

CITY COUNCIL PROCEEDINGS
BEMIDJI, MINNESOTA
Special Meeting/Work Session – September 30, 2013

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, September 30, 2013, at 5:30 p.m. in the Meeting Room at Fire Station No. 1, Mayor Albrecht presiding.

Upon roll call, the following Councilmembers were declared present: Albrecht, Meehlhause, Johnson, Hellquist, Erickson, Thompson

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

Fire Research Committee Members:

Ted Vankempfen, Mel Milender, Bruce Hemstad, Brian Merschman, Mike Yavarow

Mayor Albrecht stated that the purpose of the special work session was to hear an update from the Bemidji Area Fire Research Committee and their recommendations.

Fire Chief Hoefler provided an update on the proposed Bemidji Area Fire Department concept. In 2011, Emergency Service Consulting International conducted a study which showed that operationally the Bemidji Fire Department is performing its mission very well; however, governance and long-term stability issues are present. The study provided the Research Committee four options, including the creation of a joint fire protection organization to provide fire/rescue services to the Bemidji area. After several meetings, the Committee recommended the creation of "Bemidji Area Fire/Rescue Department" through a joint powers agreement.

Funding:

Hoefler stated that a fee based funding mechanism would be established to finance the fire department adequately, both operationally and capital improvements. The fee would be based upon building values as determined by the member's assessor's office. The fee amount would be established by the Board. Collection of the fee will be through property tax or any other legally authorized means.

Councilor Erickson inquired why vacant land would not be charged a fee. Chief Hoefler responded that the Fire Department's primary mission is to protect life and property. He further stated that it is the DNR's responsibility to handle wildfires.

Chattin commented that a merger could mean that the City could charge a fee instead of a property tax to help fund the new combined fire department. It was noted that more than half of the property values in City limits are tax-exempt. Chattin stated that a fee would allow the City to spread the financial cost of the fire department to every property owner in Bemidji and lower the amount non-tax exempt property owners have been paying.

Hemstad noted that the Committee has met with three non-profits to date; Sanford Medical, Bemidji State University and the School District. He stated that their reaction was "they were not surprised". The Committee plans to meet with the faith community next.

Timeline:

Hoefler stated that the Committee is presenting their recommendation to all LGU representatives and will seek special state legislation establishing a fire protection fee in 2014. If approved, the final agreement would be presented to the LGU's to enter into an agreement by January 2015, create a Board and the Board of Directors by June 2015, and in January 2017 the new organization would begin operation.

Discussion continued regarding the makeup of the boards. Erickson expressed concerns that the City would not have adequate representation as proposed. She stated that the City would end up being only 20 percent of the board of directors and 1/18 of the governing board, yet committing all of our equipment which it has acquired over decades.

Johnson noted that it might be a “hard sell” at the state legislature as public safety was used as one of the reasons in restoring Local Government Aid (LGA).

Hellquist asked what the “fail safe” would be if it is not working after one or more years.

Vankampen referred to the “draft” agreement which states, “...Any member who finds the initial Organizational bylaws unacceptable may withdraw from this agreement immediately without delay or penalty.”

Erickson asked if the City's assets have been compared to the Rural Fire's assets. Chief Hoefler responded that they have not but it is pretty much 50/50.

Milender stated that they have spent three years discussing and in 2003-2004 Rural Fire realized they couldn't handle a fire department this size on their own. He stated that Rural Fire likes the idea of stable funding and the ability to have a say in the funding.

Firefighter Yavarow stated that career firefighters are in favor of the joint powers agreement. He has contacted PERA regarding retirement funds.

RESOLUTION NO. 5852: A Resolution of Support for Establishing a Joint Fire and Rescue Services Organization for the Bemidji Area was offered by Councilmember Thompson who moved its adoption, and upon due second by Councilmember Olson was passed by unanimous vote.

ADJOURN

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 7:02 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kay M. Murphy
City Clerk