

CITY OF ST. FRANCIS
CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION AGENDA
St. Francis City Hall Fire Station 3750 Bridge Street NW
April 28, 2025
5:30 p.m.

1. CALL TO ORDER

The City Council Work Session meeting was called to order at 5:30 p.m. by Mayor Mark Vogel.

2. ROLL CALL

Members Present: Mayor Mark Vogel, Councilmembers Kevin Robinson, Sarah Udvig, and Amy Faanes.

Members Absent: Councilmember Muehlbauer.

Also present: City Administrator Kate Thunstrom, Deputy Administrator-City Clerk Jenni Wida, Deputy Administrator-Public Works Director Paul Carpenter, Police Chief Todd Schwieger, Fire Chief Dave Schmidt, and Finance Director Darcy Mulvihill

3. AGENDA ITEMS

A. Fire Department Organizational Chart

Fire Chief Schmidt reviewed the Staff report and the Fire Department's organizational chart with the Council.

Robinson asked why no one shows as reporting to the Administrative Captain. Schmidt said all roles funnel up to him even though it does not show on the organization chart.

Robinson asked if they are currently short-staffed. Schmidt shared that they currently have the bandwidth for four to five more firefighters, specifically at Station #2. He said their doors are always open to add someone to the department.

Robinson asked if there were any new skill sets that had been added to the department from those who came from Bethel. Schmidt shared that one is a career firefighter from Brooklyn Park.

Robinson asked if there were any other possibilities for fire inspections than hiring a new Fire Inspector. Schmidt stated there has been interest from those who are already in the department to step up into the Fire Inspector role.

Faanes asked what the goal is for having the Fire Department fully staffed as they currently have 10 officers and 18 firefighters. Schmidt said they are currently well-

balanced. He explained that with the current duty crew rotation, people are not feeling as burnt out from their duty officer rotation time. He noted one of the complaints they got the most was that the last duty crew rotation was too much repetition. He added that everyone but himself and the Administrative Captain are part-time Staff so they have redundancy built in as they never know who will be available when.

Faanes asked for more information on what a duty officer is. Schmidt explained that each officer signs up to be a duty officer for one week on a rotating schedule. He said they are all required to do a Wednesday-to-Wednesday week with the expectation that they are the primary person available after hours for calls or issues that arise.

Faanes asked if every call had a duty officer respond. Schmidt said no as they have no way to ensure a duty officer could respond 24 hours a day.

Faanes asked what kind of calls only require the duty officer to respond. Schmidt shared that these calls would be illegal burns, phone call requests, and carbon monoxide calls.

Faanes noted that some of the people at Station #2 came from Bethel. She asked if they were not St. Francis employees. Schmidt said yes as all firefighters that came from Bethel are now St. Francis employees.

Faanes asked if the contract with Bethel was complete. Schmidt explained that the contract they are under currently will expire in 2026 and they are working towards a JPA that would have a longer term.

Faanes asked if these firefighters got to keep their retention for their retirement when they became St. Francis employees. Schmidt explained that these firefighters had their retirement funded through the Bethel Fire Department and their Relief Association is dissolving and paying out their share of the pension. He noted that once these firefighters became St. Francis employees, they started a new pension under the St. Francis program as any new employee would.

Faanes asked if they originally entered into this agreement with Bethel because they asked the City for help. Schmidt said yes.

Faanes asked if Sam Strassburg would be able to fill the Fire Inspector position since he is already working under the current Fire Inspection. Schmidt shared that Strassburg does not have daytime availability to do the fire inspections.

Mayor Vogel shared that he is pleased to see the organizational chart and hopes that they can have one for every department posted on the website.

This item was for discussion only.

B. Updating Job Description - Administrative Captain

Schmidt reviewed the Staff report in regard to updating the Administrative Captain job description.

Mayor Vogel asked if some of the fire inspection duties would be able to be covered by the Administrative Captain now that there is a lot less work on the administrative side of the role. Schmidt explained that the challenge is that the Fire Inspector role accounts for about 900 hours a year, and he does not think the current Administrative Captain would have the bandwidth for even 400 hours a year on fire inspections. He said this role has been organically evolving to fit their needs. He shared that when the Assistant Chief left, there were some duties that he had to take on, and had to give some of his lower duties to the Administrative Captain. He stated they are currently very busy and the biggest department in the City and he does not see how they could effectively merge these two positions.

