

WEST METRO FIRE-RESCUE DISTRICT

Board of Directors Work Session Minutes

September 8, 2021

Approved 10/13/2021

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 September 8, 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
Battalion Chief Sean Watson
Deputy Fire Marshal Shelby Wolf
Recording Secretary Amy Juntunen

C. SAFER Grant

Chief Larson is requesting Board approval to apply for a Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant.

The SAFER grant was created to help fire departments increase or maintain the number of trained firefighters to meet the standards established by NFPA. The SAFER grant covers the salary and benefits of a full-time firefighter for three years.

The West Metro Fire-Rescue District protects an area with a population greater than 1,000 per square mile, which requires a minimum of 15 firefighters to respond to a structure fire within nine minutes 90% of the time. Even with auto aid, the District has not always met this minimum as Brooklyn Park staffs their engines with two firefighters and Plymouth with three.

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 incidents, training and event 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 all other calls.

POC firefighters are only called in for resource driven calls such as structure fires from 8:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m. M-F. Automatic Aid from two neighboring cities is available 24 hours a day, but during the 8:00-4:00 p.m. it is difficult to get enough POC firefighters from the District to respond to resource driven calls within the nine-minute timeframe.

In 2019 there were 587 calls for service on weekdays between 6:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. In 2020, there were 621 out of 1,828 calls during that window.

The smallest amount of responders are available 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 up to 17 POC firefighters along with a captain, lieutenant, and lieutenant candidate at each station. Overnight, some of them will come to a call, but it's never certain how many will respond. POC firefighters are required to respond to a minimum of 40% of all calls assigned to their station. Most respond to about 60% of the calls. Officers are required to meet a 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 shifts. 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 staffing model more sustainable and mitigate current vulnerabilities. Full-time staff have difficulty arranging for time off and many have exceeded accrued vacation time. When full-time staff take time off or are in meetings for an extended period of time, this impedes the response. 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.

Peer departments on a full-time staffing model have nine people on shift 24/7.

Adding three full-time employees 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 employees 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 an additional staff member would ensure that all projects are completed in a more timely 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 coordinate and execute the mentor program and fire academy.

The third proposed hire would provide 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.

A few 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. In 2019 the grant only covered 75% of the salary/benefits for the first two years and 35% of the third year. Previous grants included a five-year step-down of coverage. This is the first time the SAFER grant has covered 100% of salary and benefits for added positions.

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 the number of calls and time commitment continue to increase it will not be sustainable. If recruitment of POC firefighters falls or weekend and holiday staffing shortages grow, it will impact future sustainability. Plymouth moved to a full-time model because they were unable to get responders on scene in a timely manner. Maple Grove is still POC but doesn't respond to medical calls and has 14 full-time staff and 100 POC across their five stations. They had 998 calls for service, about half of the District's calls.

The cost to apply for the grant is estimated at \$7,000-\$9,000 dollars.

The Board understands the need. However, with the impact to the budget, the Chief will need to make a presentation to the member city councils prior to approval to apply for the grant.

The City Managers will work with Chief Larson to set a date for a joint Council work session.

J. Adjournment

There being no further business, motion by McDonald, second by Elder to adjourn. The meeting adjourned at 8:37 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Amy Juntunen
Recording Secretary