COTTAGE GROVE CITY COUNCIL **July 10, 2024**
12800 RAVINE PARKWAY SOUTH
COTTAGE GROVE, MN 55016
SPECIAL MEETING - TRAINING ROOM - 6:00 P.M

1. CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Bailey called the Special Meeting to order.

2. ROLL CALL

Jennifer Levitt, City Administrator, called the roll: Council Member Khambata - Not Present; Council Member Olsen-Here; Mayor Bailey-Here; Council Member Thiede-Here; Council Member Garza-Here.

Also present: Jennifer Levitt, City Administrator; Brenda Malinowski, Finance Director; Pete Koerner, Public Safety Director; Jon Pritchard, Fire Chief; Nick Arrigoni, Deputy Fire Chief; Steve Zaccard; Brad Petersen, Public Safety Captain

3. AGENDA

A. Fire Department – 5-year Strategic Plan
Staff Recommendation: Receive the 5-year Strategic Plan and provide feedback and support.

Koerner started the presentation of the 5-year Strategic Plan highlighting the City Council's support for the Cottage Grove Fire Department and recent achievements and plans for the department. Koerner added the City Council had directed the fire department to create a strategic plan and the plan would involve input from the Fire Leadership Team, Local IAFF 2570, and the Public Services Commission. A council presentation will be held to review and approve the plan before implementation. This plan will be continuously measured, reviewed, and revised. The purpose of the workshop was to receive comment and have further discussion.

Chief Pritchard outlined the department's core functions, including fire suppression, emergency medical services (EMS), community safety education, specialized rescue operations, fostering a positive department culture, firefighter well-being, and responsible financial management. He then presented the department's mission statement:

The Cottage Grove Fire Department proudly serves the community compassionately providing protection of life and property. We do this with honor, professionalism, empathy, and community partnerships.

Councilmember Khambata arrived at 6:16 P.M.

Chief Pritchard continued with the Fire Department's core service areas: fire suppression, emergency medical services (EMS), community risk reduction, and specialized response. For each area, he presented a vision statement:

- **Overall Department Vision:** Become a premier fire department delivering exceptional fire, EMS, specialized response, and community safety services to our community.
- **Fire Suppression:** Employ aggressive, strategic firefighting tactics to achieve optimal outcomes while prioritizing firefighter safety.
- **EMS:** Provide superior pre-hospital care through highly skilled professionals dedicated to patient well-being.
- **Specialized Response:** Develop a versatile department capable of handling a wide range of emergency situations.
- **Community Risk Reduction:** Proactively engage the community in prevention programs to reduce risks and disparities.
- **Workplace Culture:** Foster a diverse, inclusive, and supportive environment that values professional growth and employee well-being.
- **Firefighter Health and Wellness:** Prioritize physical, mental, and emotional health through comprehensive wellness programs.
- **Stewardship:** Utilize resources efficiently, build strong community partnerships, and ensure the department's long-term sustainability.

Pritchard next outlined the Fire Department's core values. These values encompass individual qualities, team dynamics, and community engagement.

- Individual firefighters are expected to demonstrate competence, integrity, ownership, professionalism, and service.
- The department prioritizes collaboration, communication, achieving outcomes, and mutual support.
- In relation to the community, the department values accountability, empathy, partnership, transparency, and trust.
- Finally, the organization is committed to adaptability, excellence, inclusivity, progress, safety, and strategic planning.

Chief Pritchard outlined the Fire Department's strategic goals for 2025-2030:

- Emergency Service Excellence
- Community Risk Reduction and Outreach
- People
- Technology and Innovation
- Growth

Chief Pritchard explained the department will measure success by tracking employee satisfaction, response times, call volume, and community feedback, among other metrics.

Mayor Bailey inquired about the benchmarks used for comparison. Chief Pritchard responded that benchmarks are sourced from various industry standards and organizations.

Deputy Chief Arrigoni presented findings from the 2019 Reliable, Sustainable, and Professional Organizational Study. The study recommended hiring a Deputy Chief and implementing new shift staffing. Arrigoni also shared a graph illustrating the department's call volume from 2017 to 2023 with projections through 2026. The data indicates a steady increase of 5.6% in calls per year. In response to a question about response times, Arrigoni explained that the rising call volume has led to increased out-of-service time for units and a greater reliance on mutual aid assistance.

Councilmember Olsen asked whether full-time Firefighter/EMTs should be considered and should there be a discussion regarding full-time Firefighter/EMT's and the possibility of sending EMT's to school to become Firefighter/Paramedics. Staff said they have been developing a plan to send staff to paramedic training. Koerner shared that the program would be similar to the accelerated police paramedic program. They have been working with Regions Hospital on the possibility of hosting a program. Staff have been working on an agreement.

Arrigoni presented a slide illustrating a steady increase in Out of Service Time for the Fire Department between 2019 and 2023. He noted that Cottage Grove's population has grown by 21.6% since 2010, while EMS services have expanded by 64% from 2019 to 2023.

Councilmember Garza asked for clarification on the definition of out of service time. Arrigoni clarified that it refers to periods when the Fire Department lacks a fully staffed crew at the station.

Councilmember Olsen wanted to know if there is a call volume issue or is the struggle filing shifts. Councilmember Olsen wanted clarification on how the Fire Department is currently filling their shifts. Arrigoni explained the process of filling shifts and as staffing stabilizes, we will have an improvement in shift coverage. Arrigoni responded that the call volume has increased because of Cottage Groves aging population with an increase of 3.5% from 2010 to 2020 and people over 50 account for 61% of EMS calls, Cottage Groves aging infrastructure and the non-Cottage Grove call volumes have grown exponentially. Arrigoni presented a slide showing the Council the EMS service area which includes St Paul Park, Newport, and Grey Cloud. Island.

