



WESTERN LAKES FIRE DISTRICT

FAQs

1. Why do we need a referendum now?

With calls for service up 74% and local paid-on-call staffing down 69%, WLFD is challenged with increased response times that put residents, and their property, at risk. Additionally, every year, WLFD loses an average of 40 part-time staff members as they obtain full-time employment or take higher-paying jobs, including with other fire departments. The majority of WLFD's part-time staff are paid just \$14 an hour. WLFD needs additional full-time staff and increased wages for existing staff to keep pace with the growing demands for its services. However, because of state-imposed levy limits, municipalities within the District must receive approval from voters through a referendum to authorize an increase to the tax levy to fund the services.

These challenges are not unique to WLFD. In fact, in October 2021 the Wisconsin Policy Forum, the state's leading source of nonpartisan, independent research on state and local public policy found that growing numbers of fire and emergency medical services (EMS) agencies in Wisconsin are struggling to maintain appropriate service levels in the face of numerous challenges, including increasing service calls from an aging population and staff recruitment and retention difficulties tied to a reduction in availability of paid-on-call staff. The Municipalities served by the District are not alone with this need, in April of 2022 there were seven other Fire/EMS staffing referendums in Wisconsin; all of which were approved.

2. How much additional funds does WLFD need?

Increasing staffing levels and wages will require an additional \$6.3 million each year shared across WLFD communities that receive fire services, based on a funding formula that accounts for a community's calls for service, population, the value of their facilities, and land value. On the August 9, 2022 ballot, voters will be asked if they approve increased property taxes to fund WLFD.

Municipality	2023 Funding Formula Allocation	Total Community Share of Increase	Annual Property Tax Increase per \$100K	Monthly Impact per \$100K
City of Oconomowoc	35.48%	\$2,238,470	\$80.10	\$6.68
Town of Merton	18.87%	\$1,196,837	\$66.24	\$5.52
Town of Oconomowoc	17.30%	\$1,091,475	\$62.65	\$5.22
Town of Ottawa	6.90%	\$435,328	\$77.23	\$6.44
Village of Dousman	5.90%	\$372,237	\$160.14	\$13.35
Village of Lac La Belle	1.60%	\$100,946	\$74.30	\$6.19
Village of Summit	13.85%	\$873,811	\$82.47	\$6.87

3. What will the additional \$6.3M fund?

If community referendums are approved by a majority of voters, WLFD will **improve staffing and increase wages** to bring fire and EMS capabilities in line with national standards and best practices, resulting in:

- **Additional staff, including:**
 - 33 additional in-station firefighter / paramedics (11 per shift across the WLFD footprint), eliminating the need to wait for paid-on-call staff to arrive before staff respond to a call;
 - 3 additional battalion chiefs (one per shift);
 - 15 internship positions (positions are not new, but new Department of Labor regulations require that intern positions be paid);
 - 1 full-time administrative assistant; and
 - 1 additional fire inspector.
- **Increased wages to maintain current staff and avoid staff departures to other departments, be competitive in the market and enhance staff recruitment.**

4. How, specifically, will this additional \$6.3 million be used to fund additional positions and wage increases?

Breakdown of Recommended Funding	
Adding 33 full-time firefighters / paramedics	\$4,125,617.02
Ensuring market-rate wages for existing 165 part-time / POC employees	\$695,343.00
Funding 15 paid interns in line with DOL requirements	\$566,979.53
Adding 3 full-time battalion Chiefs	\$453,517.50
Wage increases for existing 24 full-time firefighters / paramedics	\$276,672.00
Adding 1 full-time administrative assistant	\$99,682.50
Adding 1 full-time fire inspector	\$91,293.00
TOTAL:	\$6,309,104.55

5. A \$6.3M increase would more than double 2022 staff-related costs. Why does WLFD need that much money?

We are looking to add 33 full-time firefighters / paramedics - which translates to an additional 11 full-time firefighters each shift, spread across the entire WLFD footprint. These additional staff members, which would more than double our current number of full-time staff, would largely offset a significant reduction in available paid-on-call staff. These positions are necessary due to the decline in paid-on-call firefighters over the last two decades. Additionally, we have to make significant investments in wage increases if we want to fill those positions and retain our current staff. The staffing model for Fire/EMS has been broken for decades, and needs additional funds.

6. What happens if voters don't approve one WLFD community's referendum?

Ultimately, a decision will be made by the joint-owners of WLFD. It is likely that if a community's August referendum does not pass, it will need to consider alternate options for securing the funds needed for its share of WLFD service costs, which might include cuts to municipal services. Some communities may consider charging a fee for fire services.

7. How are residents impacted by the lack of staffing throughout the District?

Residents have seen a dramatic increase in response times for calls that require both an ambulance and fire apparatus, resulting in increased loss due to fire. Loss is not solely related to fire, but also water damage, smoke damage, gas explosions, and vehicle accidents, all of which are impacted by response times.

