

Holmen Area Fire District

Meeting Minutes – August 29th, 2024

Jeff Herlitzke called the Holmen Area Fire District meeting to order at 6:30 pm on August 29th, 2024 at the Town of Holland Town Hall.

Members Present: Doug Jorstad (Holmen), Travis Elam (Holmen), Rick Hauser (Holland), Jeff Herlitzke (Holland)

Alternates Present: Micah Wyss

Members Excused:

Also Present: Ryan Ostreng (Fire Chief)

Guests: Fire department staff

Pledge of Allegiance Recited

Approval of Meeting Minutes:

Jorstad stated that he would like to see alternate members of the fireboard noted on future meeting notes. Motion by Jorstad, second by Hauser. Herlitzke abstained. Motion passed unanimously.

Resident or Employee Concerns/Comments:

None.

Financial Review:

Jorstad (Treasurer) presented a general fund summary.

Jorstad stated that for the financial year the department was at 57.6% of the budget.

Check detail was reviewed by the board. Jorstad noted the largest purchase was for new tires for one of the engines at Goodyear. Ostreng stated that nothing was notable and that checks presented were the standard recurring expenses.

Ostreng stated that the department applied and was awarded the Assistance to Firefighter's Grant (AFG). Ostreng stated that La Crosse was the one to submit the grant when they were previously overseeing the department. The total amount awarded is \$113,318.18 with HAFD contributing 10% for a total of \$11,331.81. Ostreng stated that when the grant was applied for, certain areas of the grant had to be specifically designated. Ostreng stated that roughly \$17,000 was designated for personal expenses and training, \$86,000 in equipment, and \$21,000 in supplies. Ostreng stated that he didn't believe he would be able to spend the total grant amount in the time allotted. Ostreng stated that he was requesting a waiver of the purchase policy of \$2500 for any items that were specifically for the grant. Ostreng stated he was concerned that waiting for board approval

every month would result in lost opportunities. Jorstad asked where the \$11,331.81 would come from. Ostreng stated he intended to take it out of capital expenditures. Hauser asked what Ostreng planned on doing with the funds. Ostreng stated the department was in desperate need of new hoses, PPE, hand tools, defibrillators, hazmat training and other training. Hauser asked when the department would be getting the money. Ostreng stated that it was a submittal process, and that the department would pay the cost upfront and then be reimbursed by the grant. Hauser asked if the money from the grant would be coming in before the end of the year. Ostreng stated the grant funds end in February or March of 2025. Hauser asked what we would do with the money reimbursed from the grant if it was already allocated in the budget. Ostreng stated the reimbursement funds would go into the departments savings, because money does not get reallocated towards the budget. Elam asked if the department would be able to spend the money before the grant ended in 2025, and if there was enough in the 2024 budget to cover the cost of the expenditures while the department waited to be reimbursed. Ostreng stated that he did not intend to go overbudget, and that he would try to utilize the grant to its capacity. Ostreng stated that he would work with the department's accountant to allocate funds appropriately.

Herlitzke moved to temporarily waive the \$2,500 invoice approval threshold through the end of 2024, contingent upon the invoices being exclusively for supplies and equipment related to the AFG grant, with the understanding that the board would receive a list of potential items in advance, along with memos for any purchases made. Second by Jorstad. Motion carried unanimously.

Fire Administration Report:

Ostreng stated there were 98 calls for the month of July, down 3 calls from the previous year. Ostreng stated the department had a total of 634 calls year to date which is down 97 from the previous year. Ostreng stated the call volume is similar to 2020/2021. Ostreng stated there seems to be some discrepancies between La Crosse's ImageTrend and the department's ImageTrend software, but in general the numbers should be very close to actual calls.

Ostreng stated that the department is fully staffed, and that Monday night the Fire Commission welcomed McKay Wolsey to the department. Ostreng stated that there was a badge exchange for Myranda Antony and Davis Wilson. Ostreng stated that the employees have successfully completed their one-year probationary period and emphasized that all promotions require a mandatory one-year probation. Ostreng stated that it was his intention to assign unique badge numbers to all personnel, beginning with the department's first firefighter at its founding, up to the present, assuming records support it.

Ostreng stated that La Crosse decided to stop providing services for the department's vehicles. Ostreng stated that La Crosse was previously giving us a good deal and now the department is transitioning to DeBauche. Ostreng stated that the department has used

DeBauche in the past for maintenance and that they could handle the department's needs. Ostreng stated that any warranty issues with our engines would be handled by a different company. Hauser questioned if DeBauche was charging us the same rate as La Crosse. Ostreng stated that DeBauche would be charging us more than La Crosse was previously. Ostreng stated that La Crosse was mainly doing oil changes and chassis greasing for the engines. Ostreng stated that DeBauche is used by a lot of fire departments in the area.

