

FUTURE READY

Exploring fire and EMS services in Sun Prairie and surrounding communities



WISCONSIN
POLICY FORUM

ABOUT THE WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

The Wisconsin Policy Forum was created on January 1, 2018, by the merger of the Milwaukee-based Public Policy Forum and the Madison-based Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance. Throughout their lengthy histories, both organizations engaged in nonpartisan, independent research and civic education on fiscal and policy issues affecting state and local governments and school districts in Wisconsin. WPF is committed to those same activities and that spirit of nonpartisanship.

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report was undertaken to provide citizens and policymakers with information on the state of fire and EMS services provided by the city of Sun Prairie within its own territory and that of its neighbors. The intent was to lay out service and financial data, illustrate key challenges, and discuss options for improvements. The Forum would like to thank the city of Sun Prairie and the towns of Bristol and Sun Prairie for commissioning the report and also thank Sun Prairie leaders and those in neighboring and statewide peer communities for their assistance in providing information, helping to develop and analyze options, and patiently answering our questions.



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*Exploring Fire and EMS Services in Sun Prairie and
Surrounding Communities*

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2000, almost no cities of any size in the state of Wisconsin have grown in population as fast as Sun Prairie. Neighboring communities like Windsor, Cottage Grove, and the Town of Bristol have also experienced explosive growth. The arrival of new housing, businesses, residents, and workers has brought prosperity and opportunity, but also stressed emergency services in the area.

Perhaps not unexpectedly, the last several years have also brought rapid change in the nature of those services. Until relatively recently, Sun Prairie had an unusual arrangement, with a typical city emergency medical services department but a fire department that was its own separate nonprofit.

Since then, the structure and commitments of those emergency departments have been changing. In 2023, the city's emergency medical services department added more than 100 square miles of territory in the village of Marshall and three more towns. In June 2023, SSM closed its Emergency Center in the city. That decision eliminated the main emergency room for Sun Prairie's EMS calls and added roughly 20 minutes each way to ambulance trips by city paramedics, contributing to the city's decision to add full-time staffing for a third ambulance that was previously only for peak hours.

In 2024, Sun Prairie's nonprofit Fire Department formally joined city government for the first time. Today, a single fire chief leads both the city's Fire Department and its Emergency Medical Services Department. Other changes are also being pursued, including new agreements with the city of Madison to help ensure additional resources and responses to fight fires and better serve individuals experiencing mental distress.

Despite these proactive efforts, the city of Sun Prairie has experienced challenges in sustaining its emergency services, including rising costs and call volumes and difficulties in recruiting and retaining paid on premise staff. This is neither unusual nor surprising. Over the past 12 years, the Wisconsin Policy Forum has or will soon complete about 20 studies for municipal and county governments in all parts of Wisconsin on fire and emergency medical services (EMS) challenges and possible solutions. As we noted in [In Need of Resuscitation?](#), an October 2021 report reflecting on our work in this area:

Many fire and EMS agencies are finding it harder to operate each year due to increasing service calls from an aging population and staff recruitment and retention difficulties. Lagging state aid and state-imposed limits on local property taxes often compound the problem, creating a difficult road ahead for many local governments throughout Wisconsin.

In this report supported by the city as well as the towns of Bristol and Sun Prairie, we review the city's emergency services and ways that Sun Prairie could strengthen them, both on its own and in collaboration with its neighbors. We do not offer a single recommended solution to the various challenges identified, but instead lay out a range of options for decision makers to consider.

Our programmatic and fiscal analysis for each option has been aided by officials from the city, who supplied data, information, and insights, and discussed the options. The report is designed not to force local officials to specific conclusions, but rather to provide sufficient analysis to help them arrive at a course of action that will ensure high-quality, efficient, and cost-effective fire and EMS service levels for residents of Sun Prairie and surrounding communities for the foreseeable future.



CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PARTICIPATING MUNICIPALITIES

This section gives a brief overview of demographic characteristics of the communities in the service areas of the Sun Prairie Fire Division and Sun Prairie Emergency Medical Services Division as well as some other nearby communities that participated in this study. We focus on characteristics that are relevant to fire protection and EMS services and that may be germane to discussions about how these services could be maintained and made more efficient and effective. We note first the large EMS service area, shown in Figure 1, totaling just over 150 square miles.

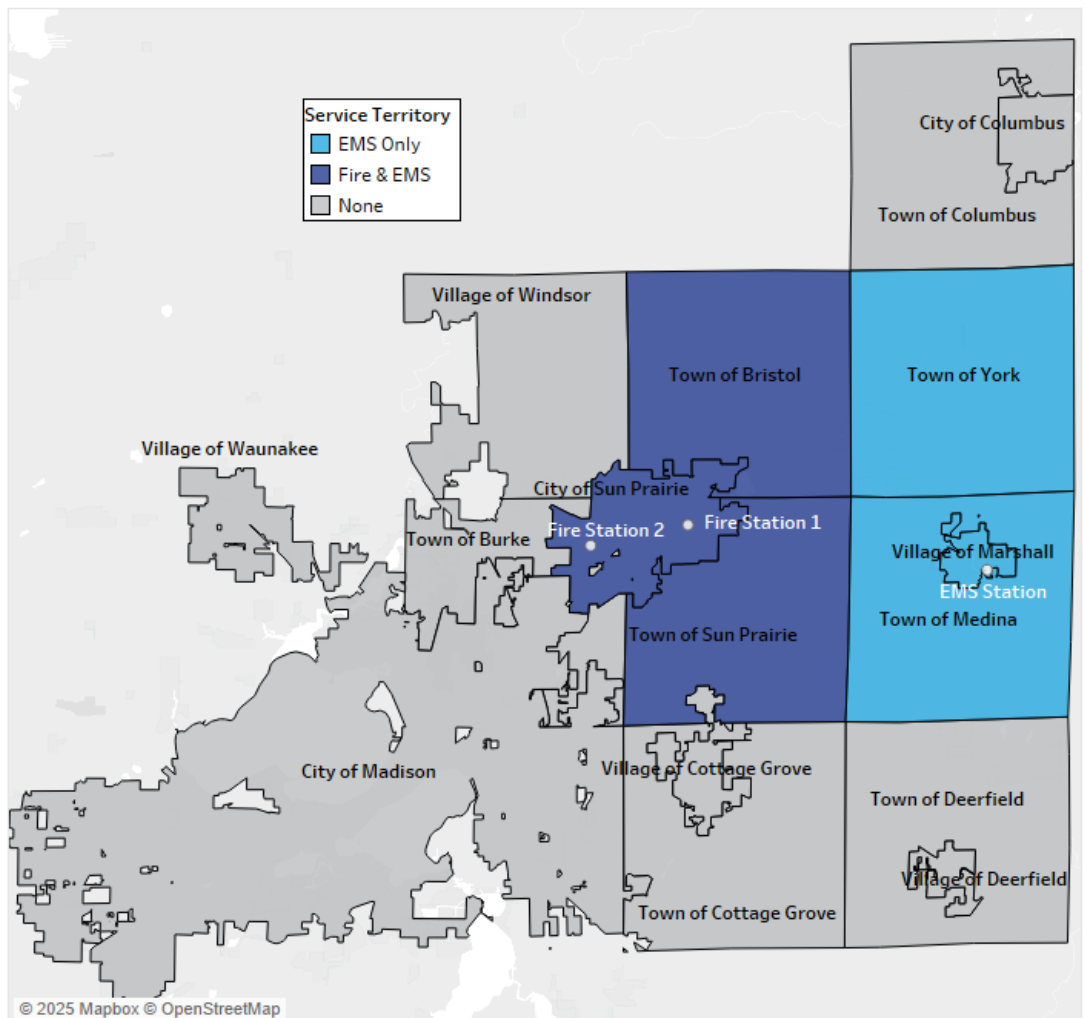
General Demographic Characteristics

The communities served by Sun Prairie’s fire and EMS services make up a contiguous area in northeast Dane County that is also just northeast of Madison. The agencies provide both services to the city of Sun Prairie and the adjacent towns of Bristol and Sun Prairie. The city also served the town of Burke in the past but in July 2024 the town shifted to receiving service from Madison.

The city of Sun Prairie also has an informal agreement with the town of Hampden to serve a handful of structures in that community.

The remainder of the service area consists of the village of Marshall and the towns of York and Medina, with

Figure 1: Sun Prairie Fire Department Serves Three Communities and EMS Serves Six
Territory served by Sun Prairie Fire and Emergency Medical Service



Sources: Wisconsin Department of Administration and City of Sun Prairie



these areas receiving only emergency medical services. EMS service to these communities and the town of Sun Prairie was added in January 2023 through intergovernmental agreements. As the map shows, there are miles of town lands separating the city of Sun Prairie from other incorporated communities such as Marshall and the Village of Cottage Grove.

EMS service is dispatched from three stations, two in Sun Prairie and one in Marshall, while fire crews work out of just the two city stations. Figure 1 on the previous page shows the service area and the location of the stations. Table 1 shows the population, geographic size, and density of the communities Sun Prairie serves.

Table 1: 2024 Population and Density of Communities Served

| Community | Population | Land Area in Square Miles | Residents Per Square Mile |
|------------------------------|---------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Fire and EMS Services | | | |
| City of Sun Prairie | 39,419 | 12.9 | 2,786.2 |
| Town of Bristol | 4,491 | 34.4 | 130.6 |
| Town of Sun Prairie | 2,376 | 31.4 | 75.7 |
| Total Fire and EMS | 46,286 | 78.7 | 588.1 |
| EMS Service Only | | | |
| Village of Marshall | 3,882 | 2.3 | 1,687.8 |
| Town of Medina | 1,345 | 33.8 | 39.8 |
| Town of York | 696 | 35.9 | 19.4 |
| Total EMS Only | 5,923 | 72.0 | 83.0 |
| Total Area Served | 52,209 | 150.7 | 346.4 |

The Sun Prairie Fire Department serves 78.7 square miles and more than 46,000 people. As noted previously, the department shifted in January 2024 from being a separate nonprofit paid by the city to provide services to being a more typical city agency.

The Sun Prairie EMS Department serves a total of just over 150 square miles and more than 52,000 people (about 5,900 more than the Fire Department). In addition, Sun Prairie EMS participates in the Dane County Advanced Life Support Intergovernmental Agreement, which regardless of jurisdiction allows for the closest ambulance and paramedic team with this high level of training and equipment to be sent to high acuity incidents such as a case of cardiac arrest or stroke. Both the fire and EMS divisions participate in the Mutual Aid Box Alarm System, which helps communities from around the region to assist one another in handling large-scale emergency events.

