

# FUTURE OF THE FIRE DEPARTMENT INITIAL COMMITTEE REPORT [STAFFING]

## OBJECTIVE:

The Future of the Fire Department Committee (the “Committee”) was assigned the task of evaluating the Mequon Fire Department/EMS and giving recommendations to the Common Council regarding current and future needs. Evaluation was to include staffing, buildings and equipment.

Staffing presents the most urgent issues and is the focus of this first report. Recently the Fire Department has experienced gaps in EMS coverage, which, if unaddressed, may lead to a decline in quality of service. This report examines the current model and recommends changes to stabilize staffing and continue to improve quality of care.

## BACKGROUND:

Prior to preparing this report, the Committee considered the following information:

- Fire Department Staffing Study dated October 2, 2017 by Matrix Consulting group (<https://tinyurl.com/yxofvkmw>);
- Executive Summary of Employee Engagement Survey dated January 2016 (<https://tinyurl.com/y2uyzn6w>);
- Mequon Fire Department 2018 Annual Report (<https://tinyurl.com/y44xz8xe>);
- SWOT Analysis of the Mequon Fire Department by Rick Lemke, Committee Member and Volunteer Fire Department Member (<https://tinyurl.com/yxd9v9sm>);
- City of Mequon Fire Department Recruitment Report dated December 17, 2019 (<https://tinyurl.com/y5d3k5yy>);
- Various additional data, reference materials and other documentation compiled by Command Staff to assist the Committee in understanding the current Fire Department structure and operations, along with associated costs, demographic challenges, etc. (<https://tinyurl.com/y3blpoo4>); and
- Information gathered during tours of the Buntrock Ave Safety Building and the East Side Fire Stations. During these tours and subsequent meetings, the Committee had an opportunity to meet with Command Staff, Paid-on-Call and Part-Time Department Members. These meetings were designed to have open

question and answer sessions to better understand the issues facing the Department, along with Members' individual concerns.

Complete copies of the materials referred to above and throughout the remainder of this report are available at the above-referenced links.

First and foremost, the Committee commends the Command Staff and Department's rank-and-file for attending every meeting and giving us their comments and recommendations. Their input has been critical in our work. We found that the FIRE/EMS Members are very positive about many aspects of the Department. However, they also have many concerns about both its current and future stability.

Mequon has been well-served for decades by a volunteer paid-on-call department with only minimal full-time staffing. Currently, we have the Fire Chief and Deputy Chief as our only full-time staff. However, due to changing demographics and other societal trends over time, our Fire Department, like many other volunteer departments nationwide, is struggling to fully staff EMS calls. The number of EMS calls in Mequon has increased 10% in two years and 76% over the past ten years. To further complicate this situation, during the last two years there has been a 20% reduction in the number of volunteer firefighters and EMTs available to deal with these increasing demands.

We believe the changing demographics of our community is a significant factor causing the challenges faced by the Department in its current structure, namely an increase in EMS calls with a concurrent decrease in number of volunteer firefighter/EMTs. The median age of the population in Mequon increased from 45.8 years in 2010 to 48.3 years in 2019, and additional senior and assisted living housing has been added to the housing stock of late. As Mequon ages, the trends suggest the community will require more frequent EMS service and call volumes will continue to increase.

Meanwhile, the aging of our community also results in a decreased pool of potential Fire/EMS volunteers, who tend to skew toward a younger demographic.

In addition to the decreased pool of potential community volunteers due to Mequon's aging demographic, our investigations suggest that many additional factors are causing the further reduction in volunteer Members, such as:

- Increasing time commitments for work and family that decreases time for volunteering
- Reduction in risk tolerance for younger generations
- Changing nature of calls, currently 78% EMS and 22% Fire (We understand that potential volunteers are often more interested in firefighting opportunities rather than responding to EMS calls.)
- Increasing late-night call volume causing fatigue during volunteers' other full-time jobs

- Increasing time commitment and costs for certification and training
- Lack of affordable housing for potential volunteers in our community, which tends to be more expensive than neighboring communities and with less rental units available (Volunteer Members who do not live nearby must stay at the Fire Station. The Fire Station housing is in need of immediate upgrades and is not an attractive option for potential volunteers.)
- Competition for EMS staff from nearby departments

Another significant complication to recruitment of volunteer citizen Members is the sheer number needed to assure 24/7 availability of Members responding to two fire stations covering 48 square miles. Currently, most fire department Members live west of the Milwaukee River and respond to Station 1 on Buntrock Avenue. Most requests for fire and emergency medical services are east of the Milwaukee River, an area best-served by Station 2 on Port Washington Road. The dichotomy between service requests and resources was the biggest factor in placing the current paid-on-premises paramedic, as well as the live-in Members and interns, at Station 2 on Port Washington Road. However, even with pre-positioning resources at Station 2, there are still many times when fire and EMS equipment is short-staffed or not staffed at all due to the lack of citizen Members living on the east side of the city.

