

—Slug:.....COMM-0847.rock.new\_fire\_chief  
—Contributor.....Robert F. Smith  
—Contributor email.....robfs52@yahoo.com  
—For section.....News  
—Format.....News - byline and dateline  
—Dateline.....Rockingham  
—Article Number:.....42869

**Notes from editor (not for publication):**

Torpey

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 Rockingham names McGinnis to lead merged fire  
2 department

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3 Alex Torpey, a municipal consultant, will serve as interim  
4 municipal manager as town and villages recruit permanent  
5 replacement for Scott Pickup

####END SUBHED####

6 TEXT BODY:

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7 It became official on Dec. 29: Shaun McGinnis was  
8 named the permanent chief of the new, consolidated  
9 Rockingham Fire and Rescue Department (RFRD).

10 The appointment of McGinnis, who had been serving in  
11 an interim capacity, was one of the last acts of outgoing

12 Municipal Manager Scott Pickup, who has taken a similar  
13 position in Springfield.

14 An interim municipal manager, Alex Torpey, was also  
15 named at the meeting.

16 Pickup's appointment of McGinnis was ratified by a  
17 resolution from the Rockingham Selectboard, the Saxtons River  
18 Village Trustees, and the Bellows Falls Village Trustees during that  
19 night's tri-board meeting.

20 McGinnis, 54, had served as the chief of the Bellows  
21 Falls Village Fire Department since 2017. He had been a member  
22 of all town fire departments at various times, having joined the  
23 Saxtons River Volunteer Fire Department when he was 20.

24 "I'm very happy to have been appointed chief,"  
25 McGinnis said Sunday afternoon, having just returned from a  
26 mutual aid call in Chester. "I enjoy doing this job, and I'm  
27 looking forward to the next chapter."

28 Several town officials and representatives of nearby fire  
29 departments were involved in the selection process.

30 "In my eyes, Chief McGinnis was the best candidate,"  
31 said Village President Paul Obuchowski, who served on the  
32 selection team, "and I'm very glad that he has accepted the job. I  
33 have seen the great job he has done as interim chief, and I'm very  
34 confident that he will continue to do a great job."

35 Obuchowski explained that the town "had a very good  
36 and open process for the hiring of the new chief." The process  
37 included the chiefs of Walpole, New Hampshire, and Springfield;  
38 the municipal manager, the chair of the Selectboard, and the  
39 Bellows Falls village president.

40 "We had a number of applications," Obuchowski said,  
41 "13 I believe, and set interviews for three people. Chief McGinnis  
42 was the number one pick of all of us."

43 Selectboard Chair Peter Golec was part of the selection  
44 committee. He noted that "the process to get to a transition team"  
45 and to form a budget, has been a long one, but "a few minor  
46 pitfalls" have been overcome.

For almost a full year, the committee had to agree on procedures, forms, and other aspects of combining the three departments.

Golec said the consolidation moved under the control of “the transition team, consisting of the fire committee and board members. That process took about three to six months.”

The three finalists were set to be interviewed, but “on the day of interviews with the Springfield and Walpole fire chiefs, two of the finalists removed themselves from contention, leaving McGinnis.”

Golec said that the committee “then went back to the board to see if they wanted to re-advertise, and they declined.

Pickup said that he felt McGinnis was the best choice.

“Shaun has been a key resource in providing accurate data, support, and management expertise to a very difficult transition,” Pickup said. “It was a consensus that he has shown the ability to withstand criticism and continue to move forward in a positive manner.”

Social media responses to McGinnis’ appointment have been overwhelmingly positive.

## A tough but smooth transition

Handling criticism well and still moving forward positively will be important qualities for the new chief. The merger of the town’s three separate fire departments, including the first responder emergency services (EMS), came out of a years-long process that at times proved contentious.

In 2023, AP Triton, a Wyoming firm that also consulted with Brattleboro over models for that town’s EMS needs, was hired to carry out a town-wide Fire Department Feasibility Study.

The study results recommended, among three options, merging the three departments into one cohesive unit under one fire chief, were presented to the town in 2024. Merging the departments had been discussed for decades but never acted on.

