

**OSSEO CITY COUNCIL  
WORK SESSION MINUTES  
July 24, 2023**

1. CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Duane Poppe called the work session of the Osseo City Council to order at 6:00 p.m. on Monday, July 24, 2023.

2. ROLL CALL

Members present: Councilmembers Juliana Hultstrom, Ashlee Mueller, Mark Schulz, and Mayor Duane Poppe.

Members absent: Councilmember Alicia Vickerman.

Staff present: City Administrator Riley Grams and Fire Chief Mike Phenow.

Others present: None.

3. AGENDA

Council agreed to discuss the work session items.

4. DISCUSSION ITEMS

A. DISCUSS FIRE CHIEF POSITION AND FUTURE FIRE DEPARTMENT NEEDS

Fire Chief Phenow stated in the 107 years since its founding in 1915, the Osseo Fire Department has had 10 chiefs that have all served in a volunteer, part-time, and/or paid-on-call capacity. In that same time, the department has gone through many changes big and small. The "antique" fire truck that we drive in parades is a 1929 REO Speedwagon. So, for the 14 years prior to that, the department operated with a horse-drawn hand pump. We now operate multiple modern fire trucks outfitted with tools that our forebears could not have conceived of. Having gone from street clothes, to rubber boots, to carefully engineered space-age materials, our gear would be unrecognizable. From filtering smoke by sucking on beards and handkerchiefs, to early breathing masks, to sophisticated self-contained breathing apparatus with heads-up displays and thermal imaging, our respiratory protection is something out of the science fiction of the past.

Fire Chief Phenow reported the surrounding areas went from sparsely populated prairie, forest, and farmland sprawled across miles of unincorporated territory, to large, vibrant suburbs home to hundreds of thousands of people served by large, well-funded, professional fire departments. This department went from responding to the fires across those many miles to operating within finely-tuned mutual-aid and auto aid arrangements among a network of cooperating departments. This department went from a sort of club that was, at times, hard to get into, with ranks filled by groups of long-tenured families and friends. Recruitment often consisted of waiting for the next

generation to reach their 18th birthday and retirements happened after decades of dedicated service.

Fire Chief Phenow commented the fuel that burned in fires consisted of wood, cotton, wool, and other natural materials. They burned long and slow. Today's fire loads consist of dangerous cocktails of synthetic and petroleum-based products – from the glue in the chip-board, to the synthetic fibers in the carpets, furniture, window coverings, bedding, clothing, electronics, paints, varnishes, and more. They create a toxic and often explosive environment that can quickly become deadly for occupants and firefighters alike.

Fire Chief Phenow stated when the department was founded, the community was fortunate and grateful to have a group of people willing to volunteer their time to do their best to help in a time of need. In all the years since then, there thankfully remains a strong sense of gratitude from the community, but it is accompanied by a fully justified set of expectations that far exceed "best effort." Fire departments (not to mention cities and employers in general) have gone from being comparatively straightforward organizations that are largely self-directed and self-governed, to being complex, highly-regulated enterprises. There are governing bodies, associations, boards, administrations, laboratories, and more – that have all been studying, reviewing, recommending, standardizing, certifying, and enforcing statutes, rules, guidelines, standards, and industry best practices, each of which raises the level of service, but imposes ever-increasing cost and complexity. These examples are just a taste of the breadth and depth of change that the department has experienced in the past 107 years. Despite that, the department has continued to be led by individuals who have fulltime day jobs.

Fire Chief Phenow explained when he got promoted to chief in January of 2019, he presented a list of 68 priorities across 22 areas where he hoped to make material improvements. He has completed many of my goals, started on others, and some are ongoing efforts. The last three items on the list, under the heading of "Succession Planning," were: "build a sustainable foundation for the future"; "hire and develop a staff of exceptional firefighters and officers"; and "work myself out of a job." That's another way of saying that I saw it (and still see it) as my responsibility to leave the department and the position of chief in a condition that sets up the community, the city, the department, and the next chief for continued success. Over the last 4 years, as I have implemented so many of the improvements I planned to make, I have also learned more – about the position, the department, and the fire service. At the same time, we have lived through so many "unprecedented" events that the term "unprecedented" has lost its impact. There's been a global pandemic, shut-downs, riots, the great resignation, inflation, and more (none of which has made "signing up for (or staying on) the local fire department" high on many people's list). He commented further on the options for the fire department going forward and recommended the City hire a full time Fire Chief going forward. He then requested direction from the Council on how to proceed.

Hultstrom stated she spoke with the Fire Chief on Friday. She explained she would like the State Board to review this and provide their sound advice on this recommendation.

Schulz explained he was confident the department had to do something, but he was uncertain how to proceed. He thanked Fire Chief Phenow for providing the Council with such a detailed and thorough presentation with recommendations. He stated he knew this was coming. He commented at some point down the road a Director of Public Safety could be a good fit. He believed if a person was hired, an annual contract should be drafted and considered. He stated the long-term viability of fire departments was changing due to the nature of the health risks, price of equipment and difficulty in finding staffing. He indicated while this was something he may not want to do, it may be something that the City has to consider doing in order to keep its fire services for the residents of Osseo. He hoped that the direction and options could be provided for Fire Chief Phenow in order to allow him a path for exit. He thanked Fire Chief Phenow for having the courage to bring a solution forward for the Council to consider.

Hultstrom commented on a conversation she had with a Councilmember from Minnetrista noting they were looking at going to a fire district. She explained if the City were to move in this direction, fire services would be run by a separate board, which would make it more of a complicated issue. She asked if anyone currently on Staff was available to tackle some of these issues on a part-time basis. Fire Chief Phenow explained being a firefighter was as much as most of the firefighters could take on at this time.

Hultstrom recommended someone on Staff contact the State Fire Board or that they be invited to a future PSAC meeting.

Poppe stated he was wrestling with how to proceed and was considering the costs and what was best for the City.

Mueller stated she had a huge amount of respect for Fire Chief Phenow and how he manages the Fire Department. She thanked Fire Chief Phenow for the detailed Staff report. She indicated she too was wrestling with how to proceed.

Schulz explained the Council did not have the luxury of indecision at this time. However, he understood this decision was pragmatic and while the Council did not want to create another position at this pay scale, the Council also had to consider what would happen if this position was not created. He noted the City would be working with the State Fire Board, no matter what decision was made. It was his hope that the Council could provide Staff with direction on how to move forward at this meeting.

Mueller questioned if this position were posted, would there be interest and it would be received well. Fire Chief Phenow explained this would be an odd position that was not traditional, but he believed there were people that would have the experience and would fit the position.

Hultstrom asked who was serving as the chiefs for fire districts. Fire Chief Phenow indicated he was uncertain who was applying for these positions.

Mueller commented she was in favor of a full-time fire chief position at this time, noting this was her direction to Staff on how to move this matter forward.

Schulz stated he was in agreement with this recommendation.

Poppe supported moving forward with a full-time fire chief position as well. He explained he would like to better understand what the cost implications would be for moving to a full-time position and what services can be lumped into the position from current contractual positions.

Schulz stated financially this would be a tough deal, but it was a service the City had to provide for its residents.

5. ADJOURNMENT

The Work Session adjourned at 6:48 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Heidi Guenther  
*Minute Maker Secretarial*