

BEMIDJI CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION AGENDA

Monday, March 24, 2025

**City Hall
317 4th Street NW
5:30 PM**



- 1. CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL**
- 2. CODE OF CONDUCT**
 - a) Review Code of Conduct
- 3. SAFER GRANT APPLICATION DISCUSSION**
 - b) SAFER Grant Application Submission (Fire)
- 4. ADJOURN**

Bemidji City Council Code of Conduct

City of Bemidji Core Values

- Communication – be open, consistent, truthful, and respectful in all communications
- Ethics – maintain the highest standards of professional behavior
- Civility – maintain an atmosphere of respect and civility
- Stewardship – responsible and sustainable use of the City’s limited resources
- Creativity and innovation – keep an open mind to new concepts and solutions
- Leadership – advocate to further the vision of a quality community

[Link to City of Bemidji's Mission, Vision, and Values](#)

Introduction

The council is committed to governing efficiently and effectively, and to promoting the values and integrity of local government and democracy. After taking oath of office, council members agree to conduct themselves in accordance with the following Code of Conduct:

Compliance

The council will comply with applicable federal laws, state laws, [City Ordinances](#), and the [City Charter](#) in performance of their public duties. This includes, but it is not limited to:

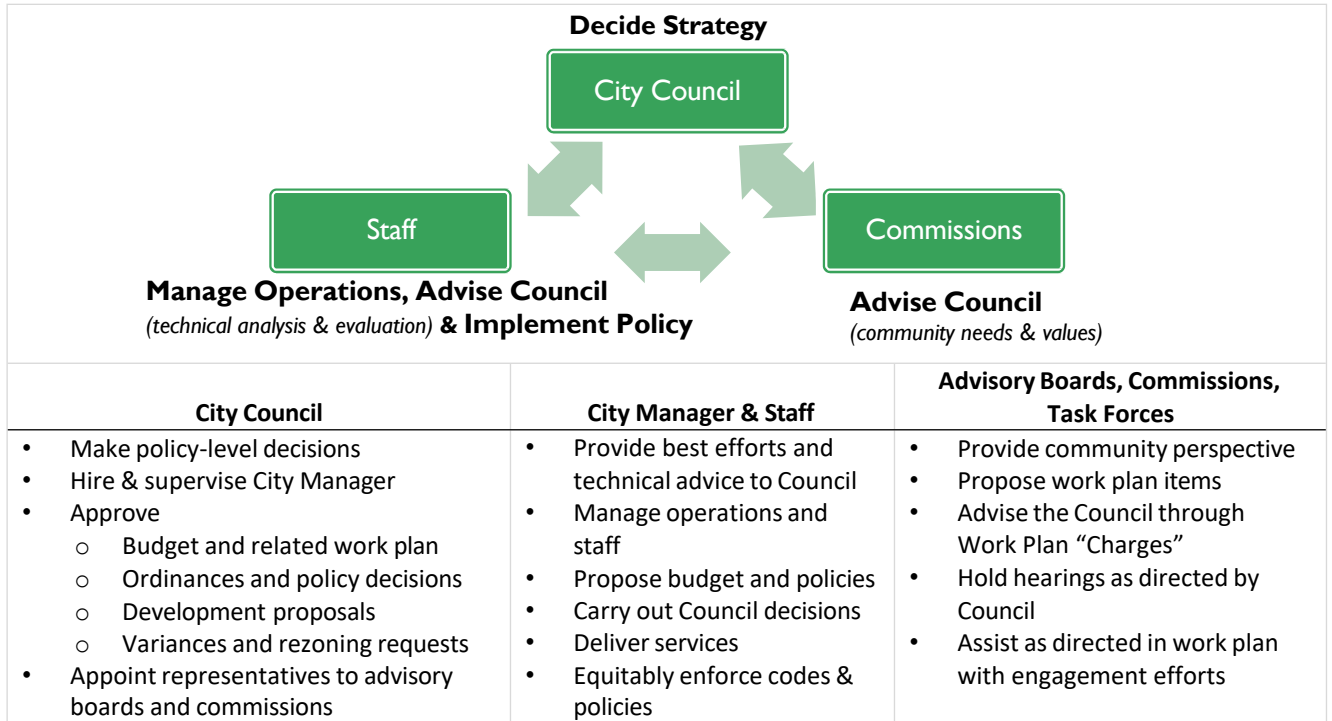
- The [Minnesota Open Meeting Law](#)
- [Gifting Law](#)
- [Conflict of Interest](#) (with [exceptions](#))
- [Minnesota Government Data Practices Act \(Chapter 13\)](#)

Roles and Responsibilities

The council is a team committed to the residents of Bemidji both today and in the future. To be effective council members must come to meetings with an open mind, think strategically about city issues, and delegate details of implementations to staff. The council strives to maintain a culture of trust, respect, and candor when working with staff and boards/commissions.

