

WESTERN LAKES FIRE DISTRICT

**ASSESSMENT OF FIRE/EMS NEEDS & FUNDING OPTIONS
MARCH 2022**



PREPARED BY:
Bradley Bowen, Fire Chief
Western Lakes Fire District

Western Lakes Fire District Overview

The Western Lakes Fire District has deep roots in Lake Country. In 1968, the Dousman Fire Department changed its name to the Dousman Fire District as it expanded its service area. That began a series of deeper partnerships among area communities to enhance fire protection service. In 2013, the Summit Fire District merged with the Dousman Fire District and in 2017, the City of Oconomowoc Fire Department and Dousman Fire District consolidated to become the Western Lakes Fire District (WLFD). In 2020, the Okauchee Fire Department and Stone Bank Fire Department consolidated and joined WLFD.



Together, WLFD serves a population of more than 54,500 from 11 municipalities in Waukesha, Jefferson and Dodge Counties. WLFD provides the following seven municipalities with both Fire and EMS services:

- City of Oconomowoc
- Town of Oconomowoc
- Town of Merton¹
- Town of Ottawa
- Village of Dousman
- Village of Lac La Belle
- Village of Summit

¹ WLFD provides Fire / EMS services to one-third of Town of Merton residents. Other residents are served by the Hartland Fire Department and the Merton Community Fire Department

And WLFD provides the following four municipalities with EMS services (these communities have their own fire departments):

- Town of Ashippun
- Town of Concord
- Town of Sullivan
- Village of Sullivan

The District's service area is a diverse mix of suburban and rural communities and covers approximately 215 square miles.

Included in the District are:



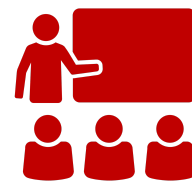
Two Hospitals



Interstate 94



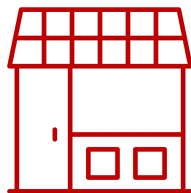
3 behavioral /
mental health
facilities



27 educational
institutions



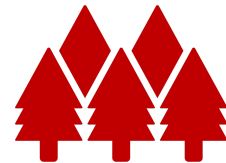
11 senior / specialty
care centers



Retail areas



Recreation
facilities



Kettle Moraine
State Forest

In 2021, the District responded to more than 6,500 calls for service. Calls include a mix of fire, emergency medical and high-acuity incidents (those requiring significant intervention).

In addition to providing fire and EMS services, the District provides speciality services such as water and dive rescue, search and rescue, and a rescue task force. The District also maintains an emergency rehabilitation unit that responds to large-scale incidents throughout the region.

Staffing Model

WLFD's staff is comprised of:

24

Full-time personnel

138

Part-time or paid-on-call
personnel²

15

Interns

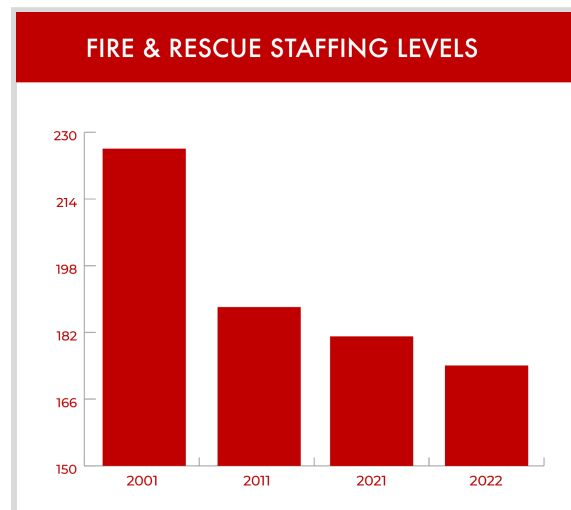
Each day, the District's six stations are staffed by a total of 20 personnel. **These 20 personnel are spread across six stations and serve the entire 215 square mile coverage area of WLFD.** In-station staff are a mix of full-time, part-time and intern staff and are supported by off-site paid-on-call staff. The National Fire Protection Association recommends 1.81 firefighters in-station per 1,000 residents. Currently, WLFD is at 0.56 in-station firefighters per 1,000 residents.