Ostreng stated that rescue 1 had its tires replaced and balanced at Goodyear. Ostreng stated that engine 1 has had persistent door alarm codes firing since the department bought the vehicle. Ostreng stated that the truck had previously been sent back to Reliant Apparatus for warranty and upon receiving the truck back fired the door alarms again. Ostreng stated department staff attempted to fix the sensor issue and haven't had any problems since. Ostreng stated that engine 1 lost a seal on one of the front tires and was leaking oil which resulted in sending the engine back to DeBauche for additional maintenance.

Ostreng stated the department was able to do their water rescue training at the Holmen Aquatic Center. Ostreng expressed his gratitude to the pool and stated that the department really enjoyed the opportunity.

Ostreng stated the public education group was meeting next week to plan for an open house for fire prevention week. Ostreng stated the department was also getting ready to be doing school visits soon.

Ostreng stated that he will be meeting soon with the Onalaska fire chief, and the work group they selected, to discuss the next steps with the shared fire investigation group.

Jorstad reiterated previous comments on the necessity for a vehicle replacement plan and brought up the department's tender. Jorstad noted that the department was previously having issues with the vehicle and wanted an update on it. Jorstad stated that the board would like advanced notice on future vehicle replacement costs.

Ostreng stated that, although the tender is fixed, it still needs to be replaced at some point and that it would be the departments next big expense. Ostreng stated that he has the start of a vehicle replacement plan. Ostreng stated that he is trying to get an apparatus group together to look at options and to get the vehicle replacement plan put together. Ostreng stated that it was his intentions to start that early next year. Hauser questioned if the department could keep the tender and purchase a new one when the time came instead of replacing it. Ostreng stated that he did not want to keep the current tender, and that the engine carry 2000 gallons of water on them and they are effectively a second tender. Ostreng stated that when a fire call is responded to, a total of 4000 gallons of water is brought to the call between the engine and the tender. Jorstad inquired about the main issue with the tender and asked if it had to do with the tank or mechanical issues. Herlitzke

stated the tender previously had a tank leak that was plastic welded in the past and hasn't had issues since. Ostreng stated there was also a frame issue.

Fire Commission Report:

Ostreng stated that the commission recently approved the job description for fire engineer. Ostreng stated that in the future there is a lot of content that can probably be removed from the description and that it should probably receive legal review as well. Ostreng stated the commission decided to terminate a paid-on-call staff, and that the department was down to only 2 paid-on-call staff for the time being.

Future Fire Station Study:

Ostreng stated that he met with Bob Stupi and Patrick Barlow today to review the 5 proposals that came in and that together they eliminated 2 of the proposals for consideration. Ostreng stated that a second round of interviews with the 3 remaining companies would happen next week and that by the next meeting a recommendation would be brought to the fire board for approval. Elam asked if Ostreng had received any cost estimates from the 3 companies. Ostreng stated that all 3 remaining proposals would be under \$30,000. Hauser asked if the Chief or the proposed companies had spoken to Onalaska about their fire station study. Ostreng stated that it was his intention to make that cooperation with Onalaska a talking point of the second round of the selection process.

2025 Budget Draft:

Board reviewed budge draft sheet provided.

Ostreng stated that the 2025 proposed budget included two drafts. Ostreng stated that draft 1 was shot down rapidly by Village Administrator Heinig. Ostreng stated that draft 2 was the response to the feedback on draft 1 after cutting lots of expenses. Ostreng stated that a lot of the increase in draft 1 was from an anticipated assistant fire chief position and lot of overtime for training. Ostreng stated that it was his intention to have his staff specialize in certain areas to distribute the departments workload. Ostreng provided an example of overtime training that was 18 hours that is required by ISO that every firefighter must meet the requirements for. Ostreng further stated that he intended to do more specialty training like water rescue, low angle rescue, and confined space training with the increase in budget for overtime in draft 1. Ostreng stated the assistant fire chief and additional overtime training were the main things that were cut from draft 2. Ostreng also stated that he would also have to cut the public education programs in draft 2. Jorstad questioned how far over budget draft 2 was based on the agreed upon contributions from the Village of Holmen. Ostreng stated the budget was roughly \$16,000 over budget still. Ostreng stated that with draft 2, each municipality would see an increase in cost of 9.2% in operational budget. Ostreng stated that the 2025 budge doesn't include funds from 2%

dues to balance the budget. Ostreng stated that he hated the 2025 draft 2 budget and that it didn't move the department forward. Ostreng stated that there was no improvement path for employees that want to move up in the department and gain experience and knowledge.