The outlying towns make up the largest share of the land area within the service territory, but the denser city of Sun Prairie makes up more than three-quarters of the population served by the EMS Department and more than 85% of those served by the Fire Department. The large geographic areas of the towns being served present challenges to ensuring speedy response times.

Population On the Rise

The populations of Sun Prairie and some surrounding communities have grown at exceptional rates in recent years. Among the 162 communities in Wisconsin 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 (see Figure 2), according to data from the state Department of Administration. The rate of growth may have slowed at least somewhat, with the city’s population increasing by 26.3% between 2014 and 2024, lagging somewhat the growth rate of 34.4% between 2004 and 2014. Still, these increases underline the present and future challenges for Sun Prairie to keep up with its service demands.

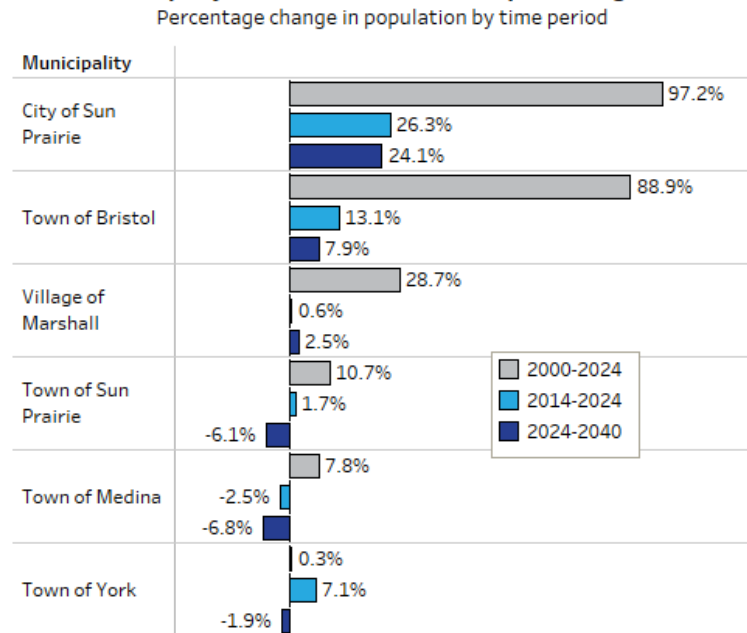
Recently released state projections suggest this growth will continue, with Sun Prairie’s population expected to grow 6.9% by 2030 and 24.1% by 2040. At the same time, not all of the communities in the area are growing rapidly. For example, the population of the towns of York, Medina, and Sun Prairie have changed relatively little in recent years and are projected to decline somewhat by 2040.

These striking differences (see the map in Appendix 2) may introduce some challenges to the city of Sun Prairie as it seeks to serve both its own urbanized territory and some outlying rural areas. While the populations in some municipalities within its territory are growing by leaps and bounds and must plan for that growth, others are experiencing little change and may prefer established approaches.

Demographics Vary Across Communities

Communities in northeast Dane County also have notable differences in their population densities and demographics. As we have noted, the city of Sun Prairie accounts for the lion’s share of the population in its fire and EMS service area and has nearly 2,800 residents per square mile (see Table 1). The town of York, on the other hand, has less than 20 residents per square mile. The wide variation

Figure 2: Cities and Villages Near Sun Prairie Have Grown Rapidly Since 2000 and Will Keep Growing



Source: Wisconsin Department of Administration. Note: 2024-2040 populations projected.

Table 2: Sun Prairie Residents are Relatively Young

| Community | Share of Population 65 and Over | Households with One or More Person Over 65 | Median Age |
|---------------------|---------------------------------|--|------------|
| City of Sun Prairie | 13.9% | 26.8% | 36.9 |
| Village of Marshall | 9.4% | 16.1% | 34.1 |
| Town of Bristol | 17.9% | 27.6% | 39.8 |
| Town of Medina | 22.8% | 37.1% | 50.3 |
| Town of Sun Prairie | 14.3% | 25.8% | 41.8 |
| Town of York | 16.0% | 32.1% | 37.1 |
| Total | 14.2% | 26.4% | – |

Source: American Community Survey: Five-year estimates 2023



in both population density and growth rates across Sun Prairie’s service area makes it difficult to find true peer communities to serve as comparisons.

Because the most frequent EMS users are older, it is important to consider the age of the population being served. Table 2 on the previous page shows that just over 14% of the service area’s population is 65 or older, which is below the state average of 18%. The city of Sun Prairie, which has the bulk of the area’s population, has a median age of 36.9, lower than the state median of 40.1 The town of Medina is notable for having a substantially older population than the other communities served.

Property Values Also Rising Rapidly

Not surprisingly, the sharp population rise in the area has been accompanied by a huge increase in property values. Even after adjusting for inflation, property values in Sun Prairie have nearly doubled since 2014 and more than tripled since 2000. Several nearby communities (see Figure 3) including the towns of Bristol and Sun Prairie, have seen inflation-adjusted property values double since 2000.

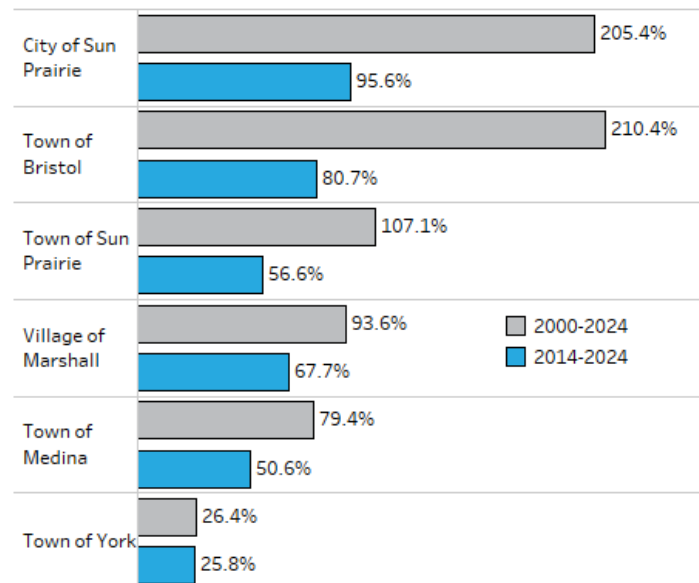
Like the growth in population, however, the increase in property values has been much smaller in the more rural parts of the area. In the towns of York and Medina, for example, the growth in property values since 2000 has not always kept up with inflation.

Property values per capita are generally high in northeast Dane County but they also vary widely, as Table 3 shows on the next page. They range from nearly \$209,000 per resident in the town of Sun Prairie and \$213,000 per resident in the town of York to less than \$105,000 in the village of Marshall. These differences matter since property values are one factor that Sun Prairie uses to allocate costs between the city and its neighbors in its fire and EMS shared service agreements.

Even in the areas where property values are rising rapidly, local governments cannot necessarily increase their levies to capture that additional value and use it to pay for public safety services. State law generally only allows municipalities to increase their property tax levy for operations annually by the percentage increase in net new construction in their territory. As Figure 8 in Appendix 3 shows, the rapid development in communities such as Sun Prairie has allowed them to raise their levies by a greater amount in recent years, though that development has also brought additional service costs in fire, EMS, and other areas.

The tax levy per resident varies from just \$354 in the town of York to \$818 per capita in the city of Sun Prairie. The difference reflects in great part the

Fig. 3: Sun Prairie Area Property Values Have Also Grown
Percentage change in municipal equalized value, adjusted for inflation



Source: Wisconsin Department of Revenue



wide difference in services available in an urbanized area versus a rural town and the greater needs for services such as public safety and public works.

Table 3: Property Values and Levies Per Capita Vary Substantially

| Municipality | Property Value | Property Value Per Capita | 2024 Levy | Levy Per Capita |
|---------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|--------------|-----------------|
| City of Sun Prairie | \$6,077,193,700 | \$154,169 | \$32,233,498 | \$818 |
| Town of Bristol | \$931,317,800 | \$207,374 | \$1,065,587 | \$237 |
| Town of Sun Prairie | \$496,568,600 | \$208,994 | \$850,236 | \$358 |
| Village of Marshall | \$405,461,400 | \$104,447 | \$1,928,304 | \$497 |
| Town of Medina | \$254,163,100 | \$188,969 | \$728,921 | \$542 |
| Town of York | \$138,642,300 | \$213,296 | \$246,472 | \$354 |

Source: American Community Survey Five-year estimate 2023

Types of Property by Community

It is also important to consider the types of properties served by fire and EMS agencies. As Table 4 shows, the city of Sun Prairie has a substantial number of multi-unit structures making up a sizable portion of its housing. Besides Sun Prairie, only the village of Marshall has more than a handful of multi-unit structures in its territory, and even Marshall has only a fraction of what Sun Prairie does. This is notable since larger structures pose greater challenges in the event of a fire and to a lesser extent for EMS services.

Table 4: Sun Prairie Has More Multi-Unit Structures (Housing Structures by Number of Units in 2023)

| Housing Units | Estimated Units | In Structures of 3 to 19 Units | In Structures of 20+ Units | Total in Structures of 3+ Units | 3+ Units as Percentage of Total |
|---------------------|-----------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| City of Sun Prairie | 15,657 | 2,397 | 2,910 | 5,307 | 33.9% |
| Village of Marshall | 1,537 | 170 | 71 | 241 | 15.7% |
| Town of Bristol | 1,559 | 9 | - | 9 | 0.6% |
| Town of Medina | 530 | 9 | 3 | 12 | 2.3% |
| Town of Sun Prairie | 812 | - | - | - | 0.0% |
| Town of York | 337 | - | - | - | 0.0% |
| Total | 20,432 | 2,585 | 2,984 | 5,569 | 27.3% |

Source: American Community Survey Five-year estimate 2023

Last, we also need to consider the age of the structures since older buildings can be more prone to fire due to older wiring and overall materials and construction that are not in keeping with current building codes. Here again there is considerable variation between communities, as Table 5 on the next page shows.

As might be expected, housing is much newer in rapidly growing communities such as Sun Prairie and much older in those with little new construction. Nearly half of the housing units in Sun Prairie, for example, have been built since 2000, and barely one housing unit in 10 in the city was built prior to 1960. In the faster-growing town of town of Bristol, the share of newer units is almost as large. In



the town of York, however, more than two-fifths of the housing was built prior to 1960 and less than one-fifth of the units were built after 2000.