Mayor Vogel asked if they were to promote an existing firefighter to the Fire Inspector role, and what this would look like from the budget perspective. Schmidt said there would be no impact on the budget as he does not think whoever they put in this role will have as robust of daytime availability as the current Fire Inspector has. He noted that there would likely be some overflow hours that the new Fire Inspector would not be able to handle that would have to be taken care of by himself or the Administrative Captain. He shared that he hopes he can find someone who has at least eight hours of daytime availability a week.

Mayor Vogel said he would like this to stay budget-neutral.

Faanes noted the current Fire Inspector has averaged about 16 to 18 hours a week over the past few years. She asked if this was just for fire inspections. Schmidt said these hours were just the scheduled hours for fire inspections.

Faanes asked if they would be able to split the inspections and public education pieces of this role to two different people if they cannot find someone who can do both in one role. Schmidt shared that they discussed at the last Work Session if there is difficulty filling the role then the Council can re-discuss the role and the possibility of splitting it into two.

Faanes shared that she attended the meetings last year, as a resident, where Schmidt requested a new full-time Assistant Chief and this did not pass. She noted that at a different meeting, they discussed an Administrative Captain, which was then approved. She said she understands that things change; however, this seems sneaky to now be changing this Administrative Captain role to a full-time Fire Department role when this was originally not approved. Schmidt stated that this has been a cooperative position for the whole City. He noted that he wants to be transparent with everything they are doing to adjust the job description. He said

this is an opportunity to do some housekeeping based on how this position has evolved.

Faanes noted that transparency is very important to her, and she is never trying to tear someone down, she is just speaking her mind on this. She stated it is important for the job description to reflect the job.

Udvig shared that Schmidt coming to a Work Session to discuss changing the job description is him being transparent. She said Staff is looking at this from every angle and has come up with this as the best solution.

Robinson explained that a lot has happened in the Fire Department over the last three years, including working with Nowthen and Bethel, the transition to the new building, and changing their data management system.

The consensus of the Council was to update the Administrative Captain's job description to more accurately align with the work being done in this role.

C. Fire Inspector Pending Resignation/Replacement Considerations

Schmidt reviewed the Staff report concerning replacing the current Fire Inspector.

Robinson asked what are considered critical roles in the Fire Department. Schmidt explained that they have three main divisions in the department, operations, fire prevention and public education, and training. He noted that the people who have shown interest in this role are currently serving in a leadership role in another division.

Robinson said he worries about what will happen when the public safety funding is gone. Schmidt noted they would only need to utilize public safety dollars if they were looking to hire this as a full-time position.

Udvig shared that it would be ideal if they could find an internal candidate who was willing to fill this role in a part-time capacity. She noted they could have issues finding someone to fill this role since it is only part-time.

Faanes asked if finding someone internal to fill this role would have an impact on the budget. Schmidt explained if they went with hiring the position as it is filled currently then the cost of that for the remainder of the year is already accounted for in the 2025 budget.

Faanes asked if other cities have part-time Fire Inspectors. Schmidt said it depends on different factors and the needs of each fire department. He added that he sees them as having a future need for a full-time Fire Inspector.

Faanes noted that the paid on-call firefighters all live in St. Francis and she believes

they mostly start out by wanting to help their community rather than just to make money. She said they need to find the individuals who would fit this role and they may need to move people around within the department to make this work. She stated she would be in favor of hiring from within the department. She asked about the public safety dollars in the fund. Schmidt shared that this was a one-time grant from the State for public safety which was split between the Police and Fire Departments.

Mayor Vogel shared that he is also in favor of hiring from within. He said he is glad to hear that there are already internal candidates who are interested.

The consensus of the Council was to hire for the Fire Inspector position from within the current Fire Department Staff.

D. Medical Response

Schmidt reviewed the Staff report in regard to the types of incidents the Fire Department responds to.

Udvig noted there has been an increase in ambulance response times and there is the ability within the Fire Department to go to these calls and be the first ones to respond in these emergencies and she would hate to see this go away.

Mayor Vogel noted that East Bethel is currently looking at reducing what calls they respond to and cities who have tried this have seen significant decreases in the number of calls, then eventually got back up to the same volume again. He said the citizens will have to realize that if they want the Fire Department to respond to every call then it will not be cheap. He noted that one way to reduce calls is through dispatching; however, this would have to be done at the County level.

Schmidt explained that Anoka County dispatchers are not EMD certified while Allina dispatchers are. He shared that the Fire Chiefs in the County have been advocating for EMD-certified dispatchers. He noted that calls for fire service are going up everywhere and they have found ways to mitigate this. He added that there has been a cultural shift around what people are calling 911 for in the current day.

