

Fire Department Press Conference

January 10, 2022, 1 p.m.

Background

Fire and emergency medical services (EMS) agencies across Wisconsin and the nation are facing intensifying fiscal and service-level challenges that are threatening existing service models and prompting consideration of new approaches. These challenges are intensified in Wisconsin by the strict property tax levy limits placed on Wisconsin municipalities as well as cost pressures caused by growing call volumes.

However, more recently, and particularly as Wisconsin's economy emerges from the pandemic and labor shortages intensify, recruitment and retention barriers for part-time staff pose the greatest obstacle for many small communities as they seek to maintain traditional *part-time and volunteer* service models.

For over 50 years, the City of Milton and Town of Milton have jointly owned and operated a fire department that serves the northeast region of Rock County. The current department covers nearly 90 square miles of territory including the City of Milton and all or parts of the Towns of Milton, Harmony, Johnstown, Lima, and Koshkonong.

The Milton Fire Department has a proud history of providing fire and EMS services to the communities it serves. This arrangement has been successful for many years and has provided exceptional service at a very low cost to the tax payers; but is proving unsustainable in its current form.

Like many fire and EMS agencies in Wisconsin, the Milton Fire Department is now struggling to maintain a staffing model that relies primarily on part-time staff. This challenge prompted the Milton Joint Fire Commission to consider a multitude of options over the last few years including, but not limited to, the following:

- Discussing merger, consolidation, and shared services models with multiple neighboring communities including Janesville.
- Restructuring the current Milton department's staffing model several times, and
- Ending the joint ownership arrangement between the City and Town of Milton and creating multiple standalone departments.

These discussions intensified over the past 18 months culminating in a joint meeting of the five municipal entities on December 15, 2021 where the municipalities agreed a regional approach to delivering fire and EMS services was the most sustainable and cost effective approach to pursue, and in that spirit unanimously approved a petition for membership in the Edgerton Fire Protection District. This historic event came as a result of months of discussions, research, vetting, and public meetings for each respective municipality to ensure this was the best path forward for all community members currently served by the Milton Fire Department. All five municipalities independently came to the conclusion joining the Edgerton Fire Protection District fit the evaluation criteria of:

- Improving our overall level of service
- Being sustainable long-term, and
- Accomplishing both in a cost effective way

With increasing demand for service and the limited number of individuals willing and able to volunteer and respond to calls when needed has created a need to find a more sustainable model for fire and EMS services. As the five municipalities explored options available, it was important to find the most cost effective and sustainable solution for our community members. The Edgerton Fire Protection District addresses long-term safety needs for the communities, while dramatically improving fire and EMS service delivery to the respective communities.

Joining the Edgerton Fire Protection District will also allow for shared governance of the department. All municipalities will have a voice in critical decisions impacting the department.

The Edgerton Model

The Edgerton Fire Protection District (EFPD), by its very name, is already an independent District made up of suburban and rural municipalities; and uses a balance of full-time, part-time, paid-on-premises, paid-on-call and Intern employees. The District currently protects the City of Edgerton and the Towns of Albion, Fulton, Porter and Sumner across Rock, Dane and Jefferson counties. An area totaling 100 sq. miles across 3 counties with an equalized value of \$1.37 billion. The District currently employs 10 full-time, and 46 part-time, paid-on-premise, paid-on-call, and Intern employees.

Each municipality has voting representation on the District Board of Commissioners, so the model provides representative shared governance participation, a key attribute as the five municipalities evaluated each option available to them.

The New District

As envisioned, the expanded Edgerton Fire Protection District would cover approximately 220 sq. miles across 11 municipalities with an Equalized Value of \$2.6 billion if the five municipalities are accepted into the District. The expanded District would utilize the combination staffing model, is projected to employ 28 full-time employees, and will maintain a robust compliment of part-time, paid-on-premise, paid-on-call, and Intern employees.