Table 5: Housing Is Newer in Sun Prairie Than Most Communities (Age of Housing Units in 2022)

| Community | Estimated Housing Units | Housing Structures by Year Built | | | |
|---------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
| | | After 2000 | 1980 - 2000 | 1960 - 1979 | Before 1960 |
| City of Sun Prairie | 15,657 | 46% | 25% | 19% | 11.0% |
| Village of Marshall | 1,537 | 18% | 36% | 24% | 21.0% |
| Town of Bristol | 1,559 | 44% | 30% | 15% | 11.0% |
| Town of Medina | 530 | 15% | 27% | 36% | 22.0% |
| Town of Sun Prairie | 812 | 11% | 24% | 43% | 22.0% |
| Town of York | 337 | 19% | 29% | 9% | 42.0% |
| Total | 20,432 | 41% | 26% | 20% | 13.0% |

Source: U.S. Census Bureau Five-Year Estimates



SERVICES, EQUIPMENT, BUDGETS, AND GOVERNANCE

This section provides a more detailed look at Sun Prairie’s services by examining governance, operations, assets, budgets, call volumes, and response times. These details highlight both the challenges of serving this rapidly growing area and the need for the city to consider new efficiencies, revenues, and partnerships with neighbors to cope with its added service demands and costs.

Governance

For fire protection, the city of Sun Prairie has an intergovernmental agreement with the towns of Bristol and Sun Prairie and the Northeast Dane County Fire Unit (which serves both towns). The agreement runs from Jan. 1, 2024, to Dec. 31, 2029 and it will automatically renew for an additional two years unless one party provides written notice of its intent not to renew prior to June 1, 2028.

The agreement lays out specific provisions for services, town charges and the formula for allocating them (see the Budgets section), vehicles, potential fees for services such as inspections, and conflict resolution. Under the contract, the city has the sole authority to approve its Fire Department budget. Bristol has a separate but similar EMS contract with the city that runs through Dec. 31, 2028.

The EMS agreement with the village of Marshall to serve that community and the towns of Medina and York runs from Jan. 1, 2023, through Dec. 31, 2025. The town of Sun Prairie entered into a separate but similar EMS contract for the same timeframe. Both sets of agreements will automatically renew for additional three three-year terms unless either the city of Sun Prairie or Marshall notify the other of their decision not to renew at least six months prior to the end of each term. Sun Prairie also can withdraw from the agreement with six months of advance notice if it stops providing EMS service in its own territory.

Under the agreement, Sun Prairie sets operating policies for its EMS service. The city then charges the village and towns a share of the net costs of the service after deducting revenues from fees charged to patients and their insurers (which are the same as those charged to Sun Prairie residents). The EMS workers at the Marshall station are Sun Prairie employees.

As noted previously, Sun Prairie EMS also participates in the Dane County Advanced Life Support Intergovernmental Agreement and the Mutual Aid Box Alarm System. Dane County provides [countywide dispatch](#) for fire and EMS and assigns priority levels to medical calls. The county also provides a medical director through the Department of Emergency Medicine at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health – though the city also contracts for additional medical direction. County dispatch facilitates agreements between communities since dispatchers can automatically send units from different communities to respond to certain incidents.

In February 2024, Sun Prairie also reached a memorandum of understanding with the city of Madison in which its neighbor agreed to deploy a fire engine, crew, and chief officer to all structure fires in the territory served by the Sun Prairie Fire Department at no charge. In return, Sun Prairie has agreed to deploy some of its specialized vehicles such as its tender truck to fires in the town of



Burke. The town, which has switched its service from Sun Prairie to Madison, does not have a system of fire hydrants, and Madison does not have a tender truck, which is used to haul water, foam, or chemicals to fire engines in the field. The agreement runs through the end of 2026 and will automatically renew for another three years unless officials from either city pull out of the agreement at least 30 days before it ends.

Lastly, Sun Prairie has contracted with the city of Madison to offer the latter’s Community Alternative Response Emergency Services (CARES) program for responding to behavioral health emergencies with less police involvement. The pilot expansion is being done in collaboration with Dane County and provides responses from a community paramedic with training in these services along with a crisis worker from Journey Mental Health. As of February, the program is available 13 hours per day on weekdays and 10 hours per day on weekends. The costs are handled on a fee-for-service basis. Sun Prairie officials indicate they deployed EMS staff and law enforcement officers to 74 calls in 2024 and projects they will see more than 120 of these calls per year going forward.

Taken together, these commitments show that Sun Prairie has worked proactively to collaborate with its neighbors on fire and EMS services and has been relatively successful at reaching agreements with them. Though we will note elements that may call for discussion by city leaders, these partnerships have generally been positive for both Sun Prairie and its neighbors.

Staffing

Sun Prairie has shifted over time to rely more heavily on full-time staff for both fire and EMS services. The city employs a total of 115 people distributed across three stations. The Sun Prairie EMS Department has 28 full-time employees and six part-time or paid on premise staffers as of March 2025. Fire and EMS staff are unionized and can bargain over wages, benefits, and workplace conditions. This means that any changes to the terms of employment, such as the expected licensing levels for firefighters, would require negotiation with the union. This requirement could add to costs.

The Fire Department has 22 full-time and 59 paid on premise employees. One fire chief oversees both operations with a deputy chief as the second in command, and further leadership positions are distributed across both service areas. Here we break down the staff by department (for a complete organizational chart see Appendix 1).

Emergency Medical Services Department Staffing

In addition to providing emergency medical services, EMS staff also are dispatched along with firefighters for all structure fires and high hazard events. As noted earlier, EMS staff work in three stations, with two in Sun Prairie that serve as both fire and EMS stations, and an EMS-only station in Marshall (see Figure 1 on page 5).

Table 6: Sun Prairie EMS Department Staffing 2024

| | EMS Lieutenant | Full-Time Paramedic | Part-Time Paramedic | Total |
|-----|-------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-------|
| EMS | 3 | 25 | 6 | 34 |



As shown in Table 6 on the previous page, Sun Prairie EMS relies mostly on 25 full-time paramedics – the highest level of EMS license (see the accompanying box for an explanation of EMS license types) as well as three paramedic lieutenants who go on EMS runs in the same way as other crew members. All responses are handled by an ambulance with two paramedics. These full-time employees work 24-hour shifts (from 7 a.m. of day one to 7 a.m. of day two) and work 48 hours per week. They are supplemented with six paid on premise paramedics who work a minimum of 24 hours per month.

The city’s EMS staff are led by three full-time lieutenants. For each 24-hour shift, one of them oversees the paramedic teams at all three stations. Teams of two paramedics are available at each station at all times, with two teams and two ambulances at station one and one team and ambulance at station two and the Marshall station.

Fire Department Staffing

The Sun Prairie Fire Department employs 81 people and is responsible for firefighting, EMS assists, responses to reports of hazardous materials, rescues in cases such as motorists trapped in cars following a collision, and other emergency responses. The fire department is dispatched on all EMS calls that are assigned a [Charlie, Delta, or Echo \(C, D, or E\) rating](#). These calls represent higher priority levels ranging from a C (potentially life-threatening condition), D (life-threatening), and E (full cardiac arrest or imminent death). EMS paramedics respond on their own to lower-level Alpha and Bravo calls. This appears to go beyond what is called for under the Dane County ALS agreement, which requires a response from a two-paramedic ambulance and fire apparatus for all Echo calls and a number of Delta calls. At the same time, however, other Dane County communities such as Madison and Fitchburg also take this approach.

The fire department also provides inspection, fire safety, and community education services and has an Insurance Services Office (ISO) rating of 2 (on a scale of 1 to 10, with a lower score denoting better fire protection), putting it among the highest-rated agencies in the state. Its staffing is substantially increased by more than 50 paid on premise firefighters, a remnant of the department’s past history as a previously volunteer unit.

Table 7 shows how fire service staffing is distributed. Firefighters are split between the two fire stations in the city of Sun Prairie, with one four-person team of full-time firefighters available around the clock at each location. These teams consist of one leadership position, either a lieutenant or battalion chief, and three full-time firefighters. These firefighters work from 6 am of one day to 6 am of the next and then have the following 24 hours off.

EMS License Levels

Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) - in addition to basic, non-invasive first aid, EMTs are trained to perform more invasive medical skills such as tracheotomies, and in the use of tourniquets and cervical collars. They are able to administer oxygen and can provide some types of medications, including Narcan for opioid overdoses. EMTs are licensed as Basic or Intermediate.

Advanced EMT – these technicians have all of the skills of an EMT, and in addition they can start an IV and can administer a wider range of medications.

Paramedic – they have all of the skills of Advanced EMTs with the addition of invasive procedures such as using a needle for chest decompression and intubation. Paramedics are able to administer the widest variety of medications.



Firefighters are also divided into three battalions, with each shift led by a battalion chief who serves as the officer for station two. A lieutenant in turn serves as the officer for station one. Additional paid on premise firefighters are used to supplement staffing and cover vacant shifts when full-time staff are on vacation, sick, or in training. These paid-on-premise staff work at least two 12-hour shifts per month. Their ranks include two part-time assistant fire chiefs who help with leadership of the paid on premise staff.

Table 7: Sun Prairie Fire Department Staffing 2024

| | Chief | Deputy Chief | Fire Lieutenant | FT Battalion Chief | FT Admin and Support | FT Fire Fighter | PT Assistant Chief | PT Firefighter /LT | PT Admin and Support | Total |
|------|-------|--------------|-----------------|--------------------|----------------------|-----------------|--------------------|--------------------|----------------------|-------|
| Fire | 1 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 11 | 2 | 54 | 3 | 81 |

After being hired, full-time firefighters must obtain firefighter II certification within one year, either EMT or Emergency Medical Responder certification within three years, driver and aerial operation certification within two years, technical rescue awareness within four years, and complete National Incident Management System courses as determined by the fire chief. Paid on premise staff need to possess firefighter II certification and are encouraged to pursue either EMT Basic or Emergency Medical Responder certification. In addition, most personnel are certified to [operate](#) fire and aerial apparatus and are trained to a similar level as full-time staff on technical rescue awareness.

Despite the shift toward a full-time staffing model, paid on premise employees remain critical to fire department operations, covering about 45% of fire shifts. The paid on premise staff are required to bid for a minimum of two 12-hour shifts per month. City staff indicate these employees save Sun Prairie roughly \$1.5 million per year. The average wages and benefits for the city’s full-time rank and file firefighters cost approximately \$35.83 per hour (starting compensation for full-time firefighters is \$24 an hour for salary alone). Paid on premise firefighters, on the other hand, are paid \$12.50 an hour with modest increases for those with the training to fill roles such as engine drivers.