Mayor Bailey asked how much revenue other communities receive in one-time public safety aid. Koerner shared the numbers from the State of Minnesota webpage.

Arrigoni presented the part-time firefighter survey stating the first question on the survey was, “are you supportive of the dissolution and payout offer”. Arrigoni added 19 members voted yes and 6 members voted no. Next members were asked to rank the following in order of importance:

- Higher hourly pay
- Experience pay (higher rate for every 5 years of service)
- Bonus pay for every quarter in good standing
- Emergency shift-pick up bonus
- Reduced hourly requirements/no all-call quota
- Part-time to full-time opportunity training
- Contributions to employee benefits
- Professional development and training opportunities

Arrigoni presented a part-time stabilization plan that included:

- Part-time listening sessions and surveys in 2023
- Increased pay to match highest wages in Twin Cities Metro
- Coordinated PERA plan with three-year vestment (vs. five-year vestment)
- Decreased hour requirements to the lowest level to maintain basic competence and department coverage
- Decrease training requirements to lowest level to maintain basic competence and to maintain fire and EMS certifications
- Flexible training opportunities
- Increased access to training, uniforms, and equipment
- Flexible scheduling
- Bonuses for exceeding call-back requirements (up to $1,000 per year)

Council had a discussion on the completion of the stabilization plan first (FY 2024-FY2026) and outlined the following as currently in the budget:

- Use one-time public safety aid for sending two employees to paramedic school.
- Use one-time public safety hiring one additional Deputy Fire Chief.

Chief Arrigoni expressed the difficulties the Fire Department is facing trying to hire part-time firefighters. Arrigoni added there is heavy competition from other fire departments that do not have the same job requirements for candidates. Solutions could include:

- Posting job opportunities online
- Offering ride-along programs
- Recruitment at local colleges job fairs
- Provide pathways for part-time firefighters to move into full-time roles

Next, Arrigoni explained the barriers to full-time hiring which included:

- Large differences in pay compared to other communities
- Staffing level
- Difficulty attracting good candidates
- Lack of support for part-time firefighters becoming full-time

Arrigoni offered the following solutions:

Phase 1

- Hire current part-time Firefighter/EMTs and train to be paramedics
- Offer better opportunities for part-time firefighters to be promoted to full-time
- Labor contract - pay parity
- Continue and expand wellness initiatives that include specialty assignment opportunities and training opportunities

Phase 2

- Increase on-shift staffing
- Define and provide service options to meet the communities needs
- Population based formula to plan for future needs (Cottage Grove population only)

Phase 3:

- Forecasting for future additions
- Maintain levels of service
- Address shift-based staffing optimization long-term
- Increase awareness of the community characteristic changes

Chief Arrigoni next discussed the Fleet Replacement Plan with an overview of the current equipment and what each piece is used for. Arrigoni added that adjusting the fleets equipment size has allowed for better apparatus utilization. Arrigoni presented the current fleet replacement schedule to the Council. This schedule includes Engine Tender 3, Brush 2/UTV 1, Ladder 2, Engine 4, and Ladder 2. Arrigoni included that truck prices and lead time for replacement have increased significantly and the Fire Department would like a replacement schedule at 15-20 years.

Councilmember Thiede requested justification for the equipment on the replacement plan. Council discussed the significance of replacing equipment at 15-20 years versus 25 years. Fire will review the replacement plan and update justification and a cost analysis.

Administrator Levitt introduced the Station 4 evaluation stating Station 4 is located at Jamaica Avenue and 95th Street. It was built in 1994 and is an essential response station for previous paid on-call firefighters. Levitt added with the transition to shift-based staffing, the need for this response station is diminishing. Currently Station 4 is used to hold reserve equipment and apparatuses and no responders utilize Station 4. Annual maintenance of Station 4 is $30,545 and as the building ages it will require more costly repairs and maintenance. In addition, this station would require significant costs to convert to a location for overnight staff and the location is not optimal for future growth. Levitt continued this makes Station 4 a great economic redevelopment opportunity and is recommending a Standards of Cover study to be conducted by an external party. If the study supports the sale of the station and/or land funds gained by the sale could possibly be used to support funding the Central Fire Station Apparatus Bay Addition and/or to allow for more on-shift staffing.

Councilmember Khambata asked if other departments had more need for space. Khambata added he is in favor of selling Station 4 if the city is forward thinking and strategic. Pritchard and Koerner added this would be part of the Standards of Cover Study.

Mayor Bailey asked if staff felt there is a need for an emergency boat. Pritchard did discuss water rescue plans and future needs. Pritchard indicated that we would pursue grant opportunities as well. Some of the needs can currently be absorbed in the budget.

Councilmember Olsen expressed concern regarding the EMS fund. Olsen wants to see what the fund can handle and requested more information from the finance department. Olsen would like to see a transparent dialogue on PSA and feels the response time would decrease with a smaller PSA. Koerner and Malinoski said they would put together numbers for the Council on the EMS fund. Olsen requested representation from the Fire Department at community events. Koerner acknowledged community engagement as being a priority and would increase as staffing is stabilized.

4. ADJOURNMENT

Motion by Council Member Olsen and seconded by Council Member Thiede. The meeting was adjourned at 9:05 p.m.

Minutes prepared by Tamara Anderson, City Clerk.