

WEST METRO FIRE-RESCUE DISTRICT

Joint Council Work Session Minutes

October 27, 2021

Approved December 8, 2021

A. Call to order

President Gary Laurant called the work session of the West Metro Fire-Rescue District Board of Directors to order at 6:30 p.m. on October 27, 2021 at Station 3, 4251 Xylon Avenue N., New Hope, MN.

B. Roll Call – The following Directors were present:

Gary Laurant	President
Anne Norris	City Manager, City of Crystal, Secretary-Treasurer
Kirk McDonald	City Manager, City of New Hope, Vice President
John Elder	Council, City of New Hope
Jeff Kolb	Citizen Representative, City of Crystal
Marc Berris	Citizen Representative, City of New Hope

The following staff members were present:

Fire Chief Sarah Larson
Assistant Fire Chief Josh Kunde
Assistant Fire Chief Joel Nelson
Assistant Fire Chief Adam Wodtke
Recording Secretary Amy Juntunen

Councilmembers present:

Jim Adams	Kathi Hemkin
John Budziszewski	Michael Isenberg
Therese Kaiser	
Nancy LaRoche	
David Cummings	

Also present:

Alaina Rooker, Sun Post

C. SAFER Grant

Chief Larson is requesting Council approval to apply for a Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant and funding the added full-time staff after the grant period.

The SAFER grant was created to help fire departments increase or maintain the number of trained firefighters to meet the 1720 standard established by NFPA in 2001. The SAFER grant covers the salary of full-time firefighters for three years.

The West Metro Fire Rescue District protects an area with a population greater than 1,000 per square mile, which according to the 1720 standard requires a minimum of 15 firefighters to respond to a structure fire within nine minutes. Even with mutual aid, the District does not meet this minimum on 90% of calls between 6:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m.

The District's response model has changed over the past 22 years. In the past, the District did not meet the standard as it was not feasible. It is possible to get closer to meeting the standard now with additional staff. NFPA standards are not mandated unless specifically referenced by code, ordinance or statute. In regards to firefighting many NFPA standards are used as industry standards for equipment specifications, maintenance and safety.

OSHA standards do require at least four firefighters on scene to make an interior entry. An engine responding with two firefighters, which happens often during the day, is able to begin preparation but not enter the structure to fight the fire until at least four are on scene.

The District's current structure requires a balance of full-time staff and paid-on call (POC) firefighters. POC firefighters are not hired for administrative functions, but for event and incident response. There are currently 7 full-time employees. Currently, the existing full-time employees cover the day shift from 6:00 a.m.-6:00 p.m., Monday through Friday, for medical, fire, false alarms and other calls. The only calls POC firefighters respond to from 8:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m. are structure fires and resource driven calls. The District has automatic aid from two neighboring cities 24 hours a day.

The number of responders available is lowest in the morning as most POC are going to work, getting kids to school, etc. from 6:00 a.m.-8:00 a.m. The hours of 4:00 p.m.-6:00 p.m. are also more difficult to get responders on time. There are 17 POC firefighters per station. All POC are required to respond to a minimum of 40% of all calls. Most respond to about 60% of calls. Officers are required to meet the 60% minimum.

In order to cover the 6:00 a.m.-6:00 p.m. weekday window, most full-time staff work four 10-hour days. Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m. is the only time that all full-time staff are in the office at the same time.

Full-time staff are the program managers and administrators for every function of the District. The current full-time staffing model is challenging. Adding full-time staff would make the current POC model more sustainable and mitigate current vulnerabilities. Due to the staggering of hours, any sick leave or time off impedes response. Full-time staff have difficulty arranging for time off and many have exceeded accrued vacation time. When full-time staff are aware there is likely to be a shortage due to time off, meetings, etc., a POC duty crew is enacted, but it's inconsistent at best as sometimes there are no POC staff to fill a duty crew.

Full-time staff are also responsible for many trainings, programs and activities for the District that occur in the evening, requiring them to often work 12-14 hours per day.

