



MINUTES
CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION
January 21, 2025

CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order at 5:01 pm.

Present: Mayor: Charlie Miner; Council: Jahn Dyvik, Mike Feldmann (arrived late to the meeting at 5:19 pm), Todd Newcomer, and Deirdre Kvale

Staff Present: City Administrator: Scott Weske; Fire Chief: Mike Heiland; Assistant Fire Chief: Cody Farley; and City Clerk: Jeanette Moeller

Absent: None

APPROVE AGENDA

A motion was made by Kvale, seconded by Newcomer, to approve the agenda, as presented. Ayes: all.

OPEN CORRESPONDENCE

No one was in attendance to address the City Council during Open Correspondence.

BUSINESS ITEMS

Updates on Recent Fire Department/Fire Service Discussions

Mayor Miner reported that he and Council member Dyvik have had a few meetings with Orono Councilmember Persian and Orono Mayor Tunheim, along with Fire Chief Heiland, City Administrator Weske, and Assistant Fire Chief Farley. He stated that he felt they have been able to have some really good discussions, to build relationships, and to brainstorm some ideas for future possibilities and multi-phase long term planning, ultimately aiming towards a fire district model. Related to these discussions, a draft document has been prepared that would be an amendment to the fire services agreement. Mayor Miner highlighted some of the provisions that were included in the draft, such as hiring duty crew staff and the return of the Navarre service area to the Long Lake Fire Department. He mentioned that it had been shared that Orono Fire Chief Van Eyll acknowledged that the Orono duty crews were based out of Orono's old Public Works building and were largely not using the temporary garage underneath the water tower in Navarre. Also related to the draft amendment, Orono Councilmember Persian had asked if the Orono Fire Department duty crews could potentially use Station 2 as a goodwill gesture and as well as a way to address a public safety concern. Mayor Miner indicated that Fire Chief Heiland was willing to support that, but Long Lake representatives emphasized there would not be room for any truck storage. Orono Councilmember Persian had replied that arrangement would be fine and they would figure out a way to make it work from an operations standpoint, but Mayor Miner wasn't sure if he had discussed the idea with Orono Fire Chief VanEyll.

Council member Kvale inquired why the date to pull them back in was in April.

Mayor Miner requested the opportunity to finish the discussion on the duty crew items before he answered her question. He added that he and Council member Dyvik had tentatively said that they thought Station 2 access was something that could be worked out, but a few days later, they concluded that the Judge's order should actually dictate the answer to this question. The order set forth that that Orono was not allowed to use Station 2 without the permission of Long Lake, and there had been expert testimony about the many reasons that it should not happen.

Council member Dyvik voiced that he would be agreeable to allowing Orono duty crew staff limited access to Station 2, though only in the context that they are moving towards a changeover effective April 1, 2025. He emphasized that he wouldn't want allowing them use of Station 2 to become something that would diminish their sense of urgency to resolve the situation. He reiterated that he would only be supportive of the limited usage of Station 2 by Orono within in the context of the overall plan, but added that Orono had not yet revealed what their plan would actually be. Council member Dyvik reflected that he would prefer not to have information out there that Orono duty crew staff would be using Station 2 without a written agreement supporting that the option was being made available because they are moving towards a return of the service area to the Long Lake Fire Department as of April 1, 2025.

Council member questioned what their plan for their staff to be at Station 2 and then run over to their other garage for their truck would actually look like.

Council member Newcomer asked what was currently housed in Station 2.

Fire Chief Heiland listed the equipment located at the station. He indicated that the Orono duty crew may be able to have a squad parked outside that they could use to respond to medical calls.

Council member Newcomer asked if there may be a way to fit their engine in at Station 2 and shared his concern that they could respond to a medical call without a rig, then suddenly have a fire call occur but they would not be near their engine. He felt it would be a more diligent practice to have the crew with their engine at all times.

Council member Kvale observed that if the LLFD needed to move around equipment because they got a call and OFD's equipment was parked there, it wouldn't be practical.

Council member Dyvik pointed out that this would be an arrangement only lasting two months.

Mayor Miner noted that City Attorney Thames had stated he believed that the City had satisfied some of what was brought up in court, for example, the recruiting thing shouldn't be an issue because this agreement would be signed and would essentially would kind of be the end of the Orono Fire Department. He stated that for dual calls they would not be responding from home and would just be the duty crew people who would already be in uniform.