The Department has increased its recruiting efforts in order to find additional volunteers (enhanced use of social media, distribution of print brochures, etc.), but to-date these efforts have not resulted in significant increased volunteers.

Currently there are approximately 50 Paid-on-Call and Part-Time Members on the roster to fill on-call shifts and times. No on-call shifts are assigned. Members sign up for the shifts and times that they are available. Because of work and family commitments, a number of the Members can only commit to a small number of shifts, leaving a core group of 12 Members to cover 80% of on-call hours.

As a result, critical time slots are not being filled. This was highlighted last summer, when scheduled service times were not staffed, and as a temporary solution the Common Council had to approve extra compensation to ensure adequate service. We believe that the dual challenges of increasing calls and decreasing volunteers currently faced by Department will directly affect the quality of care given to our residents if no corrective action is taken.

## **OPTIONS:**

We believe there are 4 options for the Mequon Fire Department moving forward:

1. Maintain the Status Quo
2. Combine Mequon with other Neighboring Fire Departments
3. Convert Department to Full-time Paid Staffing Structure
4. Retain Current Structure With Additional Full-time Staff and Pay Increases for Paid-on-Call and Part-Time Members

### **Maintain the Status Quo:**

For the reasons described above, we do not believe this is an acceptable option. Current Members are covering allotted shifts as best as possible, but it is likely that at some point there will be critical times that are not adequately staffed.

Furthermore, in our interviews, Command Staff as well as rank-and-file Members have repeatedly mentioned overwork and burnout as having the potential to cause the loss of even more volunteers, as well as increasing potential for error due to fatigue. The Committee has been very impressed with the hard work, dedication, and high level of service provided by the Mequon Fire Department even under these difficult current circumstances. We feel that it is not a reasonable expectation for them to continue to operate under the status quo in light of the increasing challenges described in this report, which at some point will negatively affect the quality of care given to our residents if no corrective action is taken.

### **Combine Mequon with Other Neighboring Fire Departments**

The Committee is aware that the City is in the beginning stages of talks with various neighboring communities regarding the combination of Mequon with other neighboring Fire Departments. We support that effort, and in particular the investigation as to whether the combination of Thiensville and Mequon would result in cost savings, efficiencies, synergies, etc. However, since these discussions are only in very preliminary stages, and we believe that any changes resulting from these discussions would be many years in the future, we do not recommend waiting for this option to come to fruition before our recommended changes discussed below are made.

### **Convert Department to Full-time Paid Staffing Structure:**

Converting the Department to full-time, paid Fire and EMS staffing would solve the problem of open shifts, and potential critical shortages facing the Mequon Fire Department. However, this would also increase the costs associated with the Department significantly. Current estimates of the cost of a full-time department for the City of Mequon would be approximately \$4,000,000 per year. The chart below shows some examples of costs associated with full-time fire departments for communities of comparable size and call volume to Mequon, along with a comparison to the cost of

Mequon’s current structure, which is significantly lower and which the Committee feels provides considerable value to the City taxpayers.

**Comparisons of Community Size, Area, Cost and Service Levels**

	<b><u>Population</u></b>	<b><u>Area (Sq. Mi.)</u></b>	<b><u>Budget</u></b>	<b><u>Call Volume</u></b>
<b>Mequon</b>	<b>24,385</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>\$1,588,029</b>	<b>2,414</b>
Pleasant Prairie	21,166	33	\$4,122,899	2,653
DePere	24,699	22	\$4,120,948	2,660
Fitchburg (No EMS)	28,316	35.6	\$3,521,130	2,103

Furthermore, in addition to significantly increased costs, conversion of the Department to a full-time staffing structure would by definition result in the elimination, or at least significant reduction, of the role for volunteer Members, many of whom would ideally like to continue to serve the Department, provided some of the current challenges are addressed. For these reasons, we do not recommend conversion to a full-time paid staffing structure at this time.

**Retain Current Structure with Additional Full-time Staff and Pay Increases for Paid-on-Call and Part-time Members**

The last option, and the option recommended by this Committee, would be to retain the current structure (a hybrid of full-time paid staff, along with part-time and volunteer Members), but add a minimum number of additional full-time staff Members and institute pay increases. We believe these changes (the specifics of which are discussed in the section below entitled “Committee Recommendation”) will serve to stabilize the Department in its current structure, address the immediate need to ensure there are no “holes” in the schedule to maintain current quality of service, provide support for current members so they are incentivized to remain part of the Department, and assist in recruitment of potential future volunteers. Although there will be increased cost with these staff additions and pay increases, these changes will allow the City to maintain the basics of the full-time/volunteer hybrid structure, which will continue to result in significant cost-savings in relation to conversion to a full-time department and significant value to taxpayers.