Daily In-Station Staffing by Station

Station	# of full-time staff per day	# of part-time staff per day	# of intern staff per day	Total daily staff
# 1: Pabst Farms	1	3	0	4
# 2: Dousman	1	2	1	4
# 3: Oconomowoc	1	2	1	4
# 4: Sullivan	0	1	1 (EMS only)	2
# 5: Okauchee	1	1	1	3
# 6: Stone Bank	1	1	1	3
TOTAL STAFF PER DAY ACROSS WLFD:	5	10	5	20

Full-time and intern staff work a "24-hours on, 48-hours off" schedule, while part-time staff work 12-hour shifts.

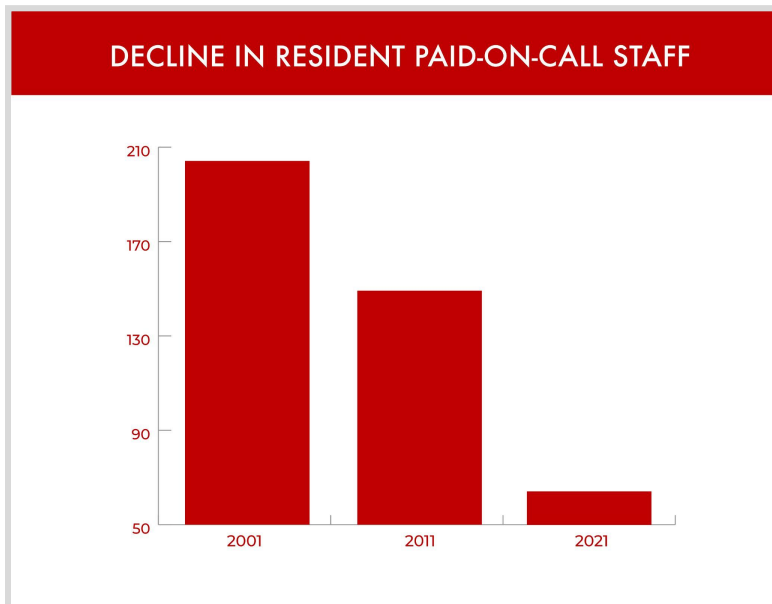
In 2001, the agencies that now make up the Western Lakes Fire District had a total of 226 staff (full-time, paid-on-call, and intern). In 2011, these communities had a total staff of 188. Ten years later, in 2021, WLFD had a total staff of 181. In 2022, it was even further reduced to 174 staff due in large part to



²Sometimes referred to as volunteer staff, paid-on-call personnel do not work at WLFD stations. They are notified when a call comes in, and respond if/when they are able to do so based on their other obligations. These staff are paid only for the time they spend responding to calls.

fewer available part-time and paid-on-call staff.

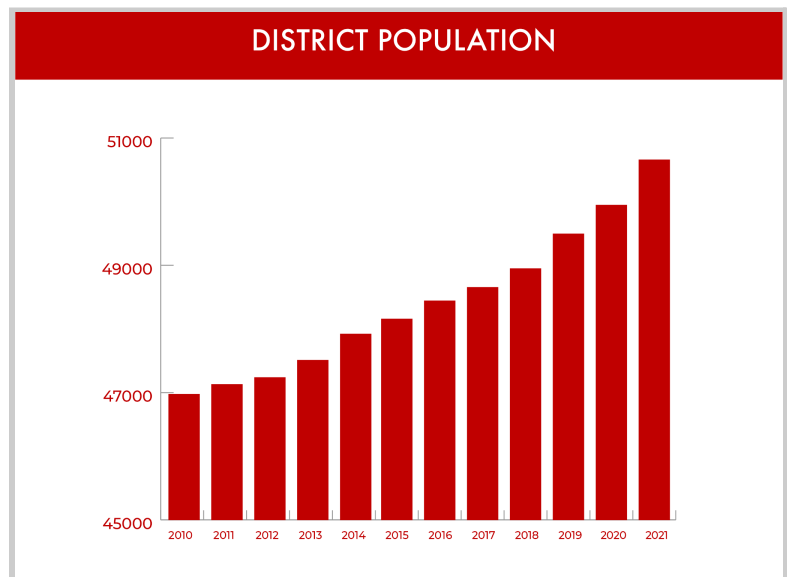
A total of **five staff members** are needed in order to respond to calls that require a fire truck and ambulance. **With current staffing, that means that in-station staff must wait for paid-on-call staff to arrive before they can respond to a call.**



Historically, paid-on-call staff were from the community. However since 2001, WLFD has seen a **69 percent decline in resident paid-on-call staff (those who live within five miles), dramatically increasing the time it takes for a paid-on-call staff member to report to the fire station when a call comes in.**

