

NEWS RELEASE

CITY OF WEST LIBERTY – February 16, 2021

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City of West Liberty provides Q&A to address inaccurate information regarding the Fire and Ambulance Department

What is the overall sentiment the Mayor, City Council and staff has for the Volunteer Fire/EMS Ambulance Department?

The Mayor, City Council and staff hold the volunteers and paid staff at the Fire Department, with high regards and overwhelming respect and appreciation for their years of service and dedication. We all make up this community whether we work and/or live here, and we are all passionate about the quality of life and essential services offered in and around this community. We all live, or work or raise our children in this district and we are all stakeholders and stewards. We are proud of the department and recognize the tireless efforts of all the volunteers who have taken an oath to serve our communities, and of their longstanding history of dedication under adverse conditions. The West Liberty Fire and Ambulance Department is a valuable asset to our area without question.

Is the Volunteer Fire/EMS Ambulance Department a department of the City of West Liberty?

The Fire/EMS department is a department within the City of West Liberty. All the department funds are operated through the city accounting system. The city government accounting system is required to meet the Government Accounting Standards Board (GASB), in how it conducts business. Therefore, all departments must meet the requirements for proper fiscal management.

Is the City of West Liberty planning to disband, dissolve, eliminate or create a For-Profit business out of the Volunteer Fire/EMS Ambulance Department or replace the volunteers with full-time paid staff?

At no time was there any proposal or requested action to disband, dissolve, or eliminate the volunteers.

What changes are the City of West Liberty considering?

The Mayor, City Council and staff have been diligently involved in updating ordinances, policies, staffing operations, organizational effectiveness, capital planning, equipment revolving plans and necessary budgeting. Much of these standard procedures are necessary implementation, or simply impending changes to update current non-compliant policies. We accomplish this through recommendations to the various departments from communication through committee representatives, or city leadership, as well as consultations with the city attorney and of course, State legislative action. We do our sincere best to follow or assist any department in the proper procedures as required by law, to identify and implement necessary changes.

Six months ago, the City Council directed the Public Safety Committee and City Staff to review the following identified items: Golf Cart, ATV, and UTV Ordinance, Nuisance Ordinance Policy, Public Safety Program and Departments. The Council Public Safety Committee and City Staff had identified four items with the Fire and Ambulance Operations:

1. Review 28 E Agreements between the City and Rural Trustees for compliance. The Fire had not been updated since 2007 and Ambulance since 2011. Therefore, they both had been out of compliance in accordance with the Iowa Code for 28 E Agreements. The statement of termination of the agreement with Rural Trustee's is a legal term within the agreements to communicate an update by Iowa law. There is also a contracted process communicated in the agreements requiring the two-party agreement to comply with.
2. Fire Code Chapter 1 in the West Liberty City Code was last updated in 1975. Through study with the council public safety committee, attorney guidance, and staff, it is recommended to update the ordinance to align with all other City department operations, state statutes, and modernize the ordinance to the current nature of business for the Fire and Ambulance Department of the City of West Liberty. Ordinances are law, the ordinance requires public notice and three readings by council before they can be approved. Public input is allowed and asked to have during the process.
3. Equipment Revolving Plan to schedule replacement of apparatuses for Fire and Ambulance. This requires a review of funding available with grants, budgets, and analysis of the equipment set to a timeline for replacement of all department equipment over the long period of time.
4. Financial and Staffing operations are always reviewed and studied due to the need and functions of all city departments. According to review, it was proposed to the possibility of creating a Full-time Fire Chief position to supervise paid staff and maintain consistency of operations on a permanent schedule. The Fire Chief is the highest ranking official in the department; therefore, when there had been a full-time coordinator, the position did not allow authority for supervision over day-to-day decisions and management of volunteers.
 - a. The Fire Department budget pays for half of the cost of a part-time Fire Chief. The Fire Chief receiving a bi-weekly salary stipend in the amount of \$300 or an annual amount

of \$7,200. The salary stipend is divided between Ambulance and Fire Expenses. The amount does not include employee benefit costs such as IPERS, Insurance, Unemployment, and Work Comp coverage. Fire volunteers are not paid per call.

- b. The Ambulance Department staffed 1 full time EMS Coordinator starting April 2012 through July 2019. During this time, the Ambulance created paid calls for volunteers, and the Fire Chief also received pay per call with the Ambulance Department in addition to the stipend split between the two departments for administration. The funding for staffing is established from ambulance revenue generated by billed service calls.

The following amounts are the annually gross wages paid to Ambulance Department, not including employee benefit costs such as IPERS, Insurance, Unemployment and Work Comp coverage:

FY 2017: \$105,465.84
FY 2018: \$ 108,244.27
FY 2019: \$117, 666.48
FY 2020: \$107,339.00

In July 2019, the full time EMS Coordinator resigned and the Fire Chief, with the support of the Ambulance board, recommended 3 part-time staff members to cover 8 hours for 5 days a week.

In 2020, additional staffing was added for the increased ambulance service calls, including increased response to the pandemic COVID-19.

Currently, there are 12 positions; 3 part-time and 9 temporary part-time employed to meet a 24 hour and 5 days a week schedule. The federal CARES Act funding is no longer available and (the call volume has decreased) to cover the added positions during the pandemic. Additional funding has not been approved for the remainder of the fiscal year 2021 that ends on June 30, 2021.

There is a need for a resolution to determine supervisory role for long-term day-to-day operations of staff, wages and benefits covered for the ambulance service.

What are the concerns with the current Volunteer Fire/EMS Ambulance Department Fire Chief?

Any personnel issues are confidential and not for public discussion. There are additional rules that apply legally between employee and employer human resource (HR) procedures that cannot be disclosed without the express consent of both parties.

How does the City plan to include the Volunteer Fire/EMS Ambulance Department through these changes?

The Fire and Ambulance Leadership has been part of discussions on biweekly staff meetings, budget meetings, staffing discussions, provided financial statements, and City Council Agendas.

Meetings have started with the Rural Trustee Fire and Ambulance boards and West Liberty Fire and Ambulance Leadership members. Again, this is the process that would happen as part of the government protocols in meeting compliance requirements. The City Council, Mayor and staff make every attempt towards compliance with all the requirements needed in each department. We follow the leadership hierarchy for communication and try to make available opportunities for input from the organizations, leadership, or volunteers during the process. Public meeting agendas and minutes are published on a timely basis based on government standards for the transparency and communication by your local government.

“It is my intent, and the intent of the City Council, to work together with the department and rural trustees towards the goal of updating agreements and codes, aligning accounting and budgetary practices and institute policies for a sufficient and sustaining department moving forward, stated Mayor Robert Hartman.”