8. Is the increase in response times tied to consolidation? Weren't consolidations supposed to save money?

Consolidation led to necessary and immediate cost savings (\$8 million every 20 years from reduced capital spending) and also strengthened WLFD's EMS services. Response times would be even longer if it weren't for consolidations. Consolidations have increased the District's ability to provide services in the short term and provided an interim solution to identify and pursue a long-term funding solution.

9. Is the increase in calls for service tied to interfacility transports? If we cut those services, wouldn't it solve our problem?

Even without interfacility transports, WLFD experiences a 12% increase in emergency calls for service every single year. Interfacility transports are also up and require staff, but that's a good development - they generate revenue for the District that offsets others costs. If we stop providing this service, and as a result, don't collect the fee associated with it, it would not change the need for or level of additional funding, and might even increase the need. These services are not unique to WLFD, as there are several other departments in Waukesha County and throughout the State providing these services.

10. Were other staffing models considered?

Yes. Three models were considered by a work group tasked with determining the need and necessary funding: volunteer / paid-on-call based, hybrid and a fully career staff. The volunteer / paid-on-call model is at a crisis point statewide and has been on the decline the past two decades locally, so we considered a hybrid model that would still rely on paid-on-call staff, but would also provide the necessary funding for additional full time, in-station staff to ensure a response from each of the stations. This model will cost an additional \$6.3 million each year. A fully career model, which would leverage only full time firefighters and paramedics, would have required an additional \$10.5 million per year.

11. How did you determine you need 33 additional firefighters?

If funded, an additional 33 firefighters would result in 11 additional firefighters per shift spread across the five WLFD stations that provide fire services. That would mean that when a call comes in, each station would have the minimum level of staff already in-station to enable WLFD to immediately respond to the call and not wait for the arrival of paid-on-call staff.

12. Why do you need three additional battalion chiefs?

Battalion chiefs are necessary to serve as incident command for significant incidents, of which there has been an increase in recent years. Additionally, these individuals will be responsible for oversight of daily operations, calls, employees and training. The addition of 33 firefighters will necessitate additional management and oversight. Adding one battalion chief per shift (three total) will help serve this need.

13. Why do you need an additional fire inspector?

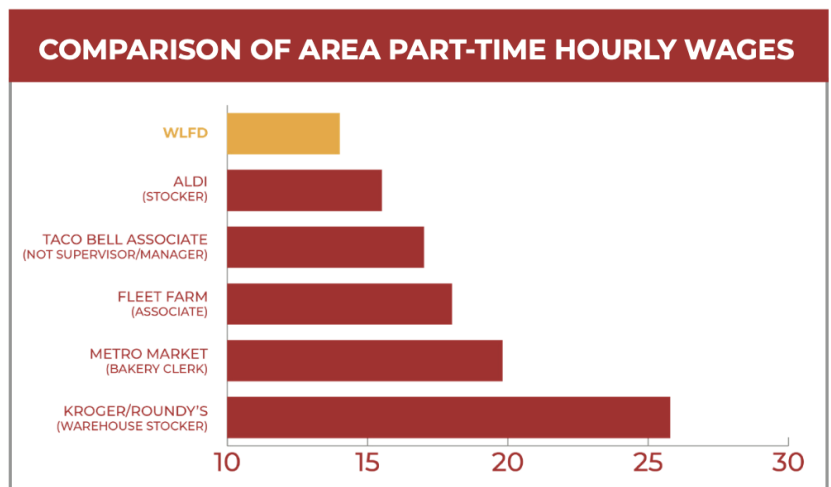
The Wisconsin Department of Safety and Professional Services requires annual inspections of public, commercial and multifamily occupancies. Currently WLFD is responsible for more than 3,000 annual inspections - and the number continues to rise as we see increased development throughout the community. These inspections are to ensure the safety of the employees and patrons of commercial occupancies and also aid in the prevention of catastrophic incidents.

14. Is investing in interns the best use of funds?

Yes. An internship program - which the Federal Department of Labor requires to be staffed through paid positions - is a great opportunity for WLFD. In paid interns, we can have dedicated staff at a significantly lower cost than part-time or full-time staffing. By leveraging paid interns as opposed to full-time staff, we save more than \$500,000 each year while also developing new candidates for potential future, long-term WLFD employment.

15. How did you determine the wages needed?

Wage increases were determined based on peer communities and the area job market. Every year, WLFD loses an average of 40 part-time staff members, largely due to higher-paying job opportunities including with other fire departments, or other hourly job opportunities in the community. The majority of WLFD's part-time firefighter and EMS staff are currently paid \$14 an hour. For comparison, a part-time hourly salary at local convenience stores range from \$15-\$25 an hour.



16. What will hourly wages be if funding is approved?

If funded, the hourly wage for the employees would range from \$17.93 to \$24 per hour depending on qualifications.

17. Is WLFD going to come back to us in a couple years saying more funds are needed?

WLFD has projected major staffing needs, and associated costs, for the next 10 years. We do not anticipate asking for a substantial funding increase for the foreseeable future. Part of the evaluation included the proposed growth and development in the municipalities to forecast the adequate staffing for the foreseeable future.