The question for the city is how long it can sustain its current work force of more than 50 paid on premise firefighters. Many of these firefighters are young, as Table 8 shows, and most younger firefighters only work for the city in a paid on premise capacity for one to two years before taking a full-time job either with the city or another municipality. They generally provide day-time staffing for Sun Prairie. Older paid on premise firefighters generally have other full-time jobs and fill night shifts. They are limited in number, with only seven older than 50. City leaders must give thought to how they will respond if they cannot sustain paid on premise staff, particularly for the night shift.

In addition to the front-line firefighting operations, the agency is supported by three full-time and three part-time administrative and support staff, including those focused on emergency management, fire inspection, and engineering.

Table 8: Most Paid on Premise Firefighters Are Younger

| Age | Staff Number |
|--------------|--------------|
| Under 20 | 1 |
| 20-25 | 21 |
| 26-30 | 10 |
| 31-35 | 3 |
| 36-40 | 5 |
| 41-45 | 4 |
| 46-50 | 3 |
| 51-60 | 4 |
| 61-70 | 2 |
| 71-75 | 1 |
| Total | 54 |

Source: City of Sun Prairie



Fire Prevention Bureau, Emergency Management, and Administrative Duties

This bureau works to prevent fires and related injuries and fatalities along with other hazards through inspections and education efforts. The bureau's lead fire inspector manages those firefighters who at least once per year inspect all public buildings, workplaces, and multi-unit residences.

A part-time fire protection engineer reviews fire protection system plans and works with city building inspectors to ensure developments in the community meet safety standards prior to construction. The lead inspector examines structures during construction and prior to occupancy. A community risk reduction officer organizes and works with firefighters to provide station tours, education visits and classroom presentations, training, career fairs, and child car seat inspections.

Since March 2024, the Sun Prairie Fire and EMS chief has also served as the city's emergency management director. In that role, the chief is supported by a part-time firefighter in addition to a part-time fire protection engineer.

The chief also has one business services specialist and a business manager. Other administration duties such as human resources are handled by centralized city staff. These more modest costs are funded in other areas of the city's budget such as the human resources unit.

Vehicles, Stations, and Hospitals

Firefighters and paramedics need specialized equipment and facilities to perform their missions and that can come with capital costs. For example, the city of Sun Prairie's participation in the Dane County Advanced Lifesaving agreement can also require additional equipment for some vehicles. When the city of Sun Prairie took on EMS service in Marshall, that community's aging assets added to the existing capital needs. In addition, since the city of Sun Prairie serves six municipalities, the costs and ownership of the relevant assets are divided among them. The hospitals used by the city and its partners also have a substantial influence on the services, as we will see.

Area Hospitals

Some Sun Prairie EMS calls that require transportation of the patient end up going to the UW Health East Madison Hospital on Eastpark Boulevard – a relatively short trip. But the majority of transports go to a hospital in downtown Madison, including UW, Meriter, or St. Mary's Hospital. This results in approximately 40 miles of round-trip driving that can tie up the ambulance and crew for an hour or more.

This situation results from the June 2023 closure of the SSM Emergency Center in Sun Prairie, which previously was the largest single destination for EMS transports in the city. The increased drive time has exacerbated the impact of the rapid increase in EMS calls handled by the city and contributed to Sun Prairie committing to full-time staff for its third ambulance in the city in the fall of 2023.

Fire and EMS Stations

The city uses three stations, which include two dual-purpose fire and EMS stations in the city of Sun Prairie and one EMS station in Marshall about eight miles to the east of the city. The oldest, station



one, is located near downtown Sun Prairie on North Bristol Street. It was built in the 1970s and last remodeled in 1999, and according to staff is due for remodeling or replacement.

This station houses overnight staff and most of the city's fire equipment and receives the most calls for both fire and EMS service. While its downtown site is close to many calls for service, its location on a main road can make exiting and entering during responses more difficult and potentially dangerous. Crews from this location respond to any fire or EMS call in the center and east side of the city, plus the towns of Sun Prairie and Bristol, and to EMS calls east of Sun Prairie.

Due to the aging nature of the facility and the traffic at its current location, Sun Prairie officials say they would prefer to construct a replacement in the vicinity. The current station needs to have its communications system upgraded, plus an expanded locker room, and will have difficulty accommodating additional technology upgrades.

Station two was built in 2006 and remodeled in 2020. It is located on Sun Prairie's west side, near the fastest growing portions of the city. Right now, the station houses one ambulance, a ladder and pump truck, and a squad vehicle. The building houses the agency's administrative staff and has capacity for additional staff and equipment if needed. At present, the station can house overnight the four firefighters, two paramedics, and battalion commander who are on-duty there at any one time. Staff from this site respond to calls on the west side of the city, including U.S. Highway 151. This location could be valuable for collaboration with Sun Prairie's western neighbors, including Madison, Burke, or possibly Windsor.

The agency's third station in Marshall is roughly two decades old and houses one ambulance and the paramedics who handle EMS calls, in addition to the Marshall Volunteer Fire Department. The EMS portions of the station have been leased to Sun Prairie by the village of Marshall for \$1 annually through Dec. 31, 2025. Initially, it was hoped this ambulance crew could address some of the calls on the east side of Sun Prairie in addition to Marshall. However, the more than eight-mile distance between the two communities means slower responses for that purpose and there are relatively few calls from the area between Sun Prairie and Marshall. So, this station mainly serves Marshall and towns of Medina and York.

Sun Prairie staff indicate that this station is also due for upgrades. For their part, village of Marshall staff believe the station to be in generally good condition and have expressed some concern about any potential capital expenditures for the EMS station or vehicles given the other demands on the village's capital budget. Before any future upgrades to the station, Marshall staff indicate that it may be appropriate to prepare a formal assessment of the station. They add that the two communities could then pursue state or federal grants to offset the costs of any necessary upgrades.

One important consideration for these stations is who would bear the cost of upgrading them to the extent that is needed. As we will see in the next section, the overall call volume for the service area largely comes from within the rapidly growing city of Sun Prairie. That said, station one does have responsibilities across the entire service area and serves some fast-growing outlying areas such as the town of Bristol. Given the need for upgrades or replacements to this station, consideration of how best to allocate the associated costs or where to locate any new station may be needed. In addition, it would make sense for the village of Marshall and its surrounding towns to play a major



role in financing any upgrades to the ambulance station in that community since they primarily serve those communities and the station also houses the village's fire department.

Fire Vehicles

Sun Prairie Fire and EMS staff use a number of fire engines, ambulances, and other vehicles. Ownership of the fire service vehicles is partially divided among the three communities served with this equipment. The Fire Department has the largest fleet, with 14 vehicles of different types and a current estimated value of more than \$4 million. For a breakdown of these vehicles, see Appendix 3. The fire vehicles break down into two general categories: eight specialized fire-fighting vehicles such as ladder and pumper trucks, with replacement costs for ladder trucks nearing \$2 million, and six less costly support vehicles like the Dodge Durango used by the chief and a Polaris utility vehicle. The towns own two engines, a tender truck, and a brush truck that are used to fight fires outside urban areas, and the city owns the other vehicles.

Ten of the department's vehicles are housed at station one, while station two has just a ladder truck and a pumper fire truck and two staff vehicles. Most of the vehicles are owned by the city of Sun Prairie. Several of the engines and vehicles suitable for use in rural areas are owned by the towns of Bristol and Sun Prairie, but as they are replaced they will be owned by the city of Sun Prairie.

The variety of vehicles reflects Sun Prairie's mission as a fire department serving both urban areas, with a system of fire hydrants, and rural areas where the fire department must haul water to fight fires. The city cannot deploy all of its vehicles at once – its staffing essentially allows for deploying one engine or other apparatus from each station using the crew at each location plus support vehicles. Agency staff indicate they have sufficient vehicles to meet their current service needs.

These firefighting apparatus typically have long lifespans of 15 or 20 years, while the support vehicles have shorter 10-year periods of use. The average age of the eight fire vehicles is about nine years old. However, two of the department's pumper trucks are scheduled for replacement in the next five years at a cost of more than \$1 million each. The average age of the six support vehicles is nearly seven years old, with one Ford Explorer staff vehicle now about 12 years old.

Ambulances

Sun Prairie owns six ambulances, two of which were inherited from the merger with Marshall. Three are located at station one (though staffing only allows for operating two at a time), two at station two (though one of them once again is a backup ambulance), and one in Marshall. Because of the city's ALS level of service, Sun Prairie ambulances require specialized equipment.

Three of the six ambulances are at least nine years old, and all but one has at least 101,000 miles on its odometer. Two of these aging ambulances serve as reserve vehicles, only called into service if the front-line vehicles are out of service or are busy with other duties, but a 2014 Lifeline ambulance with 147,000 miles is listed by the city as being a mainly front-line vehicle at station one. One ambulance was purchased in 2022, which helps bring the average age of the front-line vehicles to six and a half years and the average odometer to 90,500. But the overall EMS fleet has an average age of nearly eight years and an average odometer reading of more than 105,000.



Because of the age of these vehicles, the agency has experienced ambulance breakdowns, causing it to borrow equipment from neighboring departments. Stress on the agency’s ambulances is magnified by the large geographic size of the service area, which means many trips across longer distances, adding to the miles traveled. Most of the agency’s ambulances will need to be replaced in the near future, which will demand both a funding solution and an allocation across the partner communities. As city leaders consider when to initiate their next ambulance purchase, they should factor in the lengthy wait times to receive an ambulance from many manufacturers.

Calls for Service

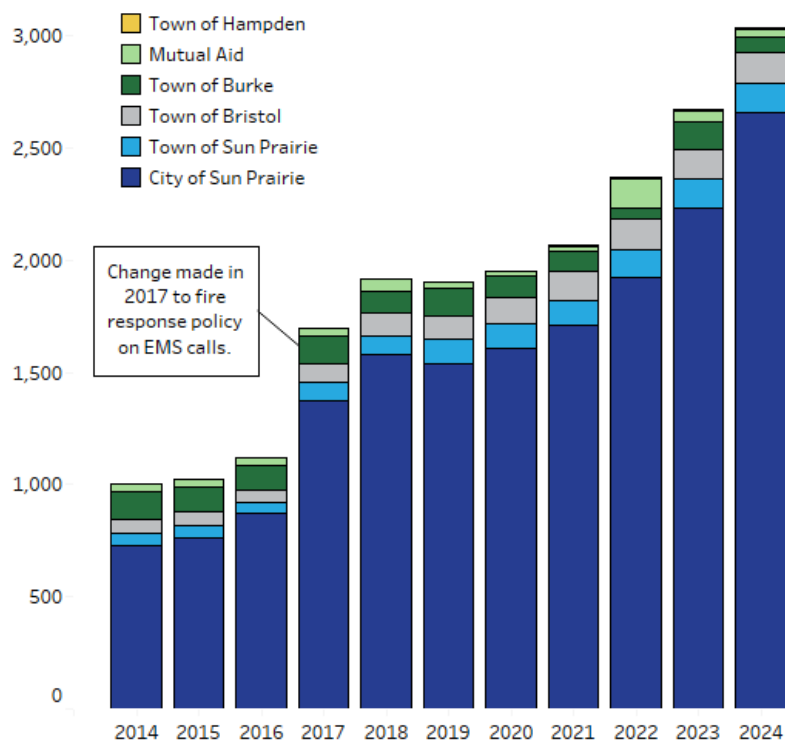
Fire Department

In 2024, the Sun Prairie Fire Department responded to 3,036 fire and EMS calls, an average of 8.3 calls per day that was up 13.3% from just the previous year (see Figure 4). The city numbers for fire and EMS vary modestly between the total for all calls and those with a community assigned. The number of calls has tripled since 2014, when it was 1,003.