- Council members will follow the roles assigned in the Bemidji City Charter and as authorized under law. (See the link to the charter in “Compliance” section above.)

- The council’s role is to decide policy, and city staff’s role is to implement that policy. It is the mayor’s role to run city council meetings.
- Council members understand that an individual council member may request information or clarification from a city officer and will not individually assign work duties. All requests for information will “cc’ the city manager.



Thank you to Edina, MN for sharing this graphic.

City Council Meetings

The purpose of regular city council meetings is to conduct city business through processes such as motions, resolutions, and ordinances. The council believes that disagreement and discussion about policy during meetings is useful and normal. It is important that all council members have opportunities voice their opinions during meetings. To ensure effective and efficient meetings, the council will adhere to the following:

- Council members will prepare for meetings. Council members will make every effort to have questions about agenda items answered before meetings.
- Council members will support the role of the mayor in maintaining order during meetings.
 - Council members agree that each member will take the time they need to express their ideas during council meetings.
 - Council members will not engage in sidebar conversations.
 - Council members will not use electronic devices during council meetings to

access social media or for any other personal use. Members understand that they may access documents or city information which is necessary for council deliberations.

- Council members agree that nonverbal communication which expresses personal reactions to other speakers is inappropriate.
- Council members agree to take personal responsibility to remain focused and listening.
- Council members will not interrupt another member who is speaking during a meeting.
- The mayor will manage the meeting using the following protocol:
 - The Council will go through one round of questions/comments, with each member having the opportunity to speak or pass on an agenda item, before making a motion. The mayor will check in with each member in rotation, starting with a different member until all have had the opportunity to speak first, and then start the rotation over.
 - Council members acknowledge that sometimes reactions are outside of someone's conscious awareness and may happen from time to time. If a member's nonverbal behavior is becoming frequent, the mayor will have a private conversation with that person.

Council Member Conduct

Council members hold themselves accountable to the highest standards of professionalism. Specifically:

- Council members will refrain from questioning the motives of others.
- Council members will strive to provide constructive feedback and be respectful.
- Once a decision is reached by a vote of the council, council members will support the decision, even if they weren't in the majority.
- Council members understand that members may share their opinions about the outcome of a vote as individuals while still supporting the decision. In these instances, members will be clear that they are not speaking on behalf of the City of Bemidji or the City Council.
- Council members will perform their duties in accordance with the processes and rules established by the full council. The council may revisit and change processes and rules by a vote of the majority (assuming compliance with the Charter and law).
- Council members will work diligently to ensure that the processes are clear to all involved.

Working with Staff and Others

- Council members will foster a positive and constructive environment for employees, for committee members, citizens and businesses dealing with the city.
- Council members will treat staff with a sense of dignity and equity.
- Council members will direct constituent questions or complaints to an appropriate city staff member and ask staff to confirm when the constituent's need has been addressed.

Review and Revision

- City staff will review the Code of Conduct and supporting materials with newly elected officials during orientation.
- The council will review this code annually during the first quarter of the year. Any amendments to this Code of Conduct can be made by passage of a resolution by a majority of the council. Once adopted, the Code of Conduct is in effect until either amended or rescinded by a vote of a majority of the council.



BEMIDJI FIRE DEPARTMENT

318 5th Street NW • Bemidji, MN 56601 • 218-751-8001

Justin M. Sherwood
Fire Chief
firechief@ci.bemidji.mn.us

Michael K. Yavarow, Jr
Deputy Fire Chief
firecode@ci.bemidji.mn.us

Dear Mayor Prince and Members of the City Council:

I am writing to request your consideration and support in addressing critical staffing needs within the Bemidji Fire Department. At the upcoming City Council work session, I will present an overview of current staffing levels, operational demands, and proposed solutions to ensure that we can continue to provide the highest level of service to our community.