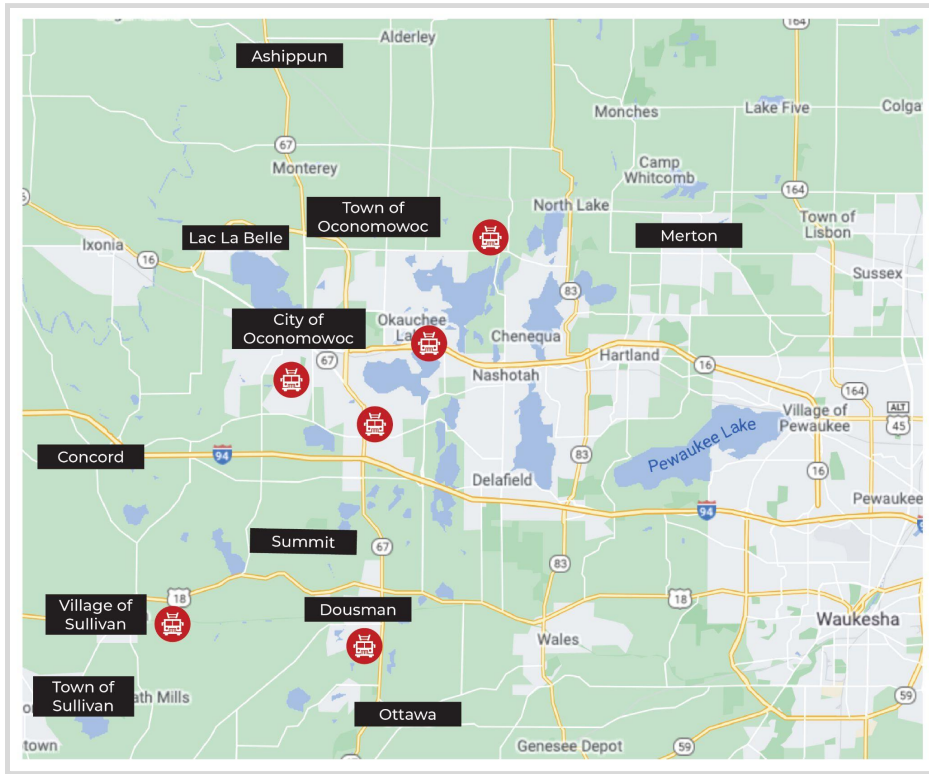
This delay impacts emergency calls for fires, car accidents, gas leaks and more.

Additionally, over the past decade, the District's communities have continued to thrive with the addition of multiple residential developments, commercial corridors, recreational facilities and specialty care facilities. As a result, **from 2011 to 2021, population within WLFD communities increased by more than 3,600 residents, a more than 7% increase. At the same time, WLFD staffing has declined by more than 7%.**



Staff is distributed among the District's six stations, serving the 215 square mile coverage area.

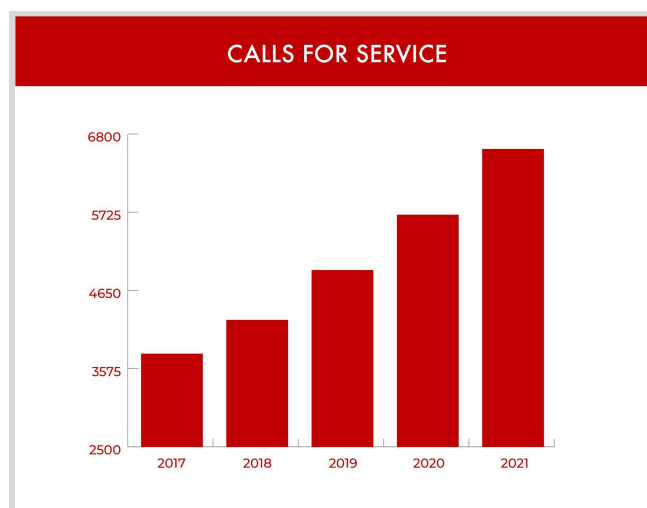
Fire Stations and Service Area



Growth in Calls for Service and Increased Response Times

Over the past decade, WLFD call volume has increased an average of 12% per year. In 2017, WLFD districts responded to 3,778 calls for fire and / or EMS service. In 2021, WLFD responded to 6,591 total calls for service, **an increase of more than 74% in just four years.**³

This trend is expected to continue as the region and its population continue to grow and develop, with the District expected to see nearly 10,000 calls per year by 2029.



