



WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

Contact: Mark Sommerhauser, Communications Director & Researcher
(608) 982-0324 or msommerhauser@wispolicyforum.org

For release:
May 1, 2025

Future Ready: Exploring Fire and EMS Services in the Sun Prairie Area

Fire department responses have tripled in the last decade; increases likely to continue

New approaches may be needed for the city of Sun Prairie's fire and emergency medical crews to sustain current service levels for one of the state's fastest-growing communities, a new Wisconsin Policy Forum report finds.

This may include forging additional partnerships – or revisiting existing ones – with neighboring communities, adopting new practices for responding to frequent EMS users, considering a city property tax referendum to cover operating costs, or adopting new fees. The report also lays out other options the city could consider to control fire and EMS costs.

In this report, commissioned by the city and the towns of Sun Prairie and Bristol, the Forum reviews Sun Prairie's emergency services and identifies ways to strengthen them. It also provides analyses of how peer communities provide these services. The report does not offer a single recommended solution to the challenges identified for the Sun Prairie area, but instead lays out options for local policymakers to consider.

"Many of these options for the city come with tradeoffs, but so do the rising costs and challenges of the status quo," the report finds.

Recent change

Sun Prairie's fire and EMS services recently have undergone major changes. Since 2023, Sun Prairie has extended its EMS service area, stopped serving a nearby town, and converted its fire department – which formerly operated under a unique private nonprofit model – to a city agency and merged it with city EMS services. In their current form, the agencies employ a total of 115 people across three stations: two in Sun Prairie that are used to provide fire and EMS services, and a third in the village of Marshall that provides EMS only.

These changes have taken place in a community that in the last two decades grew more than almost any other Wisconsin city. Among the 162 municipalities in the state with at least 5,000 residents, the city of Sun Prairie ranks third in its percentage increase in population since 2000, nearly doubling over that period. The growth rate recently has slowed somewhat, but newly released state projections still suggest that Sun Prairie's population will rise 24.1% by 2040.

This growth has contributed to enormous increases in fire and EMS service demands, as has the area's aging population. Additional factors include the department's decision to have firefighters respond to a wider range of EMS calls, and its expanding EMS coverage area.

The Sun Prairie fire department recently stopped serving the town of Burke. But the city has begun to serve the town of Sun Prairie with fire and EMS and Marshall and the towns of York and Medina with

EMS – a move that was made to add a third ambulance for the city and increase its capacity to respond to large incidents. The report finds Sun Prairie residents are covering a disproportionate share of the costs of the Marshall service – an expense being reviewed by city leaders.

Huge service call increases

As a result of these and other shifts, the number of responses (both medical and non-medical) by Sun Prairie firefighters has tripled in the last decade, from 1,003 in 2014 to 3,036 in 2024. The available EMS data only go back to 2018, but the number of EMS calls has risen 75.2% from 2,839 in that year to 4,973 in 2024.

This trend of increasing demand is likely to continue. The Forum modeled projections of future trends for fire and EMS calls, and found that total fire calls are expected to grow 23% by 2030. EMS call volumes are expected to grow by 41% during that period.

In addition to mounting service demands, these agencies face fierce fiscal and personnel pressures. Sun Prairie fire services are funded primarily through the city's general fund and payments by the towns. EMS services are funded through a combination of city general fund dollars, fees charged to patients and their insurers, and payments made by neighboring communities served by the city.

Budgetary challenges stem from rising call volumes and inflationary costs, state-imposed limits on municipal revenues, the ongoing loss of older part-time firefighters and greater use of full-time firefighters, the conversion to a city fire department, the aging population, and certain policy choices.

Possible solutions

Some service demands and fiscal challenges are outside Sun Prairie's control, but the city still has potential options to address them, the report finds. These include revisiting intergovernmental agreements to provide EMS services to Marshall and neighboring towns or using a Mobile Integrated Healthcare approach to reduce frequent EMS users.

Revenue options may include a city referendum to increase property taxes to cover rising fire and EMS operating costs. Another option could be to consider fees for facilities that use emergency crews to lift fallen residents, fines for repeated false fire alarms, or impact fees on development to cover eventual capital costs, potentially including construction of an additional fire and EMS station.

Sun Prairie could also consider partnerships with other local governments to share software and other services not constrained by physical proximity. For the future, as growth in northeast Dane County continues, city leaders could discuss possible service agreements with neighboring communities such as the city of Madison and the villages of Windsor and Cottage Grove.

Our review of Sun Prairie's peers and its own past operations also finds several options the city could draw on to control costs and address staffing challenges. Those include introducing the use of at least some firefighter-paramedics; limiting the size of firefighter crews; and reducing automatic firefighter responses to some EMS calls.

Click here to read the full report.

The Wisconsin Policy Forum is the state's leading source of nonpartisan, independent research on state and local public policy. As a nonprofit, our research is supported by members including hundreds of corporations, nonprofits, local governments, school districts, and individuals. Visit wispolicyforum.org to learn more.