In recent years, the Bemidji Fire Department has experienced an increase in service calls and operational demands, placing additional strain on our personnel and organization. Through ongoing assessments, we have identified key areas where increasing our staffing levels would enhance both public safety outcomes and the well-being of our employees.

Key points discussed in this document:

- 1. Review of Applicable Studies and Standards:** An overview of NFPA and OSHA standards.
- 2. Current Staffing Model:** An overview of our current operation and the challenges our organization is facing.
- 3. Increased Demand:** Statistics detailing the growth in our area.
- 4. Operational Benefits:** Detailing the benefits of service delivery in our protection area.
- 5. Budget and Staffing Solutions:** Outlining potential funding solutions and evaluating various methods to achieve the goal.

Your guidance and support will be crucial for ensuring we have the workforce required to fulfill our mission. We share a commitment to public safety and the well-being of our community. With an updated staffing model, we can continue to deliver the high-quality service our residents expect and deserve.

I appreciate your consideration, and I look forward to discussing these proposals in further detail.

Sincerely,

Justin M. Sherwood
Fire Chief

Introduction:

I am continuing the advocacy efforts initiated by former Fire Chief David Hoefler, with the primary motivation of ensuring safety. While national standards recommend a minimum of four firefighters per response, we can only guarantee one career staff member on the primary response engine each day. This limitation is affected by scheduling conflicts, such as time-off requests and dorm staffing. Through the implementation of our paid-on-call duty crew program, we sometimes have two personnel available at certain times.

Over the past four years, I have faced challenges related to this situation. Some may argue that these scenarios are rare or too expensive to address. However, the reality is that these situations happen far more frequently than the public realizes.

The Bemidji Fire Department responded to a report of a structure fire in a detached garage located next to a home and another garage. Upon arrival, a single firefighter deployed a 2 1/2-inch suppression line, successfully containing the fire to the original structure until additional suppression units arrived on the scene 12 minutes later. Firefighters successfully contained the fire to the original garage, resulting in minimal damage to the nearby home and the second garage. However, the original structure and its contents sustained significant damage, according to the release.

The Bemidji Fire Department responded to a report of a vehicle that had gone through the ice, leaving two people in the water. Upon his arrival, Bemidji Police Officer and Beltrami County Deputies had removed one person from the water. It was reported that one person was still unaccounted for. A single firefighter quickly donned a cold-water ice suit and entered the water, locating the missing individual and moving him to the edge of the hole where he could be removed from the water. The firefighter quickly exited the water. With the assistance of law enforcement officers, he immediately began life-saving efforts, ultimately resulting in the patient regaining a pulse.

The Bemidji Fire Department responded to a report of a structure fire with people trapped inside. A crew of two firefighters arrived on scene and found a single-family home heavily engulfed in flames. One firefighter risked his life by locating a bedroom window and attempted a rescue using the vent, enter, search method while his partner worked to establish a suppression line. The firefighters conducted operations on the scene for 10 minutes until additional units arrived to assist.

The Bemidji Fire Department responded to a report of a structure fire in the City of Bemidji. Upon arrival, firefighters found a two-story residential building with heavy smoke emanating from the front door and reports of two people trapped on the second floor. One firefighter entered the building to conduct a primary search while the other prepared the engine for suppression. For eight minutes, they operated alone until the next suppression unit arrived.

Review of Applicable Studies and Standards

National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST): Crew size and arrival times

- Four-person firefighting crews complete 22 essential firefighting and rescue tasks
 - 30% faster than a two-person crew
 - 25% faster than a three-person crew
- A four-person crew completes delivers water
 - 15% faster than a two-person crew
 - 6% faster than a three-person crew
- Larger crews reduce damage to property
- Larger crews reduce firefighter risk

NFPA 1500: Standard on Fire Department Occupational Safety, Health, and Wellness

- Members operating in hazardous areas during emergency incidents must operate in teams of two or more.
- Four persons are required during the initial stages of an incident
- Apparatus staffing levels:
 - Engine – four members
 - Truck – six members

NFPA 1710/1720: Standard for the Organization and Deployment of Fire Suppression Operations

- Suppression companies be staffed with four on-duty personnel
- Volunteer response:
 - Deploy 15 members within 9 minutes (urban response)
 - Deploy 10 members within 10 minutes (suburban response)
 - Deploy six members within 14 minutes (rural response)

OSHA 1910.134:

- This provision requires that at least two employees enter the Immediately Dangerous to Life or Health (IDLH) atmosphere and always remain in visual or voice contact with each other. It also requires that at least two employees be located outside the IDLH atmosphere, hence the term "two in/two out." This assures that the "two in" can monitor each other and assist with equipment failure, entrapment, or other hazards, and the "two out" can monitor those in the building, initiate rescue, or call for backup. One of the "two out" can be assigned another role, such as incident commander.