City Clerk Moeller reflected that she'd imagine the drive from Station 2 to the temporary garage in order to respond with an engine would still potentially be faster than driving from the Orono City Hall campus. She believed that the arrangement would still save them response time, without creating a hindrance for the LLFD.

Council member Kvale reiterated her question on why April 1, 2025 was the date chosen.

Mayor Miner explained that it was due to staffing with predominantly part-time firefighters who would work for the City of Long Lake and would need to be hired. The thought was that hopefully some of them would come from OFD or other departments, but the hiring process would take some time.

Council member Kvale asked if the staffing language was a stipulation of the agreement required by Orono for them to come back under the contract.

Mayor Miner answered that he felt the need was coming from both sides and commented that Orono would want to provide assurances to their residents that returning to LLFD coverage would be the same or better than it was under the Orono Fire Department. Orono wants to be able to communicate that they have duty crews working the times they are needed - for example, during business hours on Monday through Friday - which was why they asked that the LLFD be able to staff duty crews with at least two people.

City Administrator Weske observed that he would prefer Orono simply gave the LLFD the overall idea of their service requests and the City of Long Lake would handle it; otherwise, they would essentially be controlling and managing the LLFD. He noted that he felt that the language in Section 4C of the draft amendment should be changed because it offers the right to cancel, and he did not believe it should be canceled for any reason.

Mayor Miner completely agreed with Weske's suggestion.

Weske clarified that his thought was that no matter what happens on April 1, 2025, the LLFD will be putting their best foot forward on hiring part-timers and recruiting.

Mayor Miner asked City Administrator Weske and Fire Chief Heiland to work with City Attorney Thames and revisit the language in the section under discussion.

Council member Newcomer asked how many paid personnel are currently on the OFD.

Mayor Miner replied that he believed that they had nine paid on-call firefighters as well as 12 part-timers.

Fire Chief Heiland clarified that two of the part-timers were Orono Fire Chief VanEyll and Deputy Chief Shea Chwialkowski.

Council and staff discussed OFD's current staffing structure; the maximum number of hours paid on-call firefighters can work in order to remain classified as part-time; the minimum number of part-time firefighters Long Lake would be hiring; giving consideration to the perceived service level 'optics' factor and recognizing that outside of paid duty crews, LLFD has 40 firefighters potentially responding to night and weekend calls; how many of the OFD part-timers may be interested in applying to the LLFD; and to what degree those individuals may also be employed by other departments currently.

Mayor Miner suggested they move the discussion back to the Station 2 issue and noted that initially there had not been any language included in the proposed amendment related to Station 2. Rather than having a more informal understanding, he was more comfortable having the Station 2 access addressed in writing within the amendment.

Council member Dyvik admitted that while he also wanted to have the arrangement in writing, he wasn't certain that a formal contract was necessary because an email with a response of 'yes, I agree' is essentially a contract. He added that the proposed draft amendment was already five pages long, and while the issue would not be a sticking point for him, he reiterated that he felt the access issue could be handled via an email exchange.

Moeller observed that given the issue of the litigation remains, having the access addressed in a contract document was the best way to proceed, even though it may not feel as 'user-friendly' as the City would generally prefer.

Council member Dyvik reflected on the importance of rebuilding mutual trust between the cities. He added that another meeting with the representatives from Orono would take place the following day, and he would like to achieve some clarity that they were all on the same page.

Council member Kvale reviewed certain terms of the proposed amendment, including provisions related to Long Lake hiring additional staff. She commented that while it appeared Orono would not be agreeing to restore service to the LLFD until all their items were addressed, Long Lake would appear to be agreeing right up front to immediate restoration of water service coverage areas and Station 2 access for OFD duty crew staff. She questioned why an amendment wouldn't resolve all the issues and restore service at one time, and voiced concern over whether both parties should participate in hiring.

Council member Dyvik emphasized that recruiting and hiring of the paid on-call firefighters should be the responsibility of the Long Lake Fire Department.

Mayor Miner voiced his agreement, given that the goal was to arrive at there being one Fire Department.

Council member Dyvik added that Long Lake's expectation under the contract amendment would be that as of April 1, 2025, there would no longer be an active OFD, and this is a point he would want to be clear with Orono.

Moeller summarized that essentially, as of April 1, 2025, the OFD would have nothing on their 'to do' list because the LLFD would have returned to servicing all coverage areas. Orono would have to work out what their future would hold with regard to the OFD while the cities begin working towards a different future together.

