

## County fire, EMS work group set

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JEFFERSON — A work group of municipal and town officials and fire and EMS personnel is being organized to discuss growing concerns about emergency services in Jefferson County.

An increasing number of calls, but declining number of paid-on-call firefighters responding to them, is a growing problem for most fire departments throughout the area.

During the past few years, concerns have been expressed by municipal and town government officials and through the Jefferson County Board of Supervisors via their constituents in both of the rural and urban areas.

“We know this is a growing concern,” Jefferson County Administrator Ben Wehmeier said.

He pointed out that there are training concerns in terms of what the paid-on-call firefighters or EMTs are expected to do with their time, as well as staffing concerns during the week because many people work out of town.

In addition, Wehmeier noted that the rising cost of rescue equipment continues to be an issue for all the departments.

The county was asked to serve as a facilitator of sorts, offering the broader perspective for the group to come together and discuss the issues.

“I think the intent is making sure we get the different perspectives of municipalities, townships, and fire and EMS,” Wehmeier said. “I think it is the essence of everything coming together and everyone saying, ‘hey, let’s have a joint conversation.’”

As proposed, the intent would be to have three representatives each from municipalities, towns, and fire and EMS services.

No date has been set for the first session of the work group. However, the county administrator hopes to kick off any sessions in June.

“There are a lot of moving pieces that just don’t stop at jurisdictional boundaries within the county,” Wehmeier said.

To date, without getting into specifics, Wehmeier said, those who have been approached seem interested in beginning the conversations.

“It doesn’t mean the current system is not where we’re going to stay; however, in the long term, how do we create those conversations and what does our three to five year horizon look like?” he

said. “For some of the concerns we’re facing today, where is that going to be in three to five year? Does that accelerate the need to have the conversation now? You start looking at the studies where these things have taken place already and you’re talking about years upon years of looking at the best outcomes and looking at the best solutions.”

The county administrator acknowledged that this is not a scenario in which this group will come together and find a solution within the first few meetings. Much of the discussion will hinge on how the state intends to address the issue.

Recently, a state Legislative Council Study Committee was formed to take a closer look at staffing issues facing rural and paid-on-call volunteer firefighters and other rescue personnel.

The idea for the study arose when the Watertown Fire Department and other local emergency responders approached area legislators — including state Sen. Scott Fitzgerald, R-Juneau, and state Rep. John Jagler, R-Watertown — to urge the state to examine the changing needs of rural fire departments.

Watertown Fire Chief Greg Michalek suggested that the state consider creating fire districts in Wisconsin.

Within a fire district organizational system, an independently controlled body with taxing authority staffs and funds the fire department across an area. The system is used in multiple states, including neighboring Illinois.

Currently, the majority of Jefferson County-area fire departments rely on mutual aid through the Mutual Aid Box Alarm System (MABAS) from neighboring communities when staffing is lacking during a response to a fire scene.

MABAS is a preplanned method of mutual aid requests utilized by emergency services personnel in Wisconsin and other states. Under a MABAS box alarm, a prescribed amount of equipment from within a department’s geographic area is sent for mutual aid.

Opinions vary on the potential benefits of either a countywide or district-style fire service protection model. It is not clear that such a model would save money or actually address the staffing shortages.

Currently, most of the Jefferson County-area departments primarily have paid-on-call volunteers, with Fort Atkinson, Lake Mills and Watertown having at least one full-time staffer.

Many area departments have at least, in part, had some recent discussions about staffing concerns by their respective city councils or other elected bodies during the past couple years.

Both Whitewater and Milton have undertaken an analysis of their services.

In addition, Waukesha County is going through a study on the western portion of its county, which potentially would have an impact on Jefferson County's eastern communities due to services regularly provided by Dousman EMS and Oconomowoc EMS.

"I don't think we can come in and say there is any preconceived notion of what the solution is," Wehmeier said. "Obviously, depending where in the county it is, they (cities, towns and fire/EMS services) have different concerns, as well as great things going on too with their respective services."

He said it is not clear whether any action by the state committee will change perspectives on the current status or alter some of the training criteria or the flexibility in statute for communities to work together in terms of regional organization.

"A lot of those are just moving pieces," the county administrator said, noting that funding is going to be an issue no matter what is discussed.

For now, he said, the first step is to review the data on call volume, equipment needs, town and municipal fire contracts, overall dollars spent and more.

"In some cases, we have gotten great value from the paid-on-call firefighters versus a full-time staff," Wehmeier said.

However, he said, the struggle is determining how to maintain that model versus looking at full-time or paid-on-premises and how to cover the cost.

"The feedback I'm getting is we need to have that conversation with everybody," Wehmeier said.