³Due to consolidations and expansion of WLFD service areas over the years, service call data prior to 2017 is incomplete.

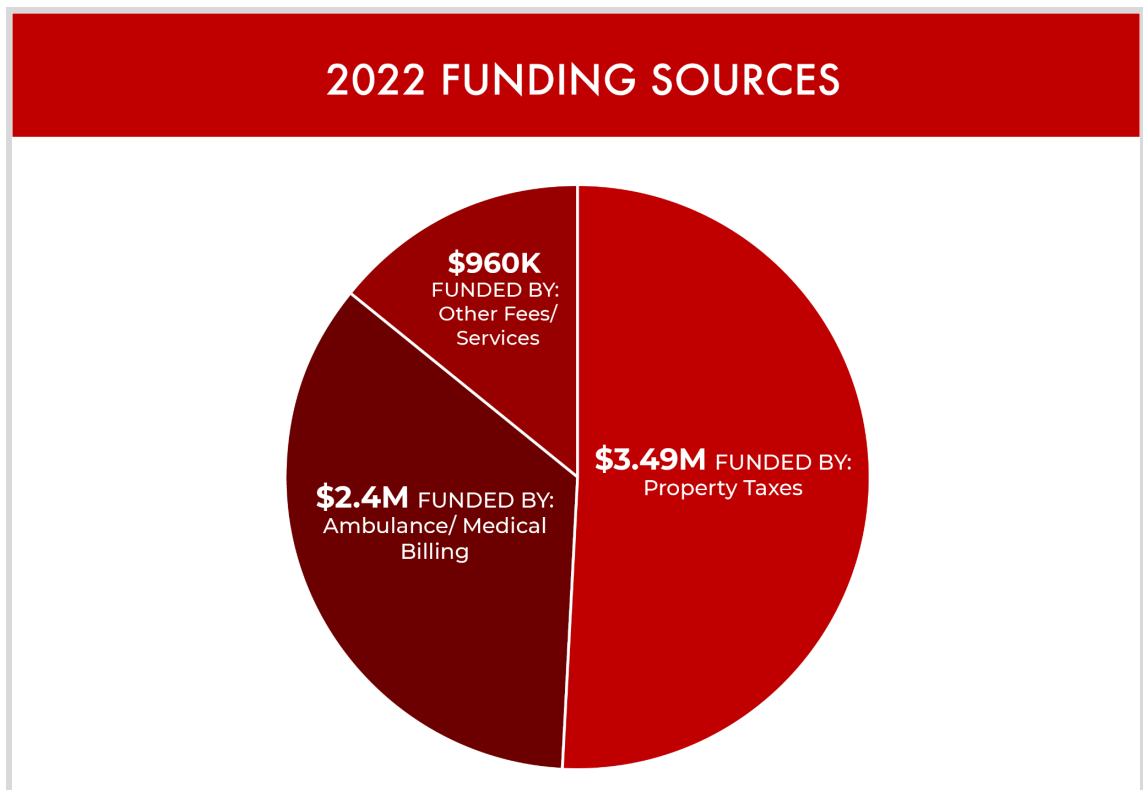
The District has also experienced a substantial increase in response times. In 2017, response time for calls in need of any fire apparatus averaged 10 minutes and 23 seconds. **In 2021, response times grew to 11 minutes and 14 seconds.** Due in large part to a reliance on non-resident paid-on-call staff, **WLFD response times do not meet national standards.**

It is also important to note that in 2021, **more than 50% of WLFD's calls for service overlapped with other calls for service**, meaning that WLFD had to respond to several incidents at once. In fact, in 2021, **28% of the time, vehicles and staff from all stations were out simultaneously.**

Fire doubles in size every 30 seconds. As a result, property owners within the District see more loss as a result of fire than comparable communities.

FUNDING OVERVIEW

WLFD is funded through a mix of revenue sources, including municipalities' property tax levy, state and federal payments, and fees for services (such as ambulance services, hazard mitigation, fire inspections, etc.). **WLFD's 2022 operating budget is \$6,857,798, 80% of which is personnel costs, including salaries and benefits.**



While costs for providing fire and EMS services, as well as the demand for these services, has increased in recent years, funding for these services has remained stagnant.