Current Staffing Model: Current Operations and Challenges

The Bemidji Fire Department operates as a combination fire department, comprising nine career firefighters and 48 paid-on-call firefighters. The department responds to emergencies from four fire stations:

- Station 1: 318 5th Street NW (*Staffed 24/7/365*)
- Station 2: 312 Lake Ave SE
- Station 3: 3810 Moberg Drive NW
- Station 4: 920 Winter Sumac Road NE

Despite national standards recommending a minimum of four firefighters per response, our current staffing model only guarantees one career firefighter per shift on the primary response engine. This number is further impacted by time-off requests, dorm staffing, and scheduling conflicts, often resulting in critical gaps in coverage.

To supplement staffing, the dormitory, and paid-on-call duty crew programs occasionally provide additional personnel at specific times. However, this remains inconsistent, and overall, 97% of emergency responses are handled by career staff.

Most concerning is that this staffing model has remained unchanged since 2004 despite a steady rise in service calls, fire safety inspections, and public outreach efforts. Over the past two decades, the community's emergency needs have increased dramatically, yet our personnel structure has failed to keep pace.

Staffing Challenges: The Need for a Proactive Approach

I do not advocate for increased staffing based on mandates or industry standards, nor will I rely on scare tactics to justify our needs. Instead, my motivation is grounded in a commitment to the safety of both our firefighters and the community we serve.

Currently, we operate with a "good enough" mindset, relying on short-term solutions rather than developing clear, forward-thinking strategies. This reactive approach hinders our ability to adapt, improve, and provide the highest level of service that our residents and businesses deserve. Instead of maintaining the status quo, we must shift toward proactive measures that enhance safety, preparedness, and community engagement.

Current Operating Realities

- The Bemidji Fire Department relies on a combination of career and paid-on-call firefighters to manage the increase in emergency calls, training requirements, and public service demands.
- While paid-on-call firefighters play an essential role, 97% of emergency responses are handled by career staff, placing a significant load on our full-time firefighters.
- Despite a continuous increase in call volume, fire safety inspections, and public outreach programs, the staffing model has remained unchanged since 2004—a nearly 20-year gap that has led to operational strain, firefighter fatigue, and potential service limitations.

The challenges we face are not hypothetical—these challenges are real, growing, and urgent. Addressing these staffing concerns is not about meeting an arbitrary standard—it is about ensuring that we have the necessary resources, personnel, and strategy to effectively meet the evolving needs of the Bemidji community without compromise.

Residential Dorm Firefighters

The Residential Dorm Firefighter program, established in the late 1970s, offers college students free housing in exchange for their service as firefighters. Initially, the dorm was occupied by hockey players from Bemidji State University. However, it now accommodates a diverse group of residents, including students, professionals, and individuals pursuing careers in the fire service.

Currently, the dorm program houses three individuals who, much like the initial members from the late 1970s, continue to supplement our career staff when available, providing invaluable support and resources. However, this arrangement is taking a toll, raising significant concerns. Due to the increased demand, our dorm firefighters are actively seeking alternative accommodations to rest. This situation indicates burnout and highlights the unsustainability of the current system.

Long-Term Contribution vs. Current Burnout

- For many years, the dorm firefighters have supplemented the career staff, filling critical gaps in staffing and ensuring continuous coverage.
- The increasing demand has now led to burnout, with dorm firefighters experiencing chronic exhaustion from responding to every call, day and night, without the structured breaks that career staff receive.
- To recover, dorm firefighters have resorted to finding other places to sleep to get adequate rest, which highlights the unsustainability of the current system.
- Without relief, this will lead to higher turnover, difficulty recruiting new dorm participants, and, ultimately, a decline in the program's effectiveness.

The Role of Additional Career Staff in Providing Relief

- Career staff additions would allow calls to be spread across a larger workforce, reducing the reliance on dorm firefighters as an emergency response safety net.
- Adding additional career staff allows dorm firefighters to take scheduled nights off, preventing sleep deprivation and long-term burnout.