Jorstad reminded the board that the both municipalities were impacted greatly when the Town of Onalaska decided to leave the Holmen Area Fire District. Jorstad stated that the Town of Onalaska's actions prevented the Village of Holmen from changing their referendum due to it already being approved by the state. Jorstad stated the Town of Onalaska made the decision to pull out of the HAFD contract 2 days before the vote on the referendum. Jorstad stated that had this not been the case, it would have been possible to increase funding for the department. Ostreng stated that the department needed to move on from that and that it need to look toward the future.

Herlitzke stated the Town of Holland board would need to review the budget and how much funding to put toward the 2025 HAFD budget. Herlitzke stated he agreed with the chief and thought the board needed to spend money to move the department forward. Herlitzke stated that the town was frustrated that fire district's budget was being dictated by one man. Herlitzke stated that every year the Town of Holland wants to put more money into the district but they can't. Herlitzke requested that the Village of Holmen representatives request more funding for the department from administrative staff and the rest of the board. Herlitzke stated the Village of Holmen is growing fast and will need more protection.

Ostreng asked if there was any mechanism to collect more funds from the new developments that are being created in the Village of Holmen. Ostreng stated that draft 1 of the budget was a lot, but he wanted to demonstrate the funds needed to grow the department. Hauser stated that one thing that would help the board, would be a white paper on the projected growth of the fire department and the needs of that department to meet the demands of the growing area. Ostreng stated that the future fire station study would answer some of those questions. Ostreng stated the department is currently operating well with 4 staff per shift, split in two, to cover medical calls if necessary. Ostreng stated that issues arise with larger structure fires. Ostreng stated that the department currently relies on mutual aid in these scenarios and is unable to cover medical calls during these times. Ostreng stated that, based on national averages, the district's number of firefighters per capita was only half of what it should be. Hauser stated that type of information needed to be presented before the district's boards. Ostreng stated that it was his intentions to put that type of information up on the HAFD website.

Jorstad asked if anyone knew what the Town of Onalaska transitioned to instead of the levy to fund their fire protection. Herlitzke stated that they went through the state and that the Town of Onalaska's residents pay a special tax to pay for their fire protection that isn't based on the levy. Herlitzke stated that because of this, there is no cap for what the town can charge residents for fire protection. Herlitzke stated there were various pros and cons

of that solution and that Bob Stupi could provide additional information on the subject. Ostreng stated there is also a public safety supplemental tax but he was not very familiar with that solution. Ostreng also reminded the board that contract negotiation would be coming up soon.

Ostreng stated that he did not want to remove anything else from the 2025 draft 2 budget.

Elam questioned the proposed increase in the budget from 2024 to 2025, and noted an almost 20% increase in the draft 1 budget. Elam clarified that the comments about the budget from Village of Holmen's administrative staff were most likely from seeing the large increase in the budget so close to the Village's annual budget meeting. Elam stated that he would be alarmed to see a 20% increase in any budget. Elam stated that he understood where the increases were coming from, and that the only thing the Chief could do was ask for the increase in funding and deal with the result from the board. Elam suggested that moving forward there needed to be more communication between the Town of Holland and the Village of Holmen ahead of time. Elam stated that the early communication could hopefully get both communities on the same page for a specific percentage increase in funding. Elam stated that the needs of the communities are slightly different and noted the lack of fire hydrants in the Town of Holland as an example. Elam stated that these differences in the fire response only reinforce the idea behind agreeing on an increase sooner to meet the needs of both communities. Hauser reiterated that a growth plan would also help these discussions moving forward because the needs of the department would be clear.

Ostreng stated that he does want to create a strategic plan and that he had reached out to a handful of acquaintances regarding firms that could help develop a plan. Ostreng reiterated that such things could be delegated to an assistant fire chief if the position existed. Ostreng reiterated the size of his work load and the lack of time to accomplish everything on it by himself.