80 Several public meetings discussed the study and its  
81 recommendations. Some of the fire departments included  
82 multiple generations of founding member families, and the idea  
83 of merging into one department was an emotional issue.

84 The idea of a merger was put to a vote at the March 5,  
85 2025, Annual Town Meeting. With a large turnout, voters  
86 approved the merger by a nearly 2-to-1 margin.

87 Though some critics voiced fears the merger would  
88 trigger a mass exodus of disgruntled volunteer firefighters,  
89 McGinnis said that hasn't really happened.

90 "Things are going really well," he said. "The membership  
91 is turning out when it needs to."

92 Approximately 40 people have joined the new  
93 department, "and they're all living," McGinnis added with a  
94 laugh, a nod to claims on social media by disgruntled former  
95 firefighters that the RFRD was including deceased members in its  
96 numbers.

97 Pickup agreed, stating, "I have high hopes that the Fire  
98 Department consolidation will serve all communities well with a  
99 staff that is professional, well equipped, and eager to provide  
100 public service."

101 McGinnis said that he would "love to have more"  
102 volunteers, and that two firefighters from the former Rockingham  
103 department had joined.

104 "I've gone out of my way to make them feel welcome  
105 here," he said. "But at the same time, you've got to grow up and  
106 be an adult about it and advocate for yourself. We did make an  
107 effort to welcome everybody. If you can go online and trash us,  
108 you can just as easily find us here" and work out any issues.

109 McGinnis said that two-thirds of the three departments  
110 "decided to take a chance on this and help to make it work. For  
111 those that want to see it work, it's going to work."

112 He said he was very pleased when a former member of  
113 the Saxtons River department, who had not been in favor of the  
114 changes, decided to join.

115 "He said he was happy with the change and said he  
116 thought it was going well," McGinnis said. "He said he was  
117 trying to recruit more members."

118 McGinnis said the new department had 145 calls in its  
119 first two months, with many individual volunteers responding to  
120 50% to 60% of the calls.

121 "Not everyone is as active or has the same amount of  
122 time to participate as the next person," he said. "It's a group  
123 effort. We actually have a good average response."

124 He noted that the firefighters receive a stipend for  
125 responding which averages around \$15 an hour.

126 McGinnis said of the members who have joined the new  
127 RFRD that "all of us here are looking forward. If you want to be  
128 here and be positive, we want you. We have one department  
129 [with] one set of standardized operating guidelines, and any one  
130 of three stations are able to respond."

131 He said the merger has allowed combining equipment  
132 and bringing more equipment up to compliance standards.

133 "All three stations are open," McGinnis said. "We haven't  
134 eliminated any equipment. We're going to do this the right way  
135 and not in a hurry. The budget looks right on target."

136 He said that the villages had given over their fire and  
137 rescue budgets to the town, and "after this year, we'll have a nice  
138 and tidy single budget."

139 He added that the department is working with the  
140 Insurance Services Office over the coming months to review the  
141 department and work on improving insurance class ratings for the  
142 community. He said he hopes to have a report on those efforts to  
143 present to the town at Annual Town Meeting in March.

## 144 **New interim Municipal** 145 **Manager named**

146 Torpey will serve as the interim municipal manager  
147 while the town searches for a permanent replacement for Pickup.

148 Pickup described Torpey as “a skilled manager who will  
149 keep the positive momentum of all the town and village  
150 initiatives moving forward,” adding that he will be a “great asset”  
151 to the Selectboard and two Boards of Village Trustees through the  
152 process.

153 On his website, Torpey, who served as town manager of  
154 Hanover, New Hampshire from 2022 to 2024, describes himself  
155 as “Municipal Implementer; professor; consultant; volunteer EMT;  
156 retired mayor; person” and his “vibe” as “good governance,  
157 outdoors, photos, writing, music, travel, and all things local.”

158 Obuchowski also said that he felt “Alex will work out  
159 very well for us.”

160 “He has good experience doing this and will help us  
161 out,” he said.

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