The Petition

The Petition, which will be submitted to the Edgerton Fire Protection District Board on January 12, 2022, addresses the expectations of the Edgerton Fire Protection District for membership, as well as the commitments all five municipalities are making as part of their petition to join the District. The Petition commits the five municipalities to the governance and staffing structure of the Edgerton Fire Protection District, as well as the willingness to construct two new stations to serve the region encompassing the five new municipalities.

Additionally, the five municipalities have unanimously agreed to an intergovernmental agreement which outlines roles and responsibilities related to the funding of the new staffing structure and

capital expenditures related to the construction of the two new stations and equipment necessary to operate those stations.

Under the intergovernmental agreement the five municipalities have worked together to design, site, and develop a funding model for the two new stations. As outlined in the intergovernmental agreement, each municipality will fund their respective “share” of the facility construction based on equalized value, which is the same way school districts are funded by multiple municipalities.

Although the timeline for construction of these facilities is still to be determined, one station will be constructed on recently purchased land along East High Street in the Town of Milton (Milton East Station) and the second station (Milton West Station) will be constructed on one of several locations on the west side of Milton currently being evaluated. The five municipalities have contracted with 5-Bugles Design to help design and plan those facilities.

Milton fire and EMS services will continue to be provided from the current Milton station until the new facilities are constructed; thus ensuring there will be no reduction in the current level of service to the Milton Fire Department communities.

2022 Operations

Community members of the City of Milton and Towns of Harmony, Milton, Lima, and Johnstown can rest assured that during this transitional process, there will be no lapse in service. In fact, as part of the 2022 budget process, the Milton Joint Fire Commission voted to expand the current staff of the Milton Fire Department to ensure service will be maintained, if not improved, during the transitional period. Additionally, the Milton Joint Fire Commission voted to name Jeremy Parker Interim Chief of the Milton Fire Department during this transitional period. Chief Parker has served in a Deputy Chief role with the Milton Fire Department for the past several years, and is well positioned and prepared to ensure service provisions are commensurate with the high level the communities served by the current Department have come to expect.

Next Steps

The five municipalities intend to submit a single unified Petition and corresponding intergovernmental agreement to the Edgerton Fire Protection District Board on January 12, 2022. The EFPD Board will then evaluate the Petition and intergovernmental agreement over the course of the next few months. Specifically, the District will evaluate the commitments made in the petition to ensure the District’s ability to provide sound fire protection and EMS services to the new municipalities without negatively impacting the service it provides to its existing municipalities.

If accepted, the five municipalities, will begin to formalize the design and timeline for construction of the two new stations, and begin making plans for a referendum likely to occur in late 2022. The hope of the five municipalities is to begin transitioning towards fully integrating with the Edgerton Fire Protection District in late 2022 and early 2023. However, this timeline is not set in stone and could shift depending on the deliberations of the Edgerton Fire Protection District Board and their current municipal members.

Key Takeaways

There cannot be enough said about the hard work put in by the respective Town Chairs and Mayor of Milton related to the research, due diligence, and careful consideration of countless options. The fact that all five municipalities, independently, came to the same conclusion, is a testament to the collegiality of the five municipalities and the commitment to this path forward.

Joining the Edgerton Fire Protection District represents the most sustainable and cost effective solution to delivering a dramatically improved level of service the residents of the five municipalities could receive. We recognize this is an increased investment. The strains and challenges facing all Fire Departments around the nation have lead these five municipalities to work together to create a new economically prudent model that will protect residents for several generations to come.

Joining the Edgerton Fire Protection District represents the most sustainable and cost effective option with a greatly improved level of service, while allowing for shared governance that ensures the municipalities have a voice in critical decisions impacting the level of service provided to their community

Service provisions to the existing residents of the Milton Fire Department will not be affected during the transitional period of 2022.

As 2022 progresses, timelines for transition, station construction, and staffing changes will become more crystalized. These benchmarks will be communicated to the public in a clear, concise and timely manner.

We are all very proud of the current Milton Fire Department staff and administration. They have served the community members of our region proudly and effectively for the past 60 years.