

**HAMEL FIRE TRANSITION STUDY GROUP WORK SESSION MINUTES OF
SEPTEMBER 25, 2019**

Hamel Fire Transition Study Group members met on September 25, 2019 at 7:00 a.m. at the Hamel Fire Station.

I. Call to Order

Members present: Mayor Kathleen Martin, Council Member Dino DesLauriers, Hamel Fire Chief Jeff Ruchti, Assistant Hamel Fire Chief Mario Fabrizio, Public Safety Director Ed Belland, Assistant City Administrator Jodi Gallup, and City Administrator Scott Johnson

Members absent:

II. Updates on Action Items

Mario Fabrizio provided an update on fire relief association information and possible shared services grants. Fabrizio spoke to the person at the State Auditor's office in charge of fire relief associations. Fabrizio was informed that other fire relief funds have changed hands from private 501(c)(3) entities to city control through changes in by-laws, rechartering, and following provisions set out under Minnesota Statutes. Hamel Fire Department's current relief association meets approximately one time per year and there is not a lot of activity. The City of Medina is required by statute to have two representatives attend the fire relief meetings. Fabrizio will ask Tom Manning to send the meeting notices to the City of Medina for future meetings.

The Hamel Fire Department Relief Association has two accounts, the special and the general fund. The special fund is used specifically for pensions and it is funded from the Minnesota State Fire Aid payment, which comes from the 2% of fire insurance premiums collected and an annual fire department contribution. All contributions to the special fund must come from public money. The state aid allocations for each fire department are updated each year by the state. Hamel Fire Department Relief Association receives approximately \$41,000 per year from the State, which is deposited in the special fund. The general fund is made up of donations and fundraising. This fund also pays for the annual audit. A relief association form is sent yearly to the State Auditor. The form includes the liabilities, interest and funds for the relief association. The relief association is a defined benefit plan which is requested by its by-laws. The amount per year of service paid in 2019 is \$5,200. Initial pension vesting begins after 5 years at 50%, follows a tiered process based on years of service to a maximum 100% at 20 years. A member needs to be 55 years of age or older to receive a payout. The relief association is currently approximately 130% funded. By-laws require funding at 110%.

Fabrizio asked the State Fire Marshal's office about using a shared service grant for planning purposes to make services more effective, efficient, and could possibly lead to larger joint powers agreements in the future. The 2020 grant application process closes in December. Fabrizio will look into the grant application process further.

Jodi Gallup provided a synopsis of the information memo received from the League of Minnesota Cities on Fire Department Management and Liability Issues. Gallup discussed possible human resources impacts from a municipal fire department. Specifically, she discussed possible changes in procedures, record keeping, data practices/retention, competitive bidding for purchases, extra requirements based on number of full-time employees (FTEs) (50 FTEs is a triggering point), worker compensation, first reports of injury, OSHA training, Veterans Preference, selection process for firefighters/leadership positions, alcohol policy, PERA, and Social Security.

There was a question about “0 Tolerance” for alcohol. Fabrizio informed the group that the Hamel Fire Department is sensitive to the alcohol issue and has a specific policy in place to address the issue. There was a group discussion about the difficulty, challenges and practicality of a “0 Tolerance” approach. Having a glass of wine with dinner and then receiving a call was used as an example. Hamel Fire Department leadership watches personnel closely on this issue. Any member responding to the station for a call that is suspected of not being 100% will be kept at the station.

Gallup will provide a chart and Medina’s Personnel Policy to the Hamel Fire Department for designation of what aspects of City and Hamel Fire Department personnel policies are aligned or which would require further study and possible changes prior to the next meeting.

Mayor Kathy Martin provided the draft Medina 10-year Projected Fire Capital spreadsheet to the group. She explained that at some point Medina will incur the additional costs for the chiefs. It is not the City’s goal to disturb the other fire departments that serve Medina at this time. Hiring a part-time fire chief as a start would allow Medina to be proactive on city needs and determine what is needed for fire and emergency services. The economy of scale is difficult to address. Medina would still need to address personnel, facility costs, and the rationale for the City providing for acquiring the department and chief. The City would control fire issues by having its own department.

Council Member Dino DesLauriers explained to the group that there will be more expense to the City of Medina with fire services. He asked how the City would address recruiting personnel.

Fabrizio agreed that what was being discussed would not address recruitment of more personnel, and that issue exists regardless of the model used. Further, the investments in the fire service will increase for Medina whether this project proceeds or not. Facility needs, dedicated leadership, potential day crews will all be needed whether Hamel stays as a separate entity or transitions to a municipal department. The can has been kicked down the road for over 15 years and Council regularly had been made aware of the impending need for investments in the fire service since 2014. This is a Medina issue that Medina can deal with now or continue to push it down the road which will only increase the costs and make it more difficult. Everyone agreed that at some point, Medina should have its own fire service. The problem of leadership, membership, and

capital can be addressed more easily under a municipal fire model because the city would be directly investing in itself and its future rather than giving money to other entities. The current model does not ensure that Medina investments will directly benefit Medina citizens and Medina may not have a strong voice in how they are used. This is a problem today under the current fire model and is easier to fix today than in the future.

Martin expressed concern over the fire expenses. She further discussed details of the advantages and disadvantages of a municipal fire department. Martin asked if grant funding was worth pursuing.

DesLauriers thought grant funding was worth pursuing. This would provide an independent person to evaluate options. DesLauriers talked about looking at all options not just the transition of Hamel to a municipal department.

Fabrizio reminded the group to be careful about scope creep when studying consultant services. The Hamel Fire Board request for this study group, and the approval from the Medina City Council, was specifically related to transitioning from an independent to a municipal fire department. Fabrizio stated that the Hamel Fire Board will not support any expansion of that scope and that they were not at all interested in wasting time and effort on reviewing options that have been attempted and rejected in the past.

DesLauriers agreed that the group did not want to go down any rabbit holes. He was very concerned about trying to solve firefighter recruitment issues and addressing future leadership.

Fabrizio reminded the group that these issues exist today. Medina will need to fix these issues if the Hamel Fire Department ceased to exist. It is easier to fix as a municipal department. Fixing as a municipality will provide Medina more control over fire services.

DesLauriers mentioned that Loretto Fire Department is at full-staff with 35 firefighters and brought up the possibility of them providing more coverage in Medina.

Fabrizio explained that while that was interesting, the call volume for Medina, location of calls and demands for response time are such that it requires people close to the epicenter to respond. While theoretically possible to cover a remote area, it is not practical and would have a severe impact on response and other potential issues.

Martin further discussed that if the Hamel Fire Department could not serve the City and it closes now; the other cities and fire departments could hold Medina hostage during fire negotiations.

Belland informed the group that he would send out a copy of the recent Corcoran Fire Study to provide background and for information on how much other similar sized cities are paying for fire services in our area.

DesLauriers commented that it is easier for Medina to plan and control future fire costs if we own a fire department. He mentioned the recent Park Fund example for Medina.

Fabrizio suggested the next meeting look at possible next steps and putting a plan in place to move forward.

III. Assignments and Next Steps

Belland will send out a copy of the recent Corcoran Fire Study for the group.

Gallup will send out an HR checklist and the personnel policy for Hamel Fire review, look into determining full-time equivalents, and contact the City of Long Lake with follow-up questions.

Adjournment at 8:05 a.m.