Adding three full-time firefighters through the SAFER grant improves the rate at which the District meets the minimum number of 15 firefighters responding within the nine-minute timeframe. Chief Larson proposes to hire three full-time firefighters as responders that would also be tasked with administrative and programming duties.

The Logistics Chief has a large workload with maintaining three stations and all the equipment. Many projects are delayed due to a lack of time. Contracting those projects out still requires time and oversight by the Logistics Chief. Bringing in a Logistics Lieutenant would help ensure that projects are completed in a timelier manner.

The Assistant Chief of Training is over-taxed with the Fire Academy, evening trainings and daytime station responsibilities as a first responder. With over 85 trainings per year and 1100 hours of training, an additional staff member would help coordinate and execute the mentor program, department drills, and the fire academy.

The third proposed hire would assist the Deputy Fire Marshal and Administrative Assistant Chief with community outreach and education. This position would be responsible for social media and website management, special education for schools, families, and children with special needs.

Three of the current full-time employees will be aging into retirement in the next three to five years. Adding full-time staff now would help with succession planning.

The 2021 SAFER grant pays 100% of the firefighter salary and benefits of these additional hires for the first three years. Previous grants included a five-year step-down of coverage for the salary and benefits. This is the first time the SAFER grant has covered 100% of salary and benefits for added positions for all three years.

Because the District would be bringing on these additional staff members as Lieutenants instead of Firefighters, the District would need to cover about \$21,000 in salary and these would be non-exempt employees. The additional cost to the District would be approximately \$59,000 the first year in 2023, with a slight decrease to \$47,250 for the second year and \$62,000 in the third year. In the fourth year, the District would be responsible for the full cost of the added employees, estimated at \$436,090.

In 2023 the additional cost would be split about 50/50 between the member cities, resulting in an increase of \$30,000 per city. There will also be an increase beginning in 2023 for the new engines of about \$35,000 per year. Combined with the regular expected annual budget increase of \$60,000 per city, this would be a total increase of about \$125,000 per city in year one.

The grant is not guaranteed. One additional full-time employee would not make enough of an impact on the District's response time to qualify for the SAFER grant. The District is not obligated to keep the three additional positions once the grant period is over, but there is value in retaining those employees for succession planning. Chief Larson voiced concern with hiring if the positions were restricted to the three-year grant period.

The POC model is currently sustainable, but if calls dramatically increase or recruitment of POC firefighters falls, it will impact future sustainability. The current full-time duty crew model keeps it sustainable. Plymouth moved to a full-time model because they were unable to get responders to scene in a timely manner. Maple Grove is still POC but doesn't respond to medical calls and has 14 FT staff and 100 POC across their five stations. Maple Grove had 998 calls for service last year, about half of the District's calls.

The cost to apply for the grant is estimated at \$7,000-\$9,000 dollars. The District does not have to accept the grant if awarded. The success of the grant application is estimated at 80%.

D. Council Comments

The total budget for the Fire District is approximately \$2 million. This proposal would be a budget increase of over 20% at \$436,090 annually. Crystal will need to discuss further as any past levy increase has been very difficult to pass.

The core function of government is public safety. This budget increase would be about \$2 per month per household in the District.

Not all councilmembers agree that the District is currently understaffed.

If we don't provide Auto Aid or Mutual Aid would the current model be more sustainable? No. Calls to Brooklyn Park have decreased, and we receive Aid nearly as often as we receive it, so the service we receive is about equal to what is provided. Brooklyn Park received a SAFER grant to add twelve new full-time employees to their department.

Both cities do not have all councilmembers present. Each city will have a Council work session to discuss further and relay the Council's decision whether or not to support pursuing a SAFER grant to the Board by the end of November. The Fire District Board will meet in December.

E. Adjournment

There being no further business, motion by Elder, second by McDonald to adjourn. The meeting adjourned at 8:16 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Amy Juntunen
Recording Secretary