In 2017, the consolidation of the Dousman Fire District and City of Oconomowoc Fire Department spurred the creation of WLFD. **Since the consolidation, capital spending for vehicles, facilities and equipment has been reduced, resulting in an estimated savings of more than \$8 million every 20 years** (the average useful life of fire vehicles) - without decreasing service levels to the communities the District serves. **In fact, as of 2019, WLFD had the lowest per capita costs when compared to peer communities.**

While this consolidation led to necessary and immediate cost savings and increased the District's ability to provide services in the short term, it was intended as an interim solution to provide time for a long-term funding solution to be identified and pursued. Today, WLFD faces a critical funding shortage that if unresolved will significantly negatively impact fire and EMS services.

THE CHALLENGE

As population continues to grow and development continues, the demand on WLFD services has increased, **including a 74% increase in calls for service from 2017 - 2021.**

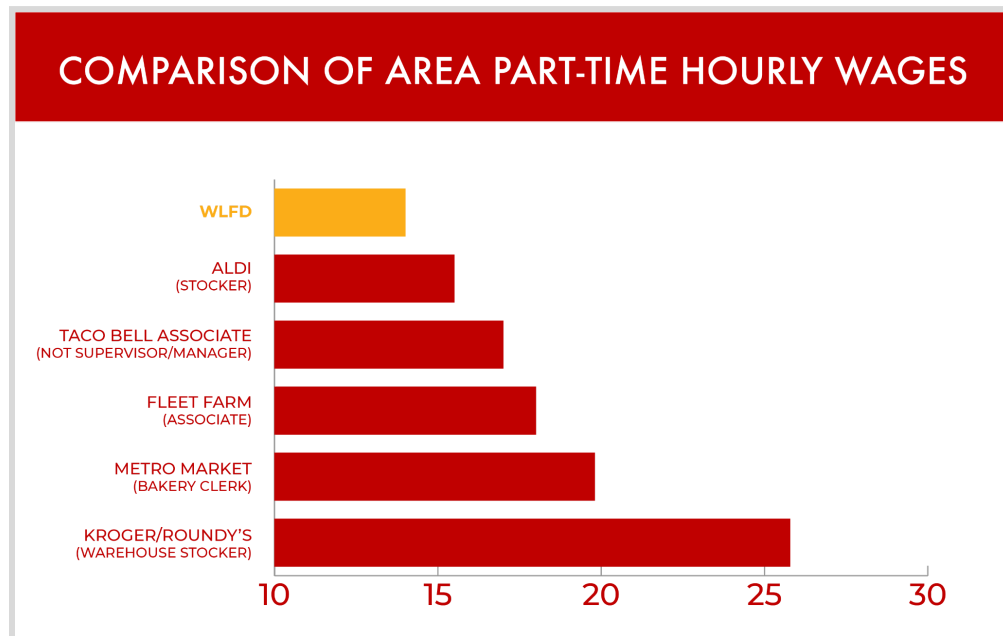
The fundamental challenge facing WLFD is that **it is unable to fund the additional full-time staff and increased wages for existing staff, as needed, to keep pace with the growing demands for its services.**

Department leaders and municipal staff have assessed the needs of WLFD communities and concluded that the following measures are necessary to bring fire and EMS capabilities in line with industry standards and best practices, as dictated by the demands, size, makeup and population of the community:

- **Fund additional staff, including:**
 - **33 additional full-time firefighter / paramedics** (11 per shift spread across the WLFD footprint);
 - **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 positions);
 - **1 full-time administrative assistant;** and
 - **1 additional fire inspector.**

- **Maintain current staff** by **increasing wages** to avoid staff departures to other departments, be competitive in the market and enhance staff recruitment and retention.

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. **WLFD's part-time firefighter and EMS staff are paid \$14 an hour. For comparison, a part-time hourly salary at local convenience stores range from \$15-\$20 an hour.**



Did You Know?

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. Additionally, the internship program helps to recruit and develop future WLFD staff.

