

City of Columbus
Budget Meeting
Alternative Meeting Format
MN Statute, Section 13D.021
08.31.2022

The 08.31.22 meeting of the City of Columbus City Council was called to order at 6:04 p.m. by Mayor Jesse Preiner at the City Hall. Present were Councilmembers Janet Hegland, Shelly Logren and Sue Wagamon; City Administrator Elizabeth Mursko, Public Communication Coordinator Connor Keith and Senior Accountant Cheryl Jenkins.

Also in attendance were: Forest Lake Fire Chief Alan Newman and Natalie Ryder (via teleconference)

Absent: Councilmember Robert Busch

1. **Call to Order – Regular Meeting – 6:04 p.m.**
2. **Pledge of Allegiance**
3. **Approval of Consent Agenda**

Motion by Hegland to approve the agenda. Seconded by Wagamon.

4. **City of Columbus – 2023 Budget**
 1. **Presentation – Fire Chief Alan Newman**

Newman presented the Forest Lake Fire Department's (FLFD) proposed budget with an overall operating increase of \$62,038 (7.62 percent), with raised wages accounting for 60 percent of the increase. As a Paid/On-Call (POC) fire department, FLFD is considered fully staffed with 31 POC and one full-time fire chief. FLFD currently has 28 POC firefighters. Newman hopes to hire five firefighters to start January 1, 2023, in anticipation of two firefighters with 20+ years of experience retiring within the near future. Newman listed multiple staffing barriers, both for recruitment and retention and its impact on FLFD, as well as the increase in workload.

Preiner asked if FLFD could reduce the amount of community engagement events, like Night to Unite and fire prevention, to save on payroll. Newman said that with some of these public events, FLFD participates because it is the public's expectation and that it educates on fire safety and prevention. As a result, Newman says it would be difficult to determine which events are retained and which are discontinued. In addition, Newman says FLFD already declines many requests made by private businesses and similar types of invites.

Preiner asked how much the average POC firefighter earns per year. Newman estimated the average firefighter earns approximately \$4,000 per year, including calls, training and public education events. Preiner asked how many times firefighters go out. Newman said POC firefighters are expected to respond to a minimum of 25 percent of calls and attend 66 percent of training sessions per quarter.

Newman explained his reasoning for requesting raised hourly wages for POC firefighters, saying that another option is to hire a fulltime fire department or deploy duty crews, changes many fire departments comparable to FLFD in the state have made. Newman warned that both of these changes would prove to be more expensive than raising wages, as full-time employees require regular wages and

benefits, while duty crews struggle with retention, which leads to higher training and equipment costs. Newman also said that fire departments that have turned to duty crews trend towards full time fire departments within 5-10 years. Newman estimates that transitioning to a full-time fire department would increase the operating budget \$1.5 million to \$2 million, a burden that would be entirely borne by Columbus and Forest Lake taxpayers. In efforts to maintain the POC format and improve recruitment and retention, Newman suggested budgeting a three-year plan to raise firefighters' hourly wage to \$31.25 per hour. Should that raise be implemented, FLFD's payroll would need to increase by \$133,125, of which Columbus would be responsible for \$26,798. Newman compared that to what Lino Lakes had to do for its fire department, which added \$350,000 to its payroll to hire 10 firefighters while still also needing to still pay POC firefighters.

Wagamon asked Newman how he chose an increase of \$4 per hour for three-consecutive years. Newman said he needed a starting point, but that he created a schedule that built towards his goal of \$31.25 per hour, which he based off a full-time Forest Lake Police officer's wage of \$33.36 per hour.

Hegland asked about staffing and response time how they relate to a fire department's ISO rating. Newman said both Forest Lake and Columbus recently saw their ISO ratings improve one point and that staffing is a major part of that. Hegland asked if this investment could see a return for Columbus residents in a reduction in home insurance rates. Newman said that is the case, in addition to the improved response time. Newman also said retaining staff helps FLFD save on training and equipment costs.

Mursko asked Newman to explain geographical restrictions on FLFD recruitment. Newman said all firefighters are required to live within a certain distance of the fire stations to maintain reasonable response times and ISO ratings.

Hegland asked how a potential disagreement with Forest Lake's City Council would be resolved. Mursko said it is the FLFD Fire Board that ultimately makes the decision, as both Cities are represented to reach an agreement.