An Increase in Demand

The Bemidji Fire Department provides fire protection for life and property to the citizens of the City of Bemidji, the City of Wilton, the City of Turtle River, and 15 townships. Our protected area spans 522 square miles and is home to an estimated population of 48,000 people. As a regional center, the greater Bemidji area comprises over 100,000 people.

Below is an overview of key points from the Bemidji Fire Department’s annual reviews (2021–2024), emphasizing the increasing demands facing the department:

Call Volume Growth

2020: 968 total calls for service
2021: 1,169 total calls for service (an increase over prior years)
2022: 1,217 total calls (up roughly 4% from 2021)
2023: 1,274 total calls (continuing a multi-year upward trend)
2024: 1,368 total calls (the highest yet, nearly 200 more than in 2021)

This trend highlights that the volume of emergencies—and the corresponding workload—has risen annually.

Increasing EMS/Rescue Demands

From 2020 to 2024, emergency medical and rescue calls accounted for the largest share of the total. This trend reflects a growing local population, more traffic, and higher overall service expectations.

It is worth noting that, according to directives from the Bemidji City Council, the Bemidji Fire Department currently responds only to “life-threatening” emergencies. If the department were to respond to all potential calls for assistance, these numbers would be significantly higher.

Expanded Prevention and Education Needs

The Bemidji Fire Department plays a critical role in ensuring community safety through fire safety inspections and public education events. Fire safety inspections help reduce the risk of fires in local businesses, multi-family housing, and other buildings by identifying hazards, ensuring compliance with safety codes, and promoting safer structural and operational practices. These inspections serve a dual purpose: they raise public awareness of fire prevention strategies and help property owners avoid costly damages or fines. Notably, from 2022 to 2024, the number of fire safety inspections rose by nearly 39%.

Additionally, public education events—such as school visits and community risk reduction programs—have also surged. Between 2022 and 2023 alone, the department’s public education hours increased by more than 100%. Although there was a slight decrease in 2024, the overall trend still reflects a 101% rise when comparing 2022 and 2024. These proactive efforts require ongoing staffing and resources to keep pace with the region’s growing demands.

Operational Benefits

Increasing the number of career firefighters at the Bemidji Fire Department would provide significant operational benefits, enhancing efficiency, firefighter safety, and community service. Below are some of the key advantages:

Safer and More Efficient Emergency Response

- Adequate staffing ensures that emergency incidents are managed with the appropriate number of personnel, reducing risks for both responders and the public.
- With more career firefighters available per shift, crews can quickly establish critical fireground operations such as fire suppression, search and rescue, and ventilation.
- More career personnel provide better support for complex emergencies, including technical rescues, hazardous material incidents, and water rescues, ensuring safer and more efficient operations under challenging conditions.

Enhanced Firefighter Safety and Crew Effectiveness

- National standards recommend four firefighters per response for safe and effective operations. However, the Bemidji Fire Department operates below this standard, at times dispatching only one firefighter on the primary response engine.
- More career firefighters reduce the risk of solo or understaffed responses, ensuring that firefighters have adequate support for tasks such as fire attack, search and rescue, and medical services.
- By distributing the workload, we can reduce firefighter fatigue, lowering the risk of on-the-job injuries, burnout, and mental health issues associated with the job.

Strengthened Community Risk Reduction and Fire Prevention Efforts

- Fire safety inspections have increased by nearly 39% since 2022, but limited staffing restricts proactive enforcement of fire codes.
- Public education programs, which have more than doubled (a 101% increase) in the same period, require personnel to conduct school visits, fire safety training, and community outreach.
- Increasing career staffing allows firefighters to dedicate more time to fire prevention, ultimately reducing fire risks and emergency incidents before they occur.

Greater Reliability and Reduced Dependence on Paid-On-Call Firefighters

- Currently, 97% of emergency responses are handled by career firefighters, placing a heavy burden on a small, full-time staff.
- While paid-on-call firefighters are valuable, they are not always available due to other jobs or commitments, creating uncertainty in response coverage.
- Increasing the number of career firefighters provides a stable and predictable workforce, ensuring that the department has consistent staffing 24/7 rather than relying on variable on-call availability.