Udvig noted that they have been telling residents to call 911 whenever they need it. She shared that she had to call 911 when a water fountain was broken at one of the parks because she needed to get ahold of someone so the water did not run all night. Schmidt said the dispatchers have all of the on-call numbers for each department, so calling 911 would allow them to find who needs to report to and take care of the issue.

Faanes said she wants all residents to be able to get the best possible care; however, there may be a few things they should look at implementing to mitigate some of the responses to these calls. She suggested having only two firefighters

respond to certain medical calls rather than having the entire department respond. She added that if Allina is already en route to a call and they are closer than the firefighters, then they should look at canceling the firefighter response. She said she would like to see them try to minimize the calls they respond to. She noted that she was reviewing the East Bethel fire study and saw that their firefighters were reporting burnout due to the number of calls they were responding to. She stated she would like to see some kind of reduction in the budget. She added that firefighters are expected to respond to 20% of calls and as the calls for service increase, so does this expectation. She recommended that they take a close look at the East Bethel study and pull from it as East Bethel is a similar city to St. Francis. She noted that she wants the Fire Department to respond to all fires, car accidents, and major medical calls; however, she does not think they need to respond in full force to every call.

Schmidt shared that he does not see a solution that would be cheaper than what they are already doing today. He cautioned against using the East Bethel study and applying it to St. Francis as it was designed to cater to East Bethel's challenges. He noted they are in the middle of their own fire service study, and they will have specific information coming soon. He added that they are one of the only departments in the area that is not currently in crisis. He said he would love to have a duty crew; however, he does not think they have the staffing or the budget for this.

Faanes noted that even if they went to a duty crew model, they would still not be able to get rid of the on-call firefighters. She said they do not have a huge pool of people that they could pull from to be firefighters as there is a requirement to live within 10 minutes of the station. She added that there have been multiple firefighters over the past few years who have left the Fire Department but still live in the area. She shared that she wonders if they would have been able to keep these firefighters if it wasn't for the large number of calls they were responding to. Schmidt stated they conduct exit interviews with every firefighter that leaves the station, and he does not think any of them left because they were unhappy with the Fire Department. He noted that this is the reality of fire services.

Robinson asked if every firefighter is also an EMT. Schmidt said there are two firefighters who are not EMTs, one from Bethel and one from St. Francis. He noted that their standard for all new hires is that they will also go through the EMT training. He stated this is becoming a trend across fire services in the State.

Robinson noted that anyone calling 911 and having the Fire Department respond has essentially already paid for this service through their taxes. He shared that he is very proud of all of the work by the Fire Department. He said his main goals on the Council are to support Police, Fire, roads, and bridges as these are the core public services and he thinks they are doing a good job at providing these to residents.

Schmidt shared that he is extremely proud of his Fire Department.

This item was for discussion only.

E. Stormwater Fees

City Administrator Thunstrom reviewed the Staff report concerning the stormwater fees.

Mayor Vogel asked if the County charges a fee for the City to put someone's stormwater fees on their property taxes. Finance Manager Mulvihill said yes and noted that there is a fee to put a special assessment on the property taxes.

Mayor Vogel said he thinks it is crazy to not include this as part of the levy. He noted there are over 800 people a year not paying their stormwater fees. He stated it is causing more issues by creating this to be a separate bill.

Faanes added that it also calls attention to it when it is a separate bill.

Robinson asked if it would show up as its own line item on the levy. Mulvihill said it would show up under the general operating levy.

Robinson asked how much of these fees are used for existing infrastructure versus future products. Public Works Director Carpenter explained that these percentages are changing as the MPCA continues to tighten down on this.

Robinson asked how they would be communicating this change to the public if they do choose to move forward with this.

Mayor Vogel said he is all for transparency; however, he does not see how taking care of stormwater ponds is different from replacing roads or other infrastructure products. Robinson noted that some of what they have to do with stormwater ponds is done due to a requirement by the State.

Mulvihill explained that every resident would get their tax notice and could come to the Truth and Taxation hearing. She added that they are also planning on putting an article in the newsletter to explain more about the budgeting process and the levy.

Robinson said he would be supportive of moving these fees into the levy.

Udvig shared that she thinks residents will see this change and have an issue with it because, with the standard stormwater bills, they at least knew exactly how much they were paying for it. She said they will need to tell the residents that this fee will be going up every year.

Mayor Vogel asked how realistic it would be to be able to give residents a breakdown of their stormwater fees if they are rolled into the levy. Mulvihill said they could come up with something that would tell people how much they are paying in stormwater fees and other fees based on their home value. She added that there are a lot of hard feelings about these stormwater fees and some people will refuse to pay them so it has to be specially assessed to their property.