Newman turned to equipment replacement, sharing that the last apparatus is due for replacement, after which FLFD should be set many years. Two new fire trucks have already been received, and another is currently being built, leaving Engine No. 1 to be replaced, which has already exceeded its 15-year lifespan by a year and is facing a 600-day build time for its replacement. To find the best costs, Newman researched purchase certificates and leasing, but settled on joining the Houston-Galveston buying consortium which limits price adjustments to only two per year compared to an approximate five percent monthly increase on the open market. The engine that is being built cost FLFD \$796,169, while the current price to replace Engine No. 1 would be \$863,747 with another price increase soon. Hegland asked if Columbus chose to continue to accrue the expense to the City's Capital Fund and pay in cash, whether the City would be exempt from paying interest on the equipment bonds. Newman confirmed that was his understanding and Mursko verify with the City of Forest Lake.

2. 2023 Fire Hall CIP

Mursko turned the Council's attention to Fire Hall No. 2, Columbus' Fire Hall, which was built in 1998. While the City is party to a Joint Powers Agreement with the City of Forest Lake in running a fire department, the fire halls are owned by the individual Cities. The building still has the original furnaces that are reaching end of life despite regular maintenance, and the roof has begun leaking. As both items are outside the existing operating budget for the building, both of these repairs will need to be included in the capital improvement plan. Mursko said the City has put aside \$10,000 per year for large capital items for the fire hall, leading to a fund balance of \$69,000 for fire hall projects. Mursko recommended increasing the \$10,000 budget for long-term repairs.

Logren suggested the City get cost estimates for options beyond replacing the existing flat roof with another flat roof and asked how long the patched roof is expected to last. Mursko said there's no way to know how long the patch will hold.

Hegland asked how long the City has been setting aside \$10,000 for costs associated with the Fire Hall. Mursko said that amount goes back approximately three years when it was increased from \$7,500, and the capital fund has existed for eight years. Preiner asked how much Mursko thought the budget might need to be raised to. Mursko estimated that a \$15,000 increase might not be enough since the roof and furnace are likely going to require additional funding beyond the capital fund.

Logren asked about other capital funds beyond the fire hall. Mursko said most Public Works accounts were in good position and were addressed at a recent Public Works Advisory Board meeting to institute escalators to account for inflation. However, the capital fund for City Hall, the City Office and the Community Center is minimally funded.

Mursko asked how much money the Council felt should be budgeted for the Fire Hall. Hegland agreed with Mursko that \$15,000 plus an escalator and asked how quickly estimates could be requested for both projects. Mursko felt comfortable that both estimates could be collected by the end of September.

3. Discussion – Anoka County Law Enforcement Contract

The City received the law enforcement contract from the Anoka County Sheriff's Office (ACSO) for 2023's renewal which includes continued service from Community Service Officers. Mursko said Lt. Jessica Slavik, Columbus' liaison at ACSO, highlighted a clause in the existing contract that stipulates a 90-day advance notice about changes to the contract, meaning the City must make any edits by October 3.

Hegland asked Mursko to invite Slavik to an upcoming workshop meeting.

4. 2023 Goals

Mursko turned to a request from Anoka County to partner with them to help pay for the biennial aerial photographs. Each municipality in the county has been asked to contribute \$1,000. Hegland said that the Sunrise River Watershed Management Organization (SRWMO) received the same request from the county and asked if each WMO was expected to contribute, as that would mean Columbus taxpayers would be contributing \$4,000 in total. Mursko said she would inquire to the County to find out.

Wagamon asked if this was a new budget item if the City has contributed in the past. Mursko said in the past when the dollar value was lower, the funding would be taken from the miscellaneous fund, but now that the ask has grown it needs to be its own line item.

Hegland asked how much it cost to distribute one mailed newsletter, as she saw \$2,000 budgeted. Mursko said she only scheduled one mailed newsletter, which will cost the full \$2,000, predominantly in postage. Hegland asked how many email addresses the City had in its database. Keith said it depends on the list that people have signed up for, but that the newsletter had approximately 130 signups compared to the larger lists that had nearly 270 signups. Given the low number of emails, Hegland said she'd be interested in mailing two newsletters in 2023. Mursko suggested the newsletters also be sent to Columbus businesses.

5. **Adjournment**

Motion by Preiner to adjourn. Seconded by Hegland. Roll call vote: Logren – aye; Wagamon – aye; Hegland – aye; Preiner – aye. Motion carries.

Meeting adjourned at 8:30.

Respectfully submitted:

Connor Keith, Public Communications Coordinator