The specifics of our recommendation will be discussed below, but the following is a brief summary of the Department’s current staffing and pay structure, an understanding of

which will assist in our explanation of our specific recommendations for staff-adds and pay increases.

The Mequon Fire Department has three groups of Members: full-time, part-time, and paid-on-call. The Chief and the Deputy Chief are currently the only full-time staff Members. There are approximately 50 paid-on-call Members and out of the 50 paid-on-call Members, 10 are eligible for part-time hours (as the paid-on-premises paramedic, as described below.)

The paid-on-call (“POC”) and paid-on-premises (“POP”) Members of the Department generally fit into three categories:

1. Community members who have other full-time jobs but enjoy serving the community and helping people;
2. People who live outside the community and have other employment, but are looking to supplement their income while at the same time helping people; and
3. Young people who want a full-time fire/EMS job and who are working for Mequon Fire/EMS to gain experience.

The pay structure for POC and POP/Part-time Members falls into four categories:

- **Standby Pay**—pay for POC Members who are on the schedule (agreeing to be on-call and available) to respond to EMS calls. Five Members are on-call at all times, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Members sign up using an online program. Standby pay is currently \$3 per hour, provided that pursuant to a temporary MOU (expires at the end of 2020), standby pay was raised to \$7 per hour for weekend hours to incentivize sign-up for these hours.
- **Call Pay**—pay for POC Members for responding to an emergency call or training. Call pay is based on a Member’s rank, certifications and length of service, between \$16.50 per hour and \$26.50 per hour. (Also, at the start of the COVID 19 crisis, the City added a \$10 per hour hazard pay increase to the base call pay for Members that will end when the City determines the crisis is over.)
- **Station Work Pay**—pay POC Members make for anything other than standby or emergency calls, such as fire inspections, public education, and standby for special events. Station work pay is \$16.50 per hour.
- **Paid-on-Premises Pay**—pay for the one part-time, POP paramedic, staffed 24 hours per day/ 365 days a year at Station 2. 10 POC Members are eligible based on certifications to serve as the POP paramedic. In the temporary MOU

(expires at the end of 2020), the City earmarked money to incentivize the POP paramedic shifts and pay was increased from \$18.32/hour to \$23.32/hour. (Also, at the start of COVID 19 crisis the city added a \$10 per hour hazard pay increase to this base pay which will end when the City determines the crisis is over.)

Based on this hybrid staffing model consisting of only two full-time staff plus POC and POP volunteers, and with the trending decrease in the number of volunteers and increasing EMS calls, the Department currently runs in a manner one might describe as “excessively-lean” with very little margin for error. An additional concern voiced by the rank-and-file POC/POP Members based on this excessively-lean staffing structure is that it doesn’t allow for 24-hour/7 day per week supervision by Command Staff at the station. (Or, alternatively, requires Command Staff to put in excessive hours providing such supervision at Mequon’s current, minimal full-time staffing levels.)

## **COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION:**

The Committee recommends that the City implement the following three changes as soon as possible:

### **1. Hire Three Additional Full-Time Deputy Chiefs (Approximate Cost \$360,000)**

Under this option the current Deputy Fire Chief would transition to the role of an 8-hour Operations Chief. The primary role of the Operations Chief is to oversee, coordinate and manage the three 24-hour Deputy Chiefs and ensure operational consistency. The Operations Chief will provide support and direction to the Deputy Chiefs and fill in a 24-hour role when any of the three Deputy Chiefs are not available due to vacation or sick time. The Operations Chief will report directly to the Fire Chief. The Operations Chief will also work with the Fire Chief to ensure the departments operational goals are carried out and that the departments strategic plans and initiatives are implemented. The Operations Chief would also fill in the role of the Fire Chief in his absence.

The Committee believes the hiring of three additional full-time Deputy Chiefs will be critical in any efforts to maintain quality of service and stabilize the Department in its current structure. Each additional full-time Deputy Chief would be a certified paramedic and trained in all activities and services of the Department, creating flexibility in filling gaps in expertise and availability at any

point in time, in particular with respect to paramedic services. That said, each of the three new Deputy Chiefs would be hired with a particular focus in mind. These three distinct focus areas are as follows: (i) direct daily supervision of all EMS Services; (ii) responsibility for training, recruitment and fleet management; and (iii) community risk reduction (community outreach and fire inspections.)

