

To: Public Safety & Welfare Committee

From: Fire Chief Tanya Reynen

Date: February 26, 2026

Subject: Addition of §80-8 and Revisions to Section §410-13(F)(2) of the Watertown City Code

Background

The Fire Department is requesting approval of the attached ordinance to formally establish a Lift Assist section within City Code and to amend provisions related to fireworks permitting and insurance requirements for City-sponsored parades.

In 2025, the Watertown Fire Department responded to 295 lift assist calls. These calls require the dispatch of an engine company and personnel, often removing a fully staffed suppression unit from service for non-injury, non-medical incidents. While we remain committed to assisting residents in times of need, the current structure allows repeat utilization of the Fire Department as a primary care resource, particularly by licensed care facilities. Health care facilities are regulated entities with staffing and liability responsibilities of their own. The Fire Department should not function as an extension of routine facility staffing models or absorb liability that appropriately belongs to those facilities.

The proposed ordinance defines lift assists, differentiates them from EMS responses, and establishes a reasonable fee structure. It maintains a compassionate approach for residents living independently by allowing two lift assists within a rolling 12-month period before a fee is assessed, while holding defined care facilities responsible for lift assist fees. Similar ordinances have been implemented in other Wisconsin communities to protect emergency response capacity and ensure appropriate allocation of public safety resources.

The ordinance amendments also clarify that fireworks permitting authority rests with the Fire Chief or designee, consistent with state statute. With the City's recent investment in a Deputy Chief Fire Marshal position, the Fire Department has the expertise to oversee fireworks permitting, insurance verification, NFPA compliance, and state regulatory standards. Fireworks events present life safety and property risks that require technical review, site evaluation, and operational planning. Centralizing this authority within the Fire Department ensures consistency, accountability, and regulatory compliance.

Summary of Proposed Changes

As reflected in the attached tracked ordinance document

- Creation of §80-8 establishing definitions, assessment standards, and a fee structure for lift assist services, including responsibility provisions for defined care facilities.
- Amendment to §410-13(F)(2) clarifying fireworks permit approval authority and insurance requirements.

Recommendation

The Fire Department recommends approval of the proposed ordinance as presented. The changes have been reviewed with City Legal and are supported by the Fire Department. Adoption will protect emergency response capacity, ensure equitable responsibility for non-emergent lift assist usage, and strengthen oversight of fireworks and event-related life safety compliance within the City of Watertown.