This growth in fire and EMS responses by firefighters since 2014 is far in excess of the 23.4% growth in population within the city’s service territory. The larger increase in calls represents multiple factors, including an aging population. But a major part of the growth also reflects a change in policy by the city with regard to the Fire Department’s responses to EMS calls.

As noted earlier, in 2017 firefighters started responding to more potentially life-threatening EMS calls in support of ambulance crews. That year, fire calls rose by 51.7%, a percentage increase that was two and half times larger than the next largest annual increase over the past decade. Data show that in 2024, there were 1,865 fire calls that involved responding to an EMS call and assisting paramedics, which was more than double the 918 EMS call responses for firefighters in 2019. A review of available data from the city shows that of the more than 1,000 additional fire calls between 2018 and 2024, all but 116 involved responses to EMS calls.

Figure 4: Fire Calls Have Risen Rapidly Over Last Decade
Calls to Sun Prairie Fire Department by community and year



Source: Sun Prairie Fire Department



In particular, EMS calls with a priority of Charlie (such as patients who are unresponsive, have difficulty breathing, or may have had a stroke) were added by the 2017 policy change. In 2024, EMS data for Sun Prairie show more than 1,200 of these calls going to the stations in Sun Prairie and Marshall for responses by those two fire departments. This is a significant number given that in Sun Prairie, six personnel are responding to each of these EMS calls – four firefighters in a fire engine and two paramedics in an ambulance.

The largest increase in fire calls came from the city of Sun Prairie, where they more than tripled from 730 in 2014 to 2,662 in 2024. As Figure 4 and Table 9 show, the increase in calls in the towns served by the fire department was not as large, though calls in the towns of Bristol and Sun Prairie did more than double over the last decade. Notably, the fire calls for mutual aid in 2024 fell to 38 after spiking at 136 in 2022.

Sun Prairie also accounts for the overwhelming majority of the fire calls within its territory at 87.7% in 2024 (see Table 9). While the city accounted for an average of more than seven fire calls per day in the first half of 2024, none of the towns served by Sun Prairie averaged more than

Table 9: 2024 Fire and EMS Calls and Responses by Fire Department

| Community | Fire Calls | % of Calls | Average Calls Per Day | % Change 2014-2024 |
|---------------------|--------------|---------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| City of Sun Prairie | 2,662 | 87.7% | 7.3 | 260.3% |
| Town of Bristol | 139 | 4.6% | 0.4 | 113.8% |
| Town of Sun Prairie | 125 | 4.1% | 0.3 | 132.1% |
| Town of Burke | 70 | 2.3% | 0.2 | 3.1% |
| Mutual Aid | 38 | 1.3% | 0.1 | 61.3% |
| Town of Hampden | 2 | 0.1% | 0.0 | N/A |
| Total | 3,036 | 100.0% | 8.3 | 206.1% |

Source: City of Sun Prairie

one call every two days. It is worth noting once again that Burke is being served by Madison going forward, and as a result, there was a drop in 2024 in the number of service calls from that town.

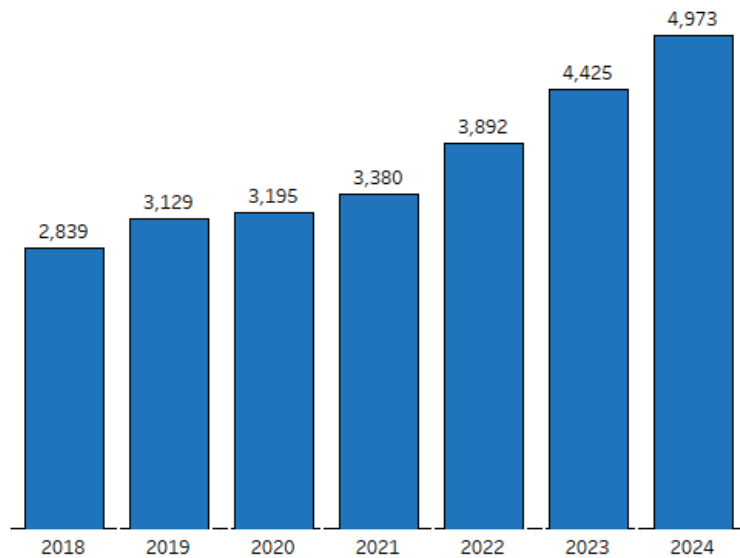
Over the past four years, just under two-thirds of the fire calls have fallen during the 6 am to 6 pm day shift compared to the 6 pm to 6 am night shift. This proportion appears to be relatively consistent across both fire stations. In 2024, roughly two-thirds of the fire calls, or 67%, were classified as rescue and EMS related, such as a medical call, a response to a motor vehicle accident with an injured passenger, or assistance to a person trapped in an elevator. That is somewhat below the state average and just above the national average, [according to the U.S. Fire Administration](#).

The next largest category of calls – 12% of the total – was for false alarms ranging from deliberate false reports to malfunctioning alarms. That was somewhat more than either state or national averages and suggests that the city might wish to consider steps to work with property owners to reduce them. Next at 11% were good-intent calls in which citizens may report in good faith a condition such as a gas leak or fire when none is present. An additional 4% of calls were reports of hazardous conditions such as a natural gas leak or a report of carbon monoxide poisoning. The remaining 6% of calls were for other reasons.



The number of building fires has remained relatively steady, with 22 in 2024, compared with 25 in 2023 and 19 in 2018. There was a similar pattern for other blazes including vehicle fires, brush and grass fires, and cooking fires that did not spread. They totaled 81 in 2024, which was down from 107 in 2023 but up somewhat from 69 in 2018. It is worth noting that in a typical year, Sun Prairie responds to more than 250 false alarms (whether intentional or not) for fires and other hazards, and firefighters do not know which are real or not until they respond.

Figure 5: Calls for EMS Have Also Climbed Rapidly
Sun Prairie EMS Division calls by year



Source: Sun Prairie Fire Department

Notably, in July 2018 a Sun Prairie Fire Department captain was killed and another firefighter was injured in their response to a natural gas leak. A private contractor installing fiber optic cable had struck a gas line and the leak eventually led to a massive explosion. This tragic event underlines the critical nature of the situations to which the city’s firefighters must respond.

Since 2020, the number of fire calls to station one on the east side of the city and station two on the west side have grown at roughly the same rapid rate. Meanwhile, the number of fire calls for station one have remained roughly 1.4 times higher than the number of the calls for station two.

Station one also has a larger proportion of EMS calls than station two, though the percentage difference is smaller. The volumes at both Sun Prairie stations are growing rapidly, while the Marshall station’s calls fell in 2024.

EMS Calls

In 2024, the Sun Prairie EMS Department responded to 4,973 calls, an average of 13.6 calls per day that was up 12.4% from just the previous year (see Figure 5). The 2023 calls totaled 4,425, which was in turn an increase of 13.8% from the year before. As with the fire calls, the number of EMS calls has skyrocketed in recent years, with the total rising 75.2% from 2,839 in 2018. Separate city data show that of the nearly 5,000 calls, 77 were for mutual aid and eight were for advanced life-saving intercept calls.

As with fire calls, the growth in EMS calls has easily outstripped the already sizable growth in the area’s population. The city of Sun Prairie generated over 80% of the EMS calls in both 2023 and 2024 (see Table 10). This proportion roughly mirrors the city’s share of fire calls after accounting for the somewhat larger territory served by the EMS Department. Marshall, Bristol, Medina, and the town of Sun Prairie accounted for much smaller numbers, and no other community besides the



combined DeForest EMS District area accounted for more than 40 calls. In addition to the growing call volume, the recent closure of an SSM health emergency room in Sun Prairie impacted the EMS workload, as we have noted.

As part of this study, we analyzed a database of EMS calls provided by the city, looking at only those in which a unit was dispatched and arrived on the scene, and excluding calls aborted for one reason or another. We found that in 2024, the median time across the city’s service territory from an EMS call being assigned to Sun Prairie’s service by dispatch to the time of first response was 6:17 (six minutes and 17 seconds), and the average was 6:47. The 90th percentile for Sun Prairie’s calls in 2024 – the timeframe that covers 90% of call responses – was 10:17. As noted earlier, both Sun Prairie and the Marshall Fire Department send their fire crews to more serious EMS calls and they sometimes arrive before the paramedics.

It is worth noting that Sun Prairie is handling a rising number of calls over a 150-square-mile area, and that the 2024 responses were faster than those in 2023, when the median response was 6:24 and the 90th percentile was 10:50. At the same time, the city does not appear to be meeting its strategic plan goal of arriving at 90% of its EMS calls within six minutes of being dispatched. If we look only at calls in the city of Sun Prairie, emergency teams arrived at 90% of the calls within 9:26.

In addition, responses have slowed by roughly 30 seconds since 2019, when the median EMS response from the call being assigned to first arrival on the scene was 5:52 and the average response was 6:20. The 90th percentile for Sun Prairie’s calls in 2019 was 9:41. Some increase in overall response times is to be expected given the large number of additional calls over the past few years and the large additional territory added to Sun Prairie’s service area, including the village of Marshall and the towns of Sun Prairie, Medina, and York. For now, response times appear relatively stable, but they represent an area to monitor in future years.

For a minority of its calls, Sun Prairie receives outside aid. Our review found there were 220 cases in 2024 in which outside units received an EMS call for a location within the territory served by the city’s EMS Department. A majority of those mutual aid calls – 120 – involved the village of Marshall and the town of Medina. Seventy-nine of them were in the city of Sun Prairie itself.

