



Soaring Eagle Press e-Edition
Templeton's "Almost Daily"

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FROM THE EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

The opinions expressed in this section are those of Soaring Eagle Press Editor/Publisher Nanette Fisher, and not necessarily those of SEP's sponsors. Letters to the Editor are welcome in response to these opinions and on other subjects. Please keep letters to 150 words or less and include your name, address, and phone number (only your name and the area of Templeton will be published).

The loss of a Fire Chief

Part I – A constant barrage of criticism

Departing or retiring department heads, general managers, superintendents, and other key positions of leadership in both business and government rarely sit on the boards or committees that choose their replacements – and if they are leaders of integrity – they don't interfere with the organization or their replacement after they have left that position.

Change is difficult for most people. Studies have shown that many would prefer to continue in less than optimum circumstances rather than face change or the unknown. When an organization undergoes a change in leadership – particularly after having the same person at the helm for a long period of time – members of the organization are often very resistant to any change.

And in a fire department, these caveats are infinitely more important.

Fire departments – particularly a volunteer fire department like Templeton's – are made up of exceptionally dedicated individuals who serve together under life and death circumstances – saving both the lives of people in the community they serve, and the lives of their fellow firefighters as they back one another up in dangerous situations.

Because of this, the ties that bind the members of a fire department together are extraordinarily strong and anything – including a change in leadership or internal changes – can upset or disturb those bonds of trust and certainty necessary for firefighters to function well and safely together.

As a result, when Fire Chiefs retire, many of them choose to move out of the community they have served, and those who don't move, do everything humanly possible to keep their distance – making every effort not to interfere with the work of the new Chief or his command in any way, shape, or form.

At worst, to interfere could cost lives; at best, badly divide a department and the community it serves.

Unfortunately, when Greg O'Sullivan retired as Templeton's Fire Chief, he chose to interfere, and the ramifications of that interference have reverberated throughout the Fire Department and our community – and are to a great degree responsible for the loss of Templeton's current Fire Chief.

In a nutshell, here's what happened.

Throughout his tenure as Fire Chief, O'Sullivan had a somewhat adversarial relationship with members of the Templeton Community Services District (TCSO) Board of Directors.

While everyone usually managed to keep public interactions polite, the undercurrents of strong disagreements between O'Sullivan and his board would occasionally surface in public meetings and sparks would fly.

Shortly after his retirement, O’Sullivan came to a board meeting and literally reamed TCSD General Manager Jeff Hodge and the Board of Directors for not allowing him to have participated on the committee that chose the new Fire Chief – even though it would have been highly irregular for them to do so.

While he didn’t say it in so many words, it was obvious he wasn’t happy with his replacement.

It was one thing to publicly express displeasure at the District’s choice, but he further exacerbated the situation by meeting with firefighters from his former department – crossing a line that the vast majority of retired Chiefs would never have crossed.

As a result, what might have been a naturally challenging transition within the Fire Department became extremely difficult.

But it didn’t end there.

In a surprising move, O’Sullivan decided to run for a seat on the board that has oversight of his former department. In 2010, with two seats up for election on the TCSD Board of Directors and only two candidates running, there was no community conversation pro or con, and no election; as a result he took the seat by default in December – less than 6 months after his retirement.

And the real fireworks began.

In board meeting after board meeting – for several months – O’Sullivan would literally cross-examine Chief Jim Langborg – point by point – keeping him at the podium for long periods of time during his staff reports to the Board of Directors. Director Kevin Hunt added to the constant, ongoing barrage of thinly veiled criticism as well.

And that was just the very tip of the iceberg. Emboldened by O’Sullivan’s actions, a number of firefighters and community members added to the constant barrage of criticism. The situation reached critical mass when Kevin Hunt exploded in a board meeting and publicly let loose with a string of career damaging accusations against the Chief that frankly, had little or no basis in fact.

Lesser men might have sued. Langborg simply put one foot in front of the other and continued to make progress within the fire department. Unfortunately, he had reached his limit and began putting out feelers for a new position.

- **In Part II** of this editorial, we’ll take a look at the challenges facing Templeton’s Fire Department and how it’s funded
- **In Part 3** of this editorial, we’ll take a look at what Langborg envisioned for the department, why, and what progress he was able to make during his tenure (to be published mid-to-late June 2013)
- **Part 4** will be the conclusion to this year-long project

ABOUT SOARING EAGLE PRESS

Templeton’s “Almost Daily” is published by Soaring Eagle Press and is made possible through a team of local sponsors. The publication serves the greater Templeton area throughout the school district boundaries and provides a central clearing house for community information and other items of interest.

Its Mission Statement is “First and foremost to let readers know what’s coming up so they can remain informed and involved, secondly to highlight our youth’s achievements because they are both the focus and the future of our community, and finally, deal with the adult shenanigans when there is time and space.”

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