Udvig reiterated that she thinks people will have an issue with this since they will not know exactly how much they are paying for it. Mayor Vogel noted that most residents do not care for a breakdown of how much they are spending on everything else that goes into the levy.

Udvig said she would be more supportive of this if they still called out the increase every year so that the residents are aware.

Mayor Vogel shared that there was a city in the area that had software that gave residents a breakdown of exactly where their tax dollars were going based on each department within the city.

Mulvihill added that they get a lot of questions from residents asking why this bill is not included in the property taxes. She noted that there was a lot of outcry when they raised the stormwater fees in the past and they will have to raise them again in the future.

Udvig noted they will also have to be prepared for how they will respond to backlash and comments on social media.

Mulvihill shared that they are currently sending over 3,000 invoices a year.

Mayor Vogel shared that he is in favor of putting stormwater fees on the levy. The Council agreed.

The consensus of the Council was to move the stormwater fees to the levy.

F. Preliminary Levy Discussion

Mulvihill reviewed the Staff report in regard to the preliminary levy for 2026.

Faanes noted the tax increase for 2025 is 10.48% and in 2026 will be 11.24%. She asked if these numbers have just increased because of the new City Hall Fire Station building or if there are other causes for the increase. Mulvihill said they are not raising taxes due to this building anymore. She explained that the increases are based on the long-term plan that they did.

Mayor Vogel asked what COLA Mulvihill identified for 2026. Mulvihill shared that she typically stays around the 3% to 4% range. She said this increase is consistent with other cities in the area.

Mulvihill stated that the levy is increasing every year for street improvements as this typically increases by \$60,000 per year.

Mayor Vogel asked if there was an increase in the budget for everything due to increased costs. Mulvihill explained that she first inputs salaries and benefits and waits for department heads to send her their budgets and requests to put those into the overall budget.

Thunstrom asked if there are any initiatives that the Council would like Staff to look into. She shared that they will be discussing negotiations with Public Works at future meetings in Closed Session.

Faanes asked when the Council will be able to see the budget requests from each department head. Thunstrom said it will come to Staff first and they can figure out how much is needed for personnel requests, capital equipment, and other expenses. She shared that they would discuss this at a Work Session before setting the levy in September and they will have until the Truth and Taxation Hearing to bring the levy down if they choose to.

Mayor Vogel said he would like to look into software upgrades in regards to the levy, continuing the discussion on pushing Bridge Street through to Highway 47, and projects relating to Highway 47.

Robinson added that Highway 47 was at the top of his list of initiatives to direct Staff to look into. He asked if the wastewater treatment plant bond would be paid off soon. Mulvihill said this will not be paid off until 2046; however, this does not affect the levy.

Robinson asked if all Public Works employees are union members. Carpenter shared that there are six union members, and four non-union members, including himself.

Robinson noted that his property value went down but his taxes still went up. He asked if they should freeze their expectations due to the uncertainty of the real estate market. Mulvihill explained that even if the property values of all homes in the City went down, they still had to cover the levy that they set. She added that they raised the market value exclusion for 2025 which pushed the burden to industrial and commercial properties.

Mulvihill shared that Highway 47 would not be funded through the street fund and they will need to sell a bond for what they need to do in this project. Robinson noted they will need to come up with a way to communicate this to the residents.

Udvig added that Highway 47 is high on her priority list for 2026 as well.

Robinson noted that they invested in new software a few years ago. He asked if this is relative to anything that Mayor Vogel is looking for in 2026. Mayor Vogel noted that he is looking more for a program to estimate where people's tax dollars are going rather than new software.

Mulvihill shared that Ehlers and Associates had told her that they may be able to create a program like this for the City. She said she would reach out and discuss this with them.

Faanes stated her priority for 2026 is also Highway 47 and the possibility of the Bridge Street and Highway 47 connection.

Mulvihill noted that Thunstrom and Carpenter are working on a park fund with a maintenance schedule for parks, similar to what they have for roads.

Faanes shared that she would like to learn more about the City's emergency management program and what they do in major emergencies. She asked if they had enough people signed up for the Citizen's Academy. Police Chief Schwieger said yes.

The consensus of the Council was to move forward with a 3% COLA and direct Staff to start looking into the Council's 2026 priorities of Highway 47, the Bridge Street and Highway 47 connection, and a program to allow residents to look at a breakdown of where their tax dollars are going.

4. **ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business, Mayor Vogel adjourned the City Council Work Session at 7:34 p.m.

Jennifer Wida, City Clerk