At its most basic purpose, the addition of three full-time staff with the flexibility to serve in any role within the Department will help address the immediate need to insure there are no gaps in the schedule to maintain the current quality of service to our community. However, the addition of these three staff persons with distinct focuses will assist in the stabilization of the Department in numerous other ways as well. Current POC Members have expressed the desire for more supervision and support, in particular during late-night shifts and for more complex EMS calls. Since increasing EMS calls and the complexity of efficiently delivering quality EMS services represents one of the critical challenges Mequon faces, creating a position for a Deputy Chief to oversee all daily shift operations for EMS services is only prudent.

The addition of a Deputy Chief focusing on training and recruitment serves many critical purposes as well. Current Department Members have expressed concern about a lack of convenient training opportunities and wanting to feel adequately prepared and supported in addressing the emergency situations they encounter. Adding a Deputy Chief able to focus on these important training issues would be both responsive to the requests of our current volunteer Members, as well as serving as a recruitment tool for potential future volunteers. In addition to the training role, the Committee is hopeful that a Deputy Chief able to devote additional time to the recruitment process will result in additional future volunteers as well.

Finally, the addition of a Deputy Chief with a focus on community risk reduction (community outreach and engagement with schools, businesses, senior facilities, etc. to educate and reduce fire and EMS risk) is becoming even more critical as risks within our community increase. As noted above, the demographic trends suggest that Mequon is an aging community, which will likely require increasing EMS services. Furthermore, we have seen increased real estate development generally of late, which may require different and increased fire-prevention, code compliance, and EMS services. A Deputy Chief with a focus on community risk reduction is intended to help mitigate and manage these risks through community outreach and education. Furthermore, Mequon currently uses an antiquated, paper-file, building-inspection records system. Having a staff member with time to focus on addressing this and other community outreach-related issues is long overdue.



## **2. Create an Additional POP EMT Position (Approximate Cost \$79,012)**

Mequon's current staffing provides for a POP paramedic 24 hours/day 7-days-a-week at Station 2 (Port Washington Road Station) only. The Committee recommends adding an additional position for a POP EMT (24/7) to be based primarily at Station 1 (Buntrock Station), but with the flexibility to staff the new EMT position at Station 2 (Port Washington Road) when Station 2 is short-staffed to allow for adequate coverage where there is the greatest need. The Committee feels that adding a second EMT position is important in part due to Mequon's expansive geographic area. Providing coverage for the entirety of the City from Station 2 is increasingly difficult with Mequon's increased development, especially on the west side of the City. Furthermore, during busy shifts, it is becoming common for multiple EMS calls to come in at the same time, increasing the need for a paramedic or EMT to be available to leave immediately from the closest Station to address such calls.

## **3. Make Temporary Pay Increases Currently-in-Effect for POC and POC Members Permanent (Approximate Cost \$ 311,820)**

The Committee recommends making the pay increases currently in place on a temporary basis (pursuant to the two MOUs and the Covid hazard pay described in the previous section of this report) permanent. In summary, this would result in permanently raising the Standby Pay from \$3 per hour to \$7 per hour, raising the Call Pay (currently between \$16.50 and \$26.50 per hour) by \$10 per hour, and raising the Paid-on-Premises Pay (for the POP paramedic) from \$18.32 to \$33.32 per hour. We feel that making these pay increases permanent will accomplish the goals of incentivizing current Members to sign up for on-call shifts and insuring there are no "holes" in the schedule, aiding in the recruitment of potential future volunteers, and perhaps most importantly, adequately compensating the quality service of current Members so they are incentivized to remain Members of the Department

Draft Job Descriptions for the three additional Deputy Chiefs, as well as spreadsheets detailing the calculations of the approximate cost of the above recommendations, can be found at the following link: <https://tinyurl.com/y3blpoo4>. In addition to the recommendations detailed above, the Committee also suggests that the City investigate the possibility of offering Department Members health insurance commensurate with what is available to other City employees. We feel that this benefit could be a significant tool in both recruitment of new Members as well as retention of existing Members.

In summary, the Committee recommends that the City implement the three changes detailed above as soon as possible in order to stabilize the Department, maintain quality of service, and reduce risk from operating with excessively-lean staffing. Although we acknowledge there will be increased costs with these staff additions and permanent pay increases, we believe that stabilizing and maintaining the basics of our Department's current hybrid (full-time and volunteer) structure will still provide significant cost savings in relation to conversion to a full-time paid "career" fire department staffing structure. The Committee feels that it is important to note that the recommendations made in this report, while critical at this juncture, may still not permit the continued sustainability of a hybrid paid-on-call volunteer fire department for our community in the long-term. The time may come when demographic and other challenges will require Mequon's conversion to a full-time "career" fire department, combined department with other neighboring communities, or other structure. That said, we believe that the changes we are recommending now will maintain quality service, reduce risk, and stabilize our Department in its current structure until such time as conversion to a full-time department or other replacement for a paid-on-call Fire/EMS service may become necessary or prudent. Thank you for your time and consideration.