Herlitzke summarized the benefits of regionalization with more municipalities and suggested the board start having more discussions about this sooner rather than later so that the department could be funded by more than just the Town of Holland and Village of Holmen. Ostreng stated that with the new future fire station study the relationships between all of the local municipalities need to be reinvigorated so that all residents could benefit from a cooperative study. Ostreng gave an example of a different district that took 10 years to regionalize and stated that it wasn't a quick process. Ostreng stated that the department would see change over in the chief ranks in Onalaska and the Village of Holmen within 5 years. Ostreng gave a brief summary of what the structure of a regionalized department would look like.

Herlitzke stated that it looked like an assistant fire chief wasn't in the budget for the coming year. Ostreng stated that it would be on the budget again for next year. Herlitzke asked if Ostreng would consider a part time assistant to help out with the administrative

tasks. Ostreng stated that there were places he could use an administrative assistant, however an administrative assistant would need items such as a computer, desk, chair, etc. and the draft 2 budget was very tight and didn't have any wiggle room for another part-time employee.

Ostreng stated that he forgot to mention something about the budget the board needed to be aware of and that was the employee retirement sick accrual payout. Ostreng stated that in order for the department to safely cover this expense the budget has to include \$17,000 a year for the next 5 years before reducing the amount paid into that line item. Ostreng stated that per contract, department employees get 50% of accrual upon retirement. Ostreng stated that there were 3 employees that could be retiring in the next 3 to 5 years. Jorstad questioned if there was a cap on the total payout for employees. Ostreng stated he thought it was 1920 hours that could be paid out per employee. Jorstad stated that was almost a year's wages for a department employee. Ostreng stated the intended use for the payout is some sort of health savings account but that isn't something the department has established. Ostreng stated the department has only had one employee retire and they received a lump sum from their accrued hours. Ostreng stated that department staff earn 208 hours a year if they use none of them for sick leave or personal business. Ostreng stated that staff receives 8 hours per pay period and the chief receives 4 hours per pay period.

Elam asked about the \$80,000 the department borrowed from itself and where that was in the budget because it was previously discussed the department would pay itself back. Jorstad state there was a line item but it was for \$36,000. Ostreng stated that in addition to that the department had \$40,000 left over from the previous year's budget sitting in savings. Herlitzke stated that the department was in a good place to reimburse itself by next year, so there shouldn't need to be a line item for the repayment in the 2025 budget.

Hauser stated that he was concerned that the draft 2 budget reduced conventions and conferences from \$10,000 to \$2700. Hauser stated that there were very few things more important than training and education in a job like firefighting. Hauser stated he would like to see this area of the budget increase instead of decrease. Hauser asked if we could use some of the money from the AFG grant to cover these expenses so funding wouldn't have to be cut. Ostreng stated that wasn't possible because the AFG grant was very specific on what the funds could be allocated for and that the grant funds would run out before the majority of the conventions and conferences would take place. Ostreng stated there wasn't enough in the budget for such things and that he had 4222 hours of minimum staffing he was required to cover. Ostreng stated that just the minimum required staffing amounted to \$145,000. Ostreng stated the he also tries to account for training off shift which is also time and a half. Jorstad stated that the total cost of all the overtime is comparable to hiring an additional full-time employee. Jorstad stated it might make sense to hire more fulltime staff instead of paying the time and a half for overtime. Ostreng stated that he is looking at creating a floating captain position that could handle some of these

issues and reduce the overtime cost. Ostreng stated that La Cross currently has a floating captain position that is working well for them.

Ostreng stated that he was on the fence about the command vehicle and is hoping the vehicle in total will come in around \$100,000. Ostreng stated that he still hoped to squeeze the vehicle in under capital expenditures instead of the proposed budget. Ostreng stated he could pay for part of the vehicle with 2% dues. Herlitzke stated that the Town of Holland still wanted to take out a loan for their portion of the vehicle. Jorstad stated that he talked to the Village of Holmen's administrator 2 months ago about the vehicle and what the administrator's opinion was of how to pay for the vehicle. Ostreng stated that he got the feeling there was a concern on the cost so he reached out to administrator Heinig as well. Ostreng stated that he was concerned he might lose the vehicle if it wasn't purchased in 2024. Herlitzke asked if the department was on a waiting list for the vehicle. Ostreng stated that he was on a waiting list. Ostreng stated that he could have picked up a ford already but wanted the capacity of a suburban as previously stated.

Announcements and Future Agenda Items:

Elam stated that he had not received an update on the MOU with the county for medical dispatch.

Next Regular Meeting Date:

Next regular meeting September 24th, 2024 at 6:30pm at Town of Holland Town Hall.

Adjourn:

Motion to adjourn Jorstad/Elam. Motion carried unanimously.

Minutes by Travis E. Elam, Secretary