18. Is WLFD going to consolidate with Hartland Fire Department or Merton Community Fire Department?

There is no plan in place today to consolidate with these departments, but it could be considered by officials in these communities. Discussions have occurred regarding working together, but at this time the three will remain independent and work together to serve the township. Because the Town of Merton is serviced by the Merton Community Fire Department and Hartland Fire Department in addition to WLFD, Merton's community share of funds takes into account Fire / EMS throughout the township to ensure sustainable staffing across the three agencies.

19. Why wouldn't any of the additional funds be directed to Municipalities that only EMS services?

WLFD's EMS staffing and services are funded through contractual agreements based on the actual service costs and have not experienced the same challenges as fire services. These contracts fund the necessary staffing for EMS, and also generate revenues to offset those expenses. Increases to these municipalities are included within the contracts and take into account increased wages and costs. Fire staffing challenges and response times are tied to the need to have a specific number of staff available in-station to operate fire apparatuses when a call requires both ambulance and fire response. Ambulance deployment on its own does not require the same staffing levels.

20. Shouldn't property taxes from new development help offset the costs of additional staff?

Yes, and they do. However, they are not enough to support a shift from what was a predominantly paid-on-call staff to a more robust in-station, career-based staff, and the necessary wages it will take to recruit and retain these new positions.

21. If WLFD is unable to immediately hire all positions it has budgeted for with this increase, will taxes be reduced? If not, how will surplus funding be used?

WLFD has projected major staffing needs, and associated costs, for the next 10 years. Part of the evaluation included the proposed growth and development in the municipalities to forecast the adequate staffing for the foreseeable future. We anticipate all 33 new positions will not be added immediately in 2023 and have accounted for that when determining the annual increase needed. The funds not expended in year one or two, for example, will be saved and drawn from in future years as staff is added. Surplus funds can only be used for Fire/EMS costs, and could also be used to limit future increases or reduce capital improvement expenses on taxes.

22. Has a third-party evaluation been completed regarding the need?

WLFD has been part of three recent, third-party studies evaluating Fire and EMS services in the Counties we serve. WLFD participated in the [Waukesha County Fire/EMS Study](#), which began in 2016 as part of an initiative by the County Executive and Board to look at sustainable Fire/EMS in Waukesha County. This study was completed by Fitch and Associates. Again from 2019 to 2020, WLFD participated in the [Dodge County EMS Study](#), which analyzed the staffing models and sustainability of services in Dodge County. This study was completed by Strategic Management Consulting. Most recently, in 2020, WLFD participated in the [Jefferson County EMS Study](#) conducted by the Wisconsin Policy Forum.

All three studies were completed due to requests from municipalities to evaluate staffing and funding needs for public safety including Fire & EMS. Each study highlighted the efficiencies and benefits of consolidation and recommended further consolidations to reduce capital costs and improve services. The studies also

highlighted the need for increased funding to transition the staffing models of services from paid-on-call/volunteer to more career and paid part-time staff.

23. I received an updated property assessment. Will new assessments alter the tax impact of the proposed referendum?

Just because your new assessed value is higher does not mean that your taxes will be higher. If your new assessment is greater than or lower than the overall assessment change in your municipality, the tax impact you feel may be slightly different from the estimates we have shared.

As a rule, when the total assessed value of the municipality increases, the individual impact of the Fire Referendum will decrease. This is because the Fire Referendum is a fixed amount. Mill rates are calculated by taking the amount of funding needed and dividing by the total assessed value of the community. This gives us a mill rate, or rate per thousand dollars of value. If the total goes up and the amount of funding needed remains the same, the mill rate will decrease. As the assessed value of each community is recalculated, mill rates will be updated.

For example: If the average residential home in the community increases by 12%, the mill rate for the Referendum will decrease. If your home value increases by 12% the net effect is close to \$0. Your increased value multiplied by the lower Mill Rate should come out very close to the same as before the new assessment. However, if your home value changed significantly more or less than the overall rate, there will be an offsetting effect in cost.

As the assessed value of each community is recalculated, mill rates will be updated.

24. How are District-related decisions made?

Day-to-day WLF D operations are managed by the Fire Board, which is comprised of citizen members appointed to the board by the elected municipal board. The board members serving have diverse backgrounds in business management, finance, and public safety. Annual budgets and ordinances are governed by the municipal boards at each community.

25. Governor Evers recently announced that millions of dollars are available for EMS providers across Wisconsin. Will WLF D leverage that funding, and will that reduce the need requested via referendum?

Funding made available through the Wisconsin Department of Health Services through EMS Flex Grants is available to support the purchase of equipment necessary for emergency medical services. The grant is capped at \$200,000 and a one-time grant. The District will be applying for the grant for equipment needs in accordance with the guidelines, however, because WLF D's needs are staffing related, any grant funds received would not lower the amount requested via referendum. Annually the District applies for a variety of grants to assist with funding, and has had success with a number of these grants in the past.