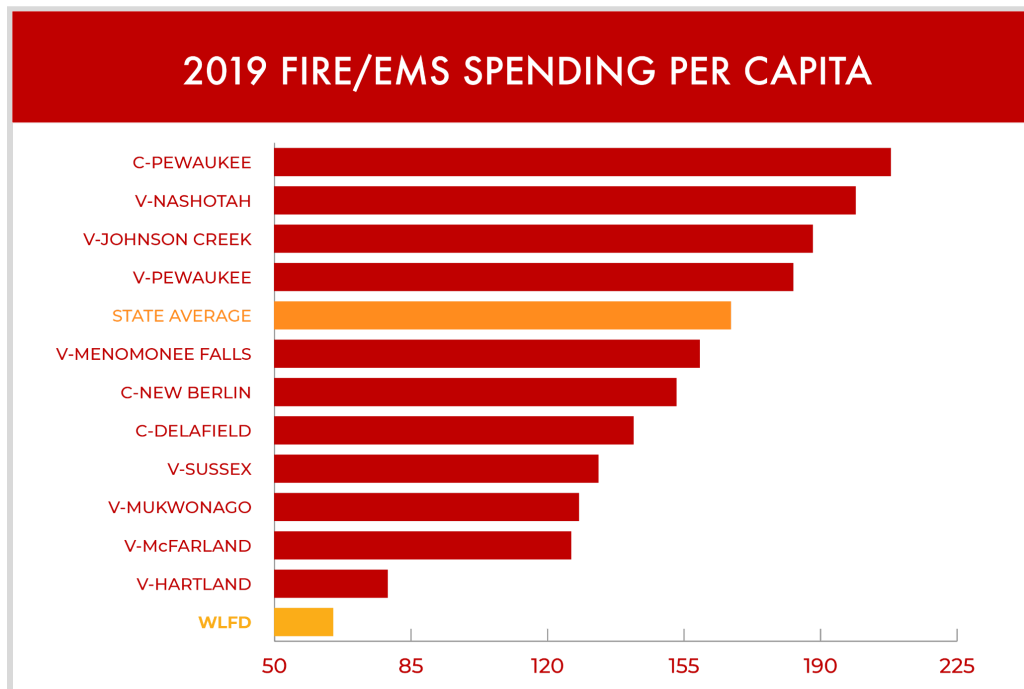
Bolstering WLFD's staff and wages would require an additional \$6.3 million:

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

The required additional funds would be provided by 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:

Municipality	Funding Formula Allocation for 2023	Total Community Share of Increase
City of Oconomowoc	35.48%	\$2,238,470
Town of Merton	18.97%	\$1,196,837
Town of Oconomowoc	17.30%	\$1,091,475
Town of Ottawa	6.90%	\$435,328
Village of Dousman	5.90%	\$372,237
Village of Lac LaBelle	1.60%	\$100,946
Village of Summit	13.85%	\$873,811
TOTAL:		\$6,309,105

As of 2019,⁴ WLFD had the lowest per capita costs when compared to peer communities. Even with an additional \$6.3 million added to its budget, WLFD would remain in the 50th percentile of per capita costs.



⁴2020-2021 data not yet available.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Option 1: Maintain the Status Quo

Over time, if WLFD does not identify additional funding, the existing challenges will create more strain on the District and the individuals it serves.

Maintaining the status quo would likely compound the current stressors on WLFD services in the years to come as population and development trends continue. Maintaining the status quo would also likely increase response times.

If WLFD does not identify new funding sources, and must keep staffing levels the same as they are today, the result will be:

Impact on services	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Continued increase of response times - and, as a result - losses, due to fire.• Continued impacts on quality and timeliness of service from WLFD due to continued low staffing levels.• Loss of existing staff and difficulty hiring without wage increases to remain competitive in the industry.
Impact on municipal budget	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Further dilution of quality services as municipalities' budgets are stretched further.<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ The natural progression is to place a hold on reinvesting on items like parks, new technology and street maintenance to support day-to-day operation demands.• Capital expenses will remain the same.
Impact on taxpayers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Property taxes would remain the same, but the quality of fire and EMS services would be lower, as the need for services continues to rise.

Option 2: Budget Cuts and Service Reductions Outside of Fire / EMS

In recent years, WLFD has assessed - and acted upon - numerous options to realize efficiencies and cost-savings, most notably through consolidation. As of 2019, WLFD had the lowest per capita costs when compared to peer communities. Further cuts at the municipal level would be required to fund the necessary WLFD additions.

Examples of the type of services that would need to be cut in order to appropriately fund WLFD could include:

- Road maintenance, repairs and replacement; and
- Parks and other quality of life community services.