Anecdotally, the Sun Prairie chief has estimated that there are 10 to 15 times per year when the four ambulances in the three stations operated by Sun Prairie are all in operation at the same time and outside ambulances must respond to any additional calls. Using the EMS call data, we found 44 instances in 2024 in which there were three EMS calls received in Sun Prairie and Marshall within 10 minutes, which accounted for about 2.4% of the total calls that year. There were 156 instances with three EMS calls

Table 10: Sun Prairie EMS calls by community in 2024

| Community | Number of Calls |
|---------------------|-----------------|
| City of Sun Prairie | 4,017 |
| Marshall | 374 |
| Bristol | 162 |
| Town of Sun Prairie | 127 |
| Medina | 114 |
| DeForest EMS Area | 65 |
| Madison | 34 |
| Deer Grove EMS Area | 20 |
| Jefferson County | 20 |
| York | 12 |
| Other | 12 |
| Burke | 9 |
| Columbia County | 7 |
| Total | 4,973 |



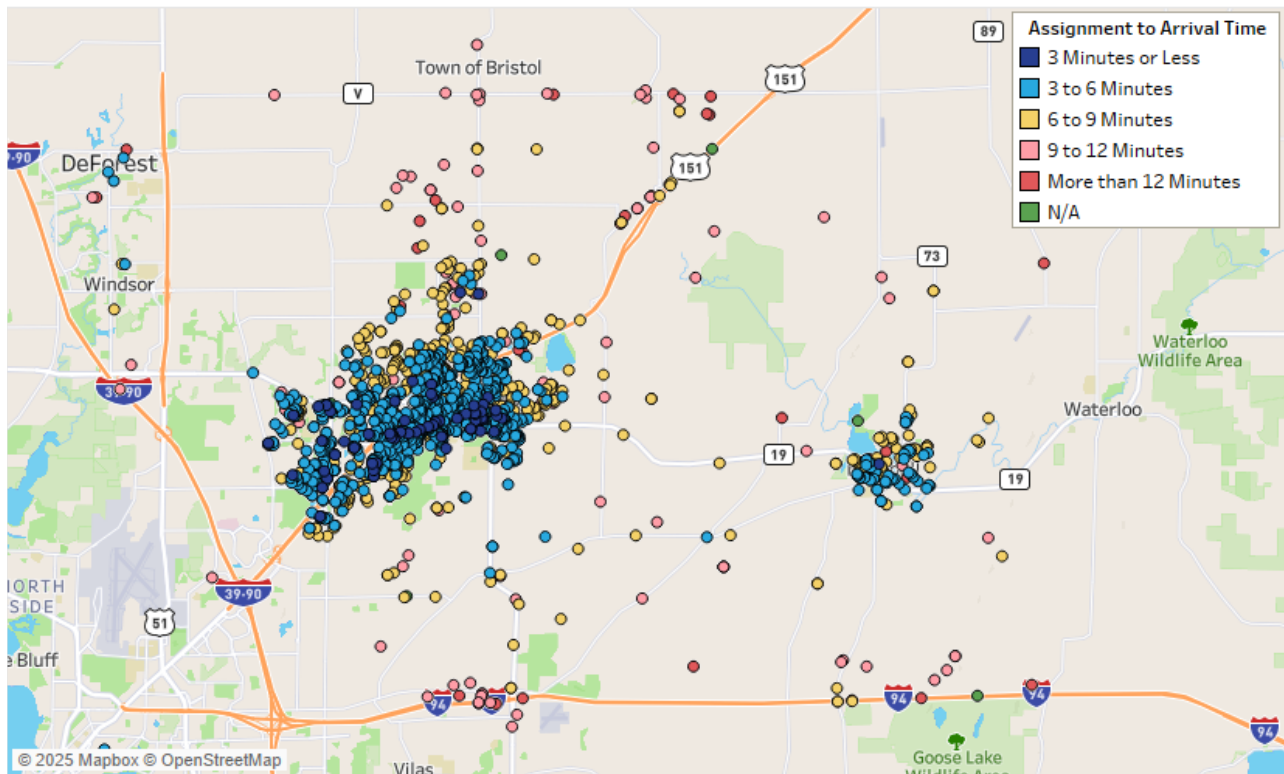
within 20 minutes (8.4% of total calls in 2024) and 520 instances of three calls within 40 minutes. This suggests that, while most calls do not fall into a window in which three ambulances are tied up at the same time, this does occur with some regularity and is worth monitoring.

We also mapped the EMS calls to see where response times were the shortest and longest (see Figure 6 on the next page). Our mapping showed the bulk of the calls within the city of Sun Prairie and to a lesser extent the village of Marshall had a responder arrive on scene within six minutes. Outside the city and village, longer responses were more common. This was particularly the case in the town of Bristol, where response times routinely exceed six minutes and can exceed nine and at times even 12 minutes.

These figures validate the view of city officials that the best place for a third EMS station within Sun Prairie would be on the city's north side at a location such as North Bird Street and Egge Road. The EMS data are likewise backed up by the population growth in Bristol, which since 2000 has been nearly as great on a percentage basis as in Sun Prairie. Initially, the city could simply move the second ambulance and two paramedic team from station one and would not immediately need to deploy a new ambulance crew from this location. The partner communities, however, may wish to give some thought to how they would divvy up the capital cost of this possible third station.

Two other potential locations for two additional Sun Prairie stations were also put forward. The first would be a replacement for the current station one that would be placed at Highway 19 and Town Hall Drive at the far eastern edge of the city. The second would be at the far southern edge of the city

Figure 6: Response Times in the City of Sun Prairie Often Rapid
Time elapsed between assignment of EMS call* to first arrival on scene, 2024



Source: City of Sun Prairie; *Chart shows only Charlie, Delta, and Echo priority EMS calls (that is more serious calls).



on Bailey Road. We analyzed those proposed locations using our mapped 2024 EMS responses (which also make up roughly half of fire responses) as well as figures on population growth. In general, we found that the majority of the city's EMS responses to be inside Sun Prairie. For that reason, city officials may not wish to place a station at the edge of Sun Prairie without a good reason such as a strong agreement with a partner community (more on that below).

The potential southern station on Bailey Road would have some advantages, such as being relatively close to the Smith's Crossing neighborhood and surrounding areas in the southwest part of the city, where there were a number of EMS calls in 2024 that took between six and 12 minutes for a first responder to arrive. However, the city of Madison fire station 11 is also relatively close to those areas and has an empty bay that could also house an ambulance that could respond to calls in the southern part of the city of Sun Prairie as well as the town. (For more on this possibility, see the final section of this report). In addition, to the extent that Sun Prairie wished or needed in the future to collaborate with the village of Cottage Grove, the Bailey Road location would not offer a particularly direct route to the village.

In 2024, there also were fewer delayed calls in the southern part of Sun Prairie's territory and there has been much less growth in the town of Sun Prairie or Burke over the past two decades compared to the city of Sun Prairie or Bristol. Sun Prairie officials should consider whether developments are being planned for this area. Yet for now, it seems less necessary for Sun Prairie to build a southern station and less clear that the proposed Bailey Road site would be ideal if a station were to be built.

The suitability of the proposed location at Highway 19 and Town Hall Drive depends heavily on at least two factors. The first is whether city officials believe that they should either renovate or relocate the current station one (we have noted already the city's concerns about this station's age). The second is whether the city ends up renegotiating its agreement with Marshall to move the ambulance currently stationed in the village to Sun Prairie.

If both of those factors are the case, then Sun Prairie might wish to move station one to this location at the far eastern edge of the city to better respond to calls in the village of Marshall. This might even be a necessary move for the village to agree to a shift in its ambulance location. However, the current site of station one in Sun Prairie is much more centrally located to respond to most calls within the eastern half of the city. In the absence of a deal with Marshall, Sun Prairie officials might decide to keep station one as it is for now or move it to a location such as one near the intersection of Highway 19 and County Road N, which would be somewhat more centrally located in the city and also better able to respond to calls to the south from the town of Sun Prairie.

In addition, city officials asked us to consider whether the city's scheduled annexation of portions of the town of Burke in 2036 would affect considerations for its station locations. Based on our review of an annexation map, the town of Burke call data for 2023 and 2024, and development in the town over the past decade, we do not believe the new territory would substantially change considerations of station locations.

One final note was with respect to the addresses of the city's EMS calls. The four most frequent of those accounted for nearly 650 EMS calls in 2024. These city of Sun Prairie addresses included two senior living facilities and two apartment buildings. City officials expect roughly one call per year per

bed in these facilities. The large number of calls suggests the city may have at least some room to proactively work with the owners and residents of these buildings to reduce future calls.

Agency Budgets and Finances

Sun Prairie’s fire and EMS budgets have both grown substantially over the past five years as a result of factors such as an increase in calls, the addition of EMS service area and staff in 2023, the closure of the SSM emergency room in 2023, changes in policies such as fire responses to EMS calls, and the conversion of the private, nonprofit fire service into a city department. These costs were shared among the city and its partner communities. Below, we look at the EMS and Fire budgets separately to understand the rising service costs, and the impact on city finances. We also discuss the future costs in the city’s capital improvement plan.

Fire Operations

The Fire Department’s operating costs have grown rapidly over the past five years as the area’s population and call volumes have expanded. The 2024 decision to make the fire department part of the city also means that the costs for the entire department now show up in the city’s budget instead of just the contract payment previously made by the city to the nonprofit. Table 11 shows a cost breakdown for the department, showing the 2024 budget consists largely of personnel costs.

Table 11: Sun Prairie Budgeted Fire Operating Expenditures, 2019-2024

| | 2019 Budget | 2020 Budget | 2021 Budget | 2022 Budget | 2023 Budget | 2024 Budget |
|---------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Personnel | - | - | - | - | - | \$3,003,500 |
| Contractual Services | \$1,382,873 | \$1,641,200 | \$1,731,900 | \$1,894,600 | \$2,059,900 | \$69,500 |
| All Other Expenditures | \$17,104 | \$28,200 | \$25,600 | \$26,200 | \$96,400 | \$379,100 |
| Total Expenditures | \$1,399,977 | \$1,669,400 | \$1,757,500 | \$1,920,800 | \$2,156,300 | \$3,452,100 |

Operating and capital costs for fire service are allocated to the participating communities through what is known as the McGrath formula. This approach accounts for differences in population, property values, and call volumes between the three partner communities that fund the fire department. In essence, the formula adds together the percentages of population, property value, and calls in a given community and then divides by three (the number of communities) to arrive at the percentage of total costs that the community pays. The 2024 budget shows that charges to the townships amounted to 18.5% of total revenues, while Sun Prairie covered 81.5% of the total.