Council member Kvale asked again why the water coverage would be restored first and why all items wouldn't be resolved equally and simultaneously.

Weske commented that based on the evening's discussion, there would be some changes to the proposed amendment language and once a document was signed, the water areas would be switched back over to LLFD as soon as the transition can be completed. He added that the agreement also needed to be presented to the Fire Advisory Board, because any contract extension would have an impact on the budget.

Mayor Miner recalled that initially there had been discussion of extending the contract, but lately there had been some signals from Orono City Administrator Edwards that perhaps a different contract with revisions to the funding formula would be a better approach. For now, Mayor Miner stated that the Council should focus on 2025 and not get deep in the weeds about the 2026 budget.

Weske commented that while the goal would be to sign an amendment in February, he expressed concern that when beginning to try to get a budget and a contract together for 2026, he wondered what would happen if the cities don't come to terms and Long Lake is responsible for 10 recently employed part-time firefighters.

Council member Kvale noted that they would also need to get buy-in from Medina and explained that the piecemeal part of what was being proposed was what was bothering her.

Council member Dyvik shared that when they had met with Orono Councilmember Ricks previously, she had talked about the importance of public safety and they agreed they should do whatever can be done to improve response times and coverage of service areas. He acknowledged it was possible there wouldn't be much of a need for water coverage for the next few months.

Council member Kvale indicated that she would be okay with restoring the water coverage service, but she would prefer the amendment be more fully encompassing and would prefer OFD duty crews not be given access to Station 2 until they were working as one organization again.

Moeller recalled that at their last meeting, an Orono Council member had already gone on record and indicated that Long Lake was going to be open to some level of access to Station 2.

Council member Newcomer commented on the importance of maintaining staffing at Station 2 in order to assure the area was well taken care of from a response perspective, and expressed concern that the area wasn't best served by OFD responding from where they were, and by the LLFD not responding. He voiced his support for allowing OFD duty crew access to help alleviate the issue.

Moeller observed that what was proposed in the draft amendment appeared reasonable because many of the position statements that the Council had made throughout this process have been very focused on the importance of public safety, and about how concerned the City has been that Orono's plans would result in inadequate coverage and response times.

Council member Dyvik noted that deficiencies had been created by Orono's actions. He indicated that he would support the amendment with the understanding that the cities were moving towards the April 1, 2025 date and the understanding that there would no longer be an Orono Fire Department on that date.

Council member Kvale commented that she felt having Orono firefighters at Station 2 with them then having to run to another location to get their truck was a half-baked idea in her opinion.

Council member Dyvik responded that it would still be better than what they had right now.

Council member Kvale suggested that the negotiations come up with a different model moving forward and have April 1, 2025 as the date everything would switch over to Long Lake. She asked if there could also be any language about cooperation between the departments whereby during the transition period, both Long Lake and Orono would be responding, so the fire service would be restored while they were working towards hiring people and versus acting as just two separate departments.

Council member Dyvik replied that he and Mayor Miner had discussed that during the interim time period, it would make sense that the LLFD would be called for mutual aid for calls in the Navarre area.

Council member Kvale confirmed the arrangement mentioned by Council member Dyvik could work, but she felt that the departments should respond from their own sites, and stressed that she had a hard time supporting two different departments using Station 2.

Council member Dyvik pointed out that the access would only be for two months and intended to serve as a good faith measure while the cities work towards the solution. Outside of the public safety aspect, it would also show that the two sides can work together.

Moeller mentioned that the inclusion of the Station 2 access language within the amendment to the contract also conveys the message that they were thinking of the measure as being tied to the future contract and therefore, part and parcel of the whole package.

Council member Newcomer stated that to Council member Kvale's point, if the understanding was that they were going to all be one department at the end of 2025, then he felt it also made sense for them to start acting like it.

Council member Dyvik believed that Orono appreciated the gesture that Long Lake may let their crew use Station 2, even if their equipment could not be parked there.

Council member Kvale asked what gesture Orono has made back to Long Lake in this process.

Council member Dyvik replied that he felt that their gesture would be their willingness to sign a contract amendment.

Council member Kvale clarified that her difficulty continued to be focused on the sequencing of everything, and asked if the cities could just have the two departments work together, or if there may be a way to meld some of Orono's part-timers into the LLFD in order to help the transition occur more quickly.

Council member Dyvik explained that Long Lake would have to post for the positions and follow the standard interview process with LLFD leadership participating. He recognized that the LLFD needed to maintain their high standards for their hiring process.

