

CITY COUNCIL PROCEEDINGS

BEMIDJI, MINNESOTA

Special Meeting/Work Session – October 17, 2011

Pursuant to due call and notice, a special meeting/work session of the City Council of the City of Bemidji, Beltrami County, Minnesota, was held on Monday, October 17, 2011, at 5:30 p.m. in the Fire Hall meeting room, Mayor Larson presiding.

Upon roll call, the following Councilmembers were declared present: Larson, Waldhausen, Johnson, Hellquist, Albrecht, Thompson, Negard

Staff Present: City Manager John Chattin, Fire Chief Dave Hoefer, Finance Director Ron Eischens, City Clerk Kay Murphy

Others Present: Fire Research Committee – Mike Yavarow, Bruce Hemstad, Ted VanKemper

Mayor Larson stated that the purpose of the special work session was to review the rural fire service district with the Fire Research Committee and consider a resolution supporting the concept of establishing a joint powers entity for shared fire and rescue services for the Bemidji area.

Fire Chief Hoefer provided an overview of the current fire department governance and funding. The City currently pays 56 percent of the funding for the fire department with the Rural Fire Association paying 44 percent. He stated that the Fire Research Committee is recommending the creation of a Joint Powers Entity, Bemidji Fire District, through a joint powers agreement between all local units of government currently being served by the Bemidji Fire Department. He noted the following:

- The fire district proposed would operate similar to the Greater Bemidji Joint Planning office and would not have taxing authority.
- All government units that are parties to the agreement would have representation on the governing board. He briefly reviewed the proposed number of representatives and the composition for the board of directors.
- All current equipment and vehicles owned by the City and Rural Fire Association would be transferred to the JPE.
- Hoefer reviewed the proposed timeline stating that the goal is to begin the Joint Powers Entity by January 1, 2013.

Albrecht stated that the City has the most invested and at stake in the fire department and felt that the representation on the board should reflect that.

Hellquist stated he liked the idea of a fire district based on the success of the airport authority, which now has its own taxing authority. Discussion continued regarding taxing authority and it was observed that there would be a shift in funding responsibility from the city to the rural governments if funded solely through property taxes.

Chattin stated that if the recommendation was adopted and the City suffered cuts in local government aid, it would be unable to reduce its contribution toward the operation of the fire department. He further stated that with the proposed JPE, the City would not have veto power over the budget or operational decisions.

Hemstad, a paid-on-call firefighter and city resident, stated that the public has heard from the City that if there were further LGA cuts, there could possibly be cuts to the fire department personnel. He stated that if the public were asked, they would vote to keep the fire department operating as it does now. He commented that the City's first responsibility should be to safety such as police and fire, and cuts should be made to nonessential services such as parks.

Chattin responded that the City does not want to change the way the fire department operates, but that significant LGA cuts could leave the City little choice. He said that if the City has to make choices for cuts, everything is on the table. He stated that City staff suggested the idea of a fire district to protect the department from drastic operational changes.

Larson commented that the suggested formula for the board makeup is unequitable.

Hoefler stated that the Committee did look into taxing authority and only one fire district in the state has taxing authority, Cloquet. He noted that Cloquet took baby steps, establishing a joint powers authority and then went to the next level by created a taxing authority.

Consensus of the City Council was to proceed slowly and get all the government units together to take a closer look at the governance of the fire department.

Hoefler commented that the City would not have the fire department it has today without the Rural Fire Association and likewise for the Rural Fire Association. He noted that together, the City and Rural Fire Association are much stronger.

ADJOURN

There being no further business, motion by Hellquist, seconded by Waldhausen, to adjourn the meeting. Motion carried. Meeting adjourned at 6:46 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,



Kay M. Murphy
City Clerk