Preparedness for Future Growth and Increased Emergency Demands

- The Bemidji area is one of the fastest-growing regions in Minnesota, with a growing population, expanding commercial development, and increasing tourism.
- As emergency incidents rise, staffing must keep pace with demand to prevent delayed responses and inadequate coverage.
- Expanding career firefighter staffing is a long-term investment in the safety and resilience of Bemidji's fire protection services.

Conclusion: Meeting the Needs of a Growing Community

Increasing the number of career firefighters at the Bemidji Fire Department is not just about meeting standards; it is about ensuring firefighter safety, reducing response times, improving operational readiness, and strengthening community risk reduction efforts. As emergency calls, inspections, and fire prevention needs continue to rise, an increased career staff will enhance service reliability, provide a safer working environment, and ensure the department is fully equipped to meet the growing demands of the community.

Budgetary and Staffing Solutions

As fire chief, my primary responsibility is to fulfill the duties of this position most cost-effectively while also ensuring that we have the necessary resources to accomplish the department's mission:

To save lives, protect property, and preserve the environment with honor, integrity, and compassion

In doing so, I am asking for your support in adding additional career staff to the Bemidji Fire Department. Below, I have listed three solutions that can improve the safety and efficiency of this organization. Please note that these estimates are based on the data provided to me.

1. Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Grant

- Federally funded program administered by FEMA
- Designed to help fire departments achieve and maintain adequate staffing levels
- Grants aim to improve response time, reduce overtime, and enhance public safety
- Three years of funding with no match
- At the end of year three, the organization then absorbs the cost.
- It is our request to submit a grant for four firefighters, for an estimated total dollar amount of \$1,455,712.99
- FEMA Funded currently frozen
- Under our current staffing model, this would provide three firefighters per shift per day.
- Supported by the Rural Fire Association

2. Adopt a Plan

- **Year 1:** Hire two new staff to address the immediate coverage needs and begin reducing workload pressures: \$242,618.83
- **Year 2:** Hire one new staff member, focusing on high-demand shifts and refining team efficiency: \$121,309.42
- **Year 3:** Hire one new staff member to reach the targeted amount of four: \$121,309.42
- Upon year 3, this would provide three firefighters per shift per day
- Not grant funded
- Supported by the Rural Fire Association

3. Change our staffing model

Currently, our members work two 24-hour shifts each week. This model ensures that two members are scheduled each day. However, our current staffing model only guarantees one career firefighter per shift on the primary response engine as it is impacted by time off. Members work a total of 2496 hours per year.

A 56-hour firefighter shift schedule is common in the fire service and typically follows a rotating schedule that ensures 24/7 coverage while managing the fatigue of firefighters.

- 24 hours on, followed by 48 hours off
- Traditional schedule ensures firefighters work no more than 24 consecutive hours
- Steady routine with predictable shifts
- Members work 2912 hours per year, an additional 416 hours from the current model
- Two additional firefighters needed
 - Estimated Costs:
 - Two additional firefighters: \$283,055.31
 - Additional expenses: \$92,297.92 (additional 416 hours/year for current members)
 - Total annual cost (estimated): \$375,353.23

Note:

The three scenarios provided are estimates based on data provided to me at the time this document was created. They do not consider the following:

1. These dollar amounts are based on the 2024 wages, as Local 2302 has not yet finalized its contract.
2. These numbers represent base wages only and do not include callbacks or overtime.
3. These numbers may change with a wage study and the creation of updated job descriptions.

Final Thoughts:

Buckminster Fuller posed an important question:

“What is my job on the planet? What is it that needs doing, that I know something about, that probably won't happen unless I take responsibility for it?”

As a fire service leader, I have a responsibility to ensure that our firefighters have the necessary support and resources to perform their jobs safely and effectively. Staffing is not just about efficiency—it’s about protecting our people, maintaining operational readiness, and upholding our commitment to the communities we serve. When staffing falls short, the consequences are real: firefighter fatigue, reduced response capabilities, and a diminished ability to save lives.

Investing in the correct number of personnel ensures that our firefighters are well-rested, adequately trained, and fully prepared to meet the growing needs of our community. It’s about doing the right thing—now and for the future. A proactive approach to staffing doesn’t just improve service; it safeguards the well-being of those who put their lives on the line every day.

I truly appreciate your thoughtful consideration of the data I have provided, and I look forward to continuing this important conversation.

Justin M. Sherwood
Fire Chief