Weske further outlined the City's hiring process and noted that the positions may pull in applicants from all over the place, not just Long Lake and Orono.

Council member Feldmann commented that the distinction of 'melding' needed to be official for the LLFD and added that with the necessary background checks and the hiring process, it may be difficult to meet the April 1, 2025 date.

Council member Kvale sought confirmation that the draft amendment spelled out that the Station 2 access for OFD would end on April 1, 2025.

Mayor Miner responded affirmatively, indicating that the document states that once the service area is returned to the LLFD, then the temporary Station 2 access arrangement would conclude.

Council member Newcomer stated that staffing would be at the discretion of Long Lake from that point on. He recalled that the draft amendment establishes that for two months, OFD can sit in Station 2 and

respond on their apparatus that will be stored in their barn. Then on April 1, 2025, that use would no longer be needed because at that point, the LLFD, under the direction of Fire Chief Heiland, would be staffing as they determined was appropriate. He suggested that the hiring related dates within the agreement could be removed, and he also agreed that the April 1, 2025 date may be tight to get through all levels of the hiring process and ensure that they've select fully certified firefighters that are ready to go.

Moeller noted that she and Fire Chief Heiland had just been talking about the timing of completing background checks.

Mayor Miner stated that there is also the question of when an amendment may be signed.

Council member Dyvik confirmed that the intent would be to not let OFD use Station 2 until Orono has signed an amendment, and if they opt not to sign it until a later time, then the April 1 date would be revisited.

Council member Newcomer suggested that the new end date should come from Fire Chief Heiland and his staff, and they could advise the Council at that time.

Mayor Miner agreed that all the dates were currently flexible. He noted that Orono was currently intending to hold an open house regarding future fire services on February 3, and asked City Clerk Moeller to post a quorum notice.

Council member Dyvik believed that the intent of their open house would be to present their plan and then accept feedback.

Council member Kvale asked if the proposed amendment to the agreement would become an attachment to the fire services agreement.

Council member Dyvik confirmed that the amendment would serve as an attachment to the current contract. He added that the current contract would not allow Long Lake to take back this service area until July 1, 2025, and this amendment waives that date.

Council member Kvale asked why the staffing section had been included in the amendment.

Mayor Miner explained that Orono Councilmember Persian had asked for more details and was more comfortable having it in writing.

Council and staff discussed the financial impact of the additional hires; whether a budget amendment of some sort would be warranted; Orono's stated intent to be responsible for added costs, and the need for that understanding to be documented in the amendment; Council member Kvale's concerns regarding implementing changes in stages within a document that would function as a short-term contract; and language changes Council and staff agreed should be reviewed with City Attorney Thames. Council member Newcomer mentioned that the Long Lake City Council would not have another meeting prior to February 3, and stated that he was trying to wrap his mind around the potential questions people may ask when he bumps into them around town. He added that perhaps someone should be tasked with answering the question as to how the amendment will make things as good, or better, than what Orono was doing right now.

Fire Chief Heiland reported that the LLFD currently has a crew capable of responding to calls at Station 2 but had also lost strong members through this whole situation. The LLFD will have to rebuild their numbers up a bit in the Station 2 area, which may take a few years.

Council member Dyvik asked if Fire Chief Heiland felt that their recruiting efforts may improve once people see that the conflict has been resolved.

Fire Chief Heiland stated that he felt it would help.

Council member Newcomer reiterated that he felt someone should spend some time brainstorming some of the questions that may be raised from the public in order to be prepared to answer them.

Fire Chief Heiland shared some details about the response times to recent calls.

Council member Newcomer indicated that he felt information may be helpful for Orono to have at the ready in order to help them fend off any negative feedback.

Fire Chief Heiland replied that he could put together a report with the call response data.

Moeller suggested that it be something in a one-page format rather than a longer, detailed report.

Council member Kvale asked if the LLFD had been invited to the open house in Orono.

Mayor Miner stated that there hadn't been a date publicly announced yet, but LLFD members could show up.

Council member Kvale congratulated and thanked Mayor Miner and Council member Dyvik for their work in negotiations with Orono.

Mayor Miner welcomed Council members who have any other feedback on the document to pass their comments along to City Administrator Weske for forwarding to City Attorney Thames.

OTHER BUSINESS

No other business was discussed.

ADJOURN

Hearing no objection, Mayor Miner adjourned the meeting by general consent at 6:27 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Scott Weske
City Administrator