These cuts would likely strain the communities and have the following impacts:

Impact on public safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reductions in the services and staffing listed above would allow the municipalities to reallocate budget resources to WLFD.
Impact on municipal budget	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Making staffing and/or service reductions would allow municipalities to reallocate budget resources to WLFD.
Impact on taxpayers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reallocations in the budget would not result in an increase in local municipal property taxes.• The budget cuts in other service areas would negatively impact the quality of services WLFD municipalities provide for residents and resident quality of life.

Option 3: Identify additional sources of revenue⁵

Wheel Tax

Wisconsin law allows municipalities to collect an annual municipal vehicle registration fee (“wheel tax”). The fee applies to vehicles kept in the municipality or county with automobile registration. Note that these fees would be in addition to the State of Wisconsin’s \$85 annual fee to renew automobile plates. Cities and counties throughout Wisconsin use wheel taxes to make up for lost state revenue.

The Wisconsin Department of Transportation collects wheel tax fees for the municipality, retains an administrative fee of \$0.17 per vehicle application and sends the rest to the municipality. The wheel tax is collected at the time of first registration and at each registration renewal.

Considering the eligible vehicles (automobiles, trucks and autocycles) registered in the municipalities within the District, to fully fund the necessary WLFD staffing municipalities would need to increase the annual wheel tax as follows:

Municipality	Registered Vehicles⁶	Total Additional Wheel Tax Per Vehicle
City of Oconomowoc	18,261	\$123
Town of Merton	4,228	\$283
Town of Oconomowoc	5,946	\$184
Town of Ottawa	1,989	\$219
Village of Dousman	3,252	\$114
Village of Lac LaBelle	195	\$518
Village of Summit	2,854	\$306

⁵Other potential funding options were deemed to be infeasible and not considered, including: (1) a utility service charge, which would require a mechanism by which to determine the rate of each residents’ use of municipal infrastructure. Given the numerous municipalities served by WLFD, this was not considered a feasible option. (2) Some municipalities have the option to add a fire protection fee to the municipal water bill. Given this option is not available for the entire service area it was not considered. (3) Municipalities could move to an entirely fee-based system, similar to garbage collection services. This was not deemed as a high-potential option due to the largely manual calculation of tax bills, nonprofits and tax bills for land.

⁶Source: Wisconsin Department of Motor Vehicles

Increase Property Tax Levy Limits Through Referendum

The State of Wisconsin limits the amount of property taxes a municipality can collect each year. In order to exceed that levy limit, a municipality in WLFD would need to secure voter approval through a referendum.⁷ A referendum could appear on the August 2022 ballot, which, if approved, would provide additional funding starting with the 2023 budget.

If a referendum passed, property owners in WLFD communities would see annual property taxes increases in 2023 related to funding WLFD as outlined in the following chart:

Municipality	Annual Property Tax Increase per \$100K	Monthly Impact per \$100K
City of Oconomowoc	\$80.10	\$6.68
Town of Merton	\$66.24	\$5.52
Town of Oconomowoc	\$62.65	\$5.22
Town of Ottawa	\$77.23	\$6.44
Village of Dousman	\$160.14	\$13.35
Village of Lac LaBelle	\$74.30	\$6.19
Village of Summit	\$82.47	\$6.87

⁷ Per Sec. [66.0602](#), Wis. Stats. Towns have another option to raise the levy limit. In towns with a population under 3,000, a town board may adopt a resolution to exceed the levy limit, which is approved by electors at a special town meeting.

STATEWIDE TRENDS

The challenges outlined above 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.⁸

In the past eight years, the Forum studied 30 fire and EMS providers throughout Wisconsin as part of a dozen service-sharing studies. This report finds that while volunteer-reliant staffing models have served many smaller communities well in the past, rising call volumes and staffing challenges are causing many to move toward a model that makes greater use of full-time staff. This can often improve operational efficiency and reduce response times, but it also requires additional funding that can be difficult to obtain due to competing local priorities or state limits on local property taxes.

Ultimately, the report echoed what the WLFD is experiencing: “the ability of many communities to provide an appropriate level of fire and emergency medical services is in jeopardy and may soon necessitate an emergency response of its own.”

CONCLUSION

WLFD has a critical need for additional funding to support the full-time staff and the increased wages for existing staff required to keep pace with the growing demand for its services. In the coming weeks and months, the municipalities served by WLFD, in partnership with local residents, will determine the best path forward for WLFD and all those it serves.

⁸ [*Wisconsin Policy Forum Report “In Need of Resuscitation,” October 2021.*](#)