Under the agreement with the towns of Bristol and Sun Prairie, the city has agreed to provide its approved budgets to the town and a copy of its annual audit and any other relevant financial documents upon request. The city decides the fire budget on its own, but the towns can choose to withdraw from the agreement if their required contribution rises by more than 15% in a given year.

One factor driving the cost allocations going forward is the town of Burke [switching in July 2024](#) to the city of Madison for its fire service. In the first half of 2024, Burke covered 7.3% of the total fire department’s budget, but in the second half, these costs were allocated between the city of Sun Prairie and towns of Bristol and Sun Prairie. In the second half of 2024, the city of Sun Prairie covered 84.6% of the total costs for the second half of the year, with the town of Bristol covering 9.6% and the town of Sun Prairie 5.8%, according to the agreement between the communities. In



other words, Sun Prairie will pay a somewhat larger share of fire protection costs moving forward because of the loss of the Town of Burke. The Forum independently calculated these percentages and came up with substantially similar figures. They appear to be a reasonable cost allocation.

Table 12: Sun Prairie Budgeted Fire Operating Revenues, 2019-2024

| | 2019 Budget | 2020 Budget | 2021 Budget | 2022 Budget | 2023 Budget | 2024 Budget |
|---------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Fire Township Charges | \$0 | \$0 | \$0 | \$0 | \$0 | \$664,543 |
| Operating Revenue | \$0 | \$147,500 | \$162,500 | \$169,000 | \$189,200 | \$219,157 |
| Sun Prairie General Fund | \$1,399,977 | \$1,521,900 | \$1,595,000 | \$1,751,800 | \$1,967,100 | \$2,568,400 |
| Total Expenditures | \$1,399,977 | \$1,669,400 | \$1,757,500 | \$1,920,800 | \$2,156,300 | \$3,452,100 |

Fire Capital Needs

The fire department also needs to replace some vehicles eventually, though the city only plans to replace one specialized vehicle in the next five years: an engine with an estimated cost of \$960,000 in 2028, according to the capital plan. Sun Prairie maintains a fund to pay for fleet replacement and generally borrows to pay for vehicles over their useful life.

The city's capital plan does not include the replacement or remodeling of fire and EMS station one, as discussed in the capital assets section. Costs for this project may be as high as \$6 to \$8 million based on similar recent projects in Wisconsin. The final cost will depend on decisions about location and final design. Because these projects may not begin for another five years, inflationary pressures will likely raise costs. Another potential outlay that we have already discussed is the possible construction of a third station on the north side of the city, which could have a similar cost to the replacement of station one. Sun Prairie maintains a borrowing program to help pay for large-scale capital improvements like stations.

EMS Operations

Table 13 shows the expenditures budgeted by Sun Prairie for EMS services since 2019. Even in years with no change to the city's service area, total expenditures increased more than 6%. As discussed above, these years saw significant increases in EMS calls and other changes, driving up

Table 13: Sun Prairie Budgeted EMS Operating Expenditures, 2019-2024

| | 2019 Budget | 2020 Budget | 2021 Budget | 2022 Budget | 2023 Budget | 2024 Budget |
|---------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Personnel | \$1,735,661 | \$1,775,300 | \$1,856,600 | \$2,074,700 | \$3,103,100 | \$3,495,800 |
| Other Expenditures | \$376,200 | \$483,300 | \$567,200 | \$618,100 | \$809,100 | \$746,300 |
| Total Expenditures | \$2,111,861 | \$2,258,600 | \$2,423,800 | \$2,692,800 | \$3,912,200 | \$4,242,100 |

Beginning in 2020, costs rose due to a combination of unusually high inflation, low unemployment, and high worker turnover. The table also shows the impact of adding service in Marshall and the surrounding towns in 2023, as well as additional staffing hours for the third ambulance to make up for the longer drives following the closure of the SSM Emergency Center. All of those factors contributed to the 45.3% jump in budgeted spending that year. The bulk of these costs came from



the addition of seven city paramedic positions to serve the Marshall area out of the station in that village with a 24/7 team of two paramedics, an upgrade from the emergency medical technicians who previously served there and an improvement to the level of service in the area. Overall, budgeted EMS spending by Sun Prairie doubled between 2019 and 2024, rising from \$2.1 to \$4.2 million.

From a budget standpoint, the addition of Marshall has not had positive results for the city of Sun Prairie. More than one-fifth of Sun Prairie’s total personnel EMS costs are attributable to the Marshall station, but the station accounted for about 12% of total EMS calls in 2024. We will discuss the Marshall station agreement in greater detail below.

EMS services are funded through a combination of three major revenues: fees charged to patients and their insurers, charges paid by the partner communities, and payments from Sun Prairie’s general fund (property taxes account for about two-thirds of the ongoing revenues in this fund, with other sources such as state shared revenue and general transportation aids rounding out the total).

Table 14 shows the revenue sources that have funded Sun Prairie EMS since 2019.

Table 14: Sun Prairie Budgeted EMS Revenues, 2019-2024

| | 2019 Budget | 2020 Budget | 2021 Budget | 2022 Budget | 2023 Budget | 2024 Budget |
|---------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| EMS Township Charges | 64,820 | 69,300 | 81,454 | 101,435 | 425,163 | 529,043 |
| Ambulance Fees | 1,234,000 | 1,350,000 | 1,400,000 | 1,555,000 | 2,038,999 | 2,102,545 |
| Other Revenue | 0 | 3,700 | -62,154 | -35 | 5,038 | 8,012 |
| Revenue from EMS Service | 1,298,820 | 1,423,000 | 1,419,300 | 1,656,400 | 2,469,200 | 2,639,600 |
| Sun Prairie General Fund | 813,041 | 835,600 | 1,004,500 | 1,036,400 | 1,443,000 | 1,602,500 |
| Total Revenues for EMS | \$2,111,861 | \$2,258,600 | \$2,423,800 | \$2,692,800 | \$3,912,200 | \$4,242,100 |

Ambulance fees are consistently the largest funding source, covering between 50% and 60% of total EMS service costs. The next largest source is the city of Sun Prairie general fund, covering approximately 40% of total EMS costs. Charges to partner communities jumped significantly in 2023 and 2024 along with the new territory but remain a small share of the total.

Between 2019 and 2024, the contributions from partner communities grew more than eight-fold while Sun Prairie’s general fund contribution nearly doubled. Ambulance fees grew the least at 70%, but on Jan. 1 the city increased those charges, which will raise projected revenues by \$491,000 in 2025, according to the [mayor’s proposed budget](#). In short, both costs and revenues have risen rapidly in recent years and are on a trajectory that will be challenging to sustain.

EMS Capital

In addition to these operating costs, Sun Prairie is planning significant capital spending for EMS over the next five years, as outlined in its capital improvement plan. As discussed above, the EMS ambulance fleet is aging, and the city has planned ambulance replacements in 2026 and 2028.

The ambulance targeted for replacement in 2026 at an expected cost of \$388,800 is one of the Marshall vehicles inherited in the 2023 merger. In 2028, the city plans to replace an ambulance



stationed in Sun Prairie with more than 90,000 miles on its odometer at an expected cost of \$521,000. However, these timelines could be pushed back by apparent delays in the delivery of new ambulances. Another notable question is which communities will pay for this ambulance – the partners’ agreement states simply that Marshall is responsible for its own equipment and facilities. It may be wise to clarify the capital responsibilities, ownership, and decision-making process in any future agreements.

Marshall EMS Station Operating Costs

City of Sun Prairie officials say they approved the agreement to serve the Marshall station in 2023 for several reasons. Those included the possibility of adding a third ambulance to the system sooner than the city had projected, strengthening the Marshall service to reduce mutual aid calls, adding capacity in the area to respond to large

potential incidents in Sun Prairie, and an estimate at the time by the city’s finance division that the contract would be to the city’s financial advantage. Officials from Marshall and York have expressed their general satisfaction with the service.

Table 15: Costs of Marshall EMS Crew in 2024

| Item | Cost | Percentage |
|---------------|------------------|---------------|
| Salary | \$431,300 | 45.6% |
| Fringe | \$230,500 | 24.4% |
| Overtime | \$113,500 | 12.0% |
| Non-Personnel | \$169,800 | 18.0% |
| Total | \$945,100 | 100.0% |

Source: City of Sun Prairie

As part of our review, we analyzed the financial impact of this EMS agreement with Marshall and the towns of York and Medina. Operating the Marshall station in 2024 cost an estimated \$945,100, including salary and fringe benefit costs and expenses for vehicles, supplies, maintenance, and other needs. These are significant costs given that the station averages less than two EMS calls per day. Most costs were associated with the seven full-time paramedics needed to provide round-the-clock service in Marshall. Any hours not covered by those full-time paramedics were filled in by paid on premise staff. Table 15 on the previous page shows how these costs break down across different areas.

EMS costs are allocated between the various communities by first taking ambulance fees and subtracting them from EMS costs. The remaining amount is allocated between EMS communities according to the McGrath formula, which takes each community’s percentage share of the total property value, population, and EMS runs in the service area over a three-year period and then adds up those percentages and divides by the number of communities to get to the final share of costs.

Based on the agreement and the relevant numbers, residents and visitors to the three communities that represent the main service area of the Marshall station contributed a total of \$450,923 of revenue in 2024.

That included \$216,492 in ambulance fee revenues from patients and insurers and \$234,431 in

Table 16: Marshall Area Community Contributions to 2024 EMS Budget

| Community | Ambulance Fees | Cash Contribution | Total Revenues |
|---------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Marshall | \$147,599 | \$159,828 | \$307,427 |
| Medina | \$57,820 | \$62,612 | \$120,432 |
| York | \$11,073 | \$11,991 | \$23,064 |
| Totals | \$216,492 | \$234,431 | \$450,923 |

Source: City of Sun Prairie



payments from the communities. Table 16 shows the total revenues derived from each community.

In other words, the actual revenues from the three communities served by the Marshall station covered just under half, or 47.7%, of the estimated costs of that station. Based on the agreements we have reviewed, the remaining \$494,207 in estimated 2024 costs for the station were covered by revenue from the remaining three communities, principally the city of Sun Prairie but also Bristol and the town of Sun Prairie. This significant remaining cost is due to the characteristics of the other three communities served by the Marshall station and the nature of the cost allocation formula.

In brief, Marshall, Medina, and York together have smaller populations, lower property values, and fewer EMS calls per year than the city of Sun Prairie, Bristol, and the town of Sun Prairie. That reduces the costs allocated to the Marshall communities under the McGrath formula as well as the ambulance fees collected from residents. All of these factors mean the Marshall station communities pay roughly one-tenth of the total budgeted costs for the Sun Prairie EMS Department in 2024 across all of its territory. That share is despite Marshall having one of only three stations operated by Sun Prairie, one of only four ambulances, and seven of the 28 full-time paramedic positions (including the three lieutenants).

This arrangement seems favorable to Marshall, Medina, and York, and officials from these communities confirmed they are generally satisfied with it. First, their first responders have been upgraded from EMTs to paramedics. In addition, budget documents provided by Marshall show the village budgeted \$139,000 for EMS services in 2022 - the year before the agreement with Sun Prairie took effect - and budgeted \$130,000 in 2023 (slightly less than the previous year) and \$159,828 in 2024.

Sun Prairie does derive some benefits from operating the third station, including another ambulance in the case of large potential incidents, a larger pool of paramedic staff from which to draw to cope with turnover, sick leave, and vacations. The costs of the EMS chief and deputy chief are also spread over a greater number of communities. However, Sun Prairie officials had hoped the merger would allow the Marshall station to be used to respond to EMS calls in Sun Prairie when the city's other ambulance crews were out on other calls. In practice, that generally has not been the case because the Marshall station is too far for a rapid response to the city. According to our analysis of the data, the ambulance from the Marshall station in 2024 responded to 99 calls in the city of Sun Prairie out of its 606 calls plus an additional 26 calls in the town of Sun Prairie and Bristol.

This agreement could become somewhat more favorable for Sun Prairie as EMS costs within the city rise over time. When call volumes in Sun Prairie grow to levels that warrant an additional ambulance, those costs would be shared across all partner communities based on the cost-sharing formula even though the additional ambulance would mostly benefit Sun Prairie. Still, that time would be in the future and the partner communities might or might not agree. For now, city leaders may wish to discuss this agreement with their partners before it ends at the close of 2025. We will discuss potential policy options for this agreement in this report's final section.

Service Challenges and Opportunities

In general, Sun Prairie officials see their staffing, stations, and assets as adequate to meet their current demand with several caveats. First, they are concerned about their ability to recruit and



retain paid on premise firefighters who currently handle about 45% of the city's daily shift coverage. As noted earlier, these staff save the city an estimated \$1.5 million a year.

In the past, these paid on premise staff have included a large contingent of individuals with other jobs and a long-term commitment to working several days a month as firefighters. Today, younger individuals account for an increasing share of those employees, and many of them wish to work on a paid on premise basis only temporarily to gain experience and then move into a full-time job either with the city or another fire department. Like many other local governments, city officials fear that as their older committed paid on premise workers age out of firefighting and retire, the city will not be able to sustain this group of staff and will have to replace them with more costly full-time workers.

Since 2019, Sun Prairie's general fund payments for fire services have increased at an average rate of 12.9% per year, and EMS costs have grown by 14.5% per year, though that likely overstates the pace of growth because of the 2023 jump in costs associated with adding service to Marshall. A more accurate future projection may be the 8.4% annual growth between 2019 and 2022. Either way, these rates far outstrip state limits on the city's property tax levy used for operations. Sun Prairie's growth in net new construction averaged 3.4% between 2019 and 2024, suggesting that it will only become more difficult over time for the city to sustain its fire and EMS services.

Between 2019 and 2024, the combined growth of the city's fire and EMS budgets outpaced the rate allowed under the state's expenditure restraint program every year. The increases in 2023 and 2024 were largely driven by the addition of new EMS territory, and the incorporation of the fire department into city government, which would be excluded from the actual expenditure restraint calculations. However, even in years without territorial expansion, growth in costs have outstripped the allowed percentage under expenditure restraint. If the city faces similar pressures in other areas of the budget, these increases could lead it to eventually surpass the state limits and endanger its aid payment, which was just over \$457,000 in 2024.

The city also currently finds itself with aging EMS vehicles that need to be replaced and an aging station one that needs to be either renovated in its present location or moved to a more desirable place nearby, as we previously outlined. In addition, the fire and EMS chief states – and our own analysis validates – that response times in the city and to the north in the town of Bristol would benefit from a third station within the city of Sun Prairie near the intersection of North Bird Street and Egge Road. Without such a station, development in the town of Bristol could lengthen overall response times, which for now remain reasonable across the city's territory. The question for Sun Prairie is when response times in the northern part of its territory justify making such an investment.

This station would not initially need any additional staff beyond those currently employed by the city. The second ambulance and crew from station one could initially work out of this new station, which would provide only EMS service at first, and then over time a fourth ambulance crew within the city could be added. The station could also be built large enough to serve as a fire station eventually.

Projections of Future Calls

The Sun Prairie service area has seen tremendous development over the past decade, and can expect to see that trend continue. Using Department of Administration population projections, we



estimate call volumes for both 2028 and 2030 below. One important consideration in our estimates is the 21% increase in EMS calls per person in Sun Prairie between 2021 and 2024. At some point, that increasing rate of utilization should slow, but the most recent data show no sign of that so far.

Table 17: Projected Populations and Call Volumes

| | 2024 Population | 2024 Calls | 2028 Estimated Population | 2028 Estimated Calls | Change from 2024 | 2030 Estimated Population | 2030 Estimated Calls | Change from 2024 |
|-------------------------|--------------------|---------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|
| Fire – Other | 49,517 | 1,117 | 46,518 | 1,160 | 4% | 54,828 | 1,190 | 7% |
| Fire – Medical | 49,517 | 1,899 | 46,518 | 2,170 | 14% | 54,828 | 2,520 | 33% |
| Total Fire Calls | 49,517 | 3,016 | 46,518 | 3,330 | 10% | 54,828 | 3,710 | 23% |
| EMS Calls | 51,177 | 4,973 | 54,828 | 6,300 | 27% | 61,927 | 7,000 | 41% |

Source: DOA, Sun Prairie Fire and EMS Data, WPF Calculations

Table 17 shows our projections for fire and EMS calls, along with population projections for the existing fire and EMS service areas based on DOA figures. If the area for either fire or EMS services either shrinks or extends to additional communities, total call volume will change proportionately.

Total fire calls are expected to grow 10% by 2028 and 23% by 2030 compared to 2024. This more modest increase reflects in part the loss of the town of Burke in 2024 and the slower growth in non-medical responses such as fires, false alarms, gas leaks, or hazardous materials responses. The increase in call volume would require each fire station to respond to up to roughly 150 additional calls per year by 2028 and 350 calls per year by 2030.

On the EMS side, call volumes are expected to grow by 27% between 2024 and 2028, adding approximately 1,300 calls. Assuming continued rapid growth through 2030, Sun Prairie can expect an additional 2,000 calls, or 41% more. For context, that number is about 500 fewer than are handled by one EMS station in Sun Prairie today. In 2024, the service had approximately one ambulance crew on call for every 1,500 calls. In theory, therefore, the service would need at least one additional ambulance crew sometime between 2028 and 2030 to maintain current service levels. The majority of these calls are projected to come from the city of Sun Prairie, though some would also come from other fast-growing communities such as Bristol.

However, these fire and EMS projections rely on a number of assumptions. City leaders should not rely on the estimates uncritically and should update their expectations over time as they monitor whether the growth in calls is tracking these projections or diverging from them.



COMPARISON WITH PEER DEPARTMENTS

As part of our analysis, we examined the operations of four communities with relatively similar geographies, populations, call volumes, and service models to Sun Prairie. However, because of its large service territory with rural and urban areas, explosive population growth, and particular structure, it is difficult to find true peers for Sun Prairie Fire and EMS. In particular, one notable characteristic for Sun Prairie is the difference in service areas for the fire and EMS departments, which lead us to examine one peer agency that also has a split between those services.

Table 18: Peer EMS Department Characteristics

| | Service Area (sq. miles) | Service Population | Residents Per Sq. Mile | Calls for Service | Calls per Capita |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Sun Prairie Fire and EMS | 150 | 52,204 | 348.0 | 4,425 | 0.09 |
| Fitch-Rona EMS | 71.0 | 53,714 | 756.5 | 4,858 | 0.07 |
| Oshkosh | 263.0 | 90,042 | 342.4 | 9,106 | 0.10 |
| Appleton | 26.0 | 75,745 | 2,913.3 | 5,322 | 0.07 |
| South Shore Fire | 38.0 | 33,653 | 885.6 | 4,467 | 0.13 |

To compare EMS services, we examined four agencies that cover six main communities, using call data from 2023 and budget data from 2024 unless otherwise noted. As shown in Table 18, the Sun Prairie service area is larger than those of all of the selected peers except Oshkosh and is double the size of the Fitch-Rona EMS District (covering Fitchburg and the city and town of Verona) and six times that of Appleton.

Sun Prairie, however, serves a smaller population than all of the peers except the South Shore Fire Department. That poses a challenge, as the cost of the service is spread over fewer people. Sun Prairie’s calls for service fall closer in line with peer cities despite its smaller population.

We use four agencies that serve six larger cities and adjacent communities for our fire department comparisons. Table 19 shows some of the most important characteristics for each. Unlike with EMS, Fitchburg and Verona provide fire services through their individual municipalities.

Table 19: Peer Fire Department Characteristics

| | Service Area (sq. miles) | Service Population | Residents Per Sq. Mile | Department Responses | Adjusted Fire Calls | Adjusted Calls per Capita |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|
| Sun Prairie Fire/EMS | 78.7 | 46,286 | 588.1 | 2,679 | 950 | 0.021 |
| Fitchburg Fire Service | 35.0 | 35,125 | 1,003.6 | 2,600 | 1,160 | 0.033 |
| Verona Fire Service | 37.0 | 18,488 | 499.7 | 1,190 | N/A | N/A |
| Oshkosh | 27.0 | 67,425 | 2,497.2 | 1,243 | 1,243 | 0.018 |
| Appleton | 26.0 | 75,745 | 2,913.3 | 1,671 | 1,671 | 0.022 |
| South Shore Fire | 38.0 | 33,653 | 885.6 | 1,410 | 1,410 | 0.042 |

Sources: Respective city departments; *Note –Sun Prairie, Fitchburg and Verona report EMS responses as part of total fire calls, so for comparison we report both the total number of reported fire calls (2,679) and fire calls less medical calls (950) for Sun Prairie and Fitchburg. We were unable to adjust Verona calls.



The data show Sun Prairie’s fire service population is in the middle of our comparison communities, but the department fields the largest number of responses. Sun Prairie appears to receive double the calls of Oