concept of a fire district for the member communities to own and manage a fire department and allow for transparency and proper oversight in their operations is all you need to know to understand that the financial foundation this organization is built upon is not stable. To those who would argue I'm only interested in finances and not community service, I would answer that any organization must be financially stable in order to function properly for the benefit of those it serves. If new equipment purchases have been deferred because of operating deficits, eventually old equipment must lead to degradation of services. Your 20-year-old car might function well; it might not. How dependable will it be when you go to start on a cold winter's morning? None of us know the answer, but we had all better ask the question.

4. I believe the additional expense burden upon this Village by this contract will be an unsustainable loadstone without additional taxation to the residents. In effect, approving this contract is an unfunded mandate whereby this body agrees to spend funds it does not currently have nor can expect to have in the future from existing sources. Additional funds will need to be raised from the taxpayers. Once again, we have the cart before the horse. We should have asked the taxpayers to approve a fire levy to support these expenses prior to committing the Village to paying for them.
5. I have serious reservations about the process by which we have arrived at this vote. We have followed none of the good practices we as a Council have insisted upon in every other operation of the Village including transparency, competitive bidding, and an open review process. I believe this contract is and since the beginning has been the product of a corrupt bargain. It was negotiated in secret, sold to the Village without the benefit of a competitive bidding process. When Council attempted to solicit competitive proposals to do its own due diligence, the Mayor called out his people and shut it down. The process by which this contract comes to us reflects the worst possible disgrace upon this institution, its elected officials, and the Village. I believe the ratification of this agreement legitimizes the unauthorized acts of the Mayor and subjects us all to liability for approving such unauthorized acts.
6. Council is now in an untenable position. Our residents need the reassurance that fire and EMS protection will go on uninterrupted as of 1 January 2026. Other townships have rightfully told council to "go jump," a family friendly version of the actual statement, after the events of two weeks ago. And so, when a man has no options, he has no problems. His path is clear regardless of the efficacy of that path. Only CVFD remains and therefore for the time being I'm confident that this Council will act under duress to approve this contract and allay the fears of its residents. Monies will somehow be found, I'm sure; other projects delayed or terminated, and spending

delayed or denied to meet the exigent circumstances created by this contract. And so it must be. Our future is undetermined. What happens tomorrow is unknown. What is absolutely clear is that the failure of this process by which we have arrived at this moment must not ever happen again. Whatever has happened to diminish the perception of integrity of Council in our Village; it must stop and those responsible must be held to account. These steps we must take to ensure our future success. No matter how painful or distasteful, this cleansing of corruption in our Village must happen. I would say more to later date, but for now I will vote no.

Poter stated he was not pleased with the 12-12-12. He thought it was a real burden on the taxpayers of the Village. CVFD has done exemplary service and remarkable work. The Village does not have another proposal from anyone else at this time and it is the end of October. Porter said he would not vote against something that will deny coverage possibly to the residents of South Russell. Because of that, he planned to vote in favor of the agreement. Porter called the question.

Cavanagh asked Mark Vedder whether he could assure Council that the Advisory Board will meet and that the Village would be receiving notification of the meetings despite signing the three-year contract. She asked if the Mayor was on this board, and the Mayor said no. Porter stated that the contract allows the Mayor to appoint a representative to the Advisory Board. Cavanagh wanted to have the assurance that the meetings would be occurring. Vedder explained that the contract allows for examination of the CVFD books at any time, but South Russell has never asked for the benefit of doing that. He further explained that South Russell pays less than half for fire and EMS protection than any other Geauga County community that boarders the Village. It is not an outrageous amount that is being requested. The Village has enjoyed the benefit of paying less than half by being together with five other communities. It has seen economy of scale and benefit in paying $500,000 for fire protection even with the proposed increases, lost ambulance billing money, and the $60,000 for dispatching. In 2028, the Village will pay hundreds of thousands of dollars less than Bainbridge Twp., Russell Twp., Auburn Twp., Newbury Twp., or any of the communities in the area. The Village has enjoyed the benefit of those savings for many years by doing the smart financial thing and being good stewards of the money of the Village of South Russell by joining together with five other communities to get economy of scale and provide quality services for less money by having more communities together than just one or two. Vedder stated the department would be happy to meet more frequently with the Village, adding that no one had ever asked to meet more frequently. He stressed the importance of planning together. He encouraged Council to let CVFD know how frequently they would like to meet.

Cavanagh verified that the CVFD firefighters are paid on the lower end of most of the surrounding communities. Vedder confirmed that they are paid the least of any community. Cavanagh wanted to see that climb with the contract increase. Vedder advised this was part of the proposal. The members of Council who attended the three meetings held by CVFD know the reasons why the contract is going up by this amount. If they did not share this information with Council, that is unfortunate. He further explained that the information was made available to all of Council through a Power Point presentation. When many members of Council attended the third meeting and did not ask any questions whatsoever about wanting more financial information, it could have been made available at that time. This was the reason for the meetings. CVFD was asking the participating councils to look at the challenges CVFD was facing and together with their finance directors offer suggestions. It was not pushed down anyone's throat. It was collectively agreed

to by all the communities. All five of the other communities have signed the contracts and provided them to CVFD. South Russell is the lone community which has not done that.

Bell seconded the motion. Roll call – ayes, Bell, Canton, Cavanagh, and Porter. Nay, Berger. Galicki recused himself. Motion carried. **ORD 2025-61**

The Mayor stated that there is a Council meeting on November 10th. He expected to read about the unauthorized actions of this Mayor in the Chagrin Valley Times or expect an apology from Berger on November 10th.

ADJOURNMENT: Being that there was no further business before Council Porter made a motion to adjourn at 6:15 p.m., seconded by Cavanagh. Voice vote – ayes, all. Motion carried.

William G. Koons, Mayor

Danielle Romanowski, Fiscal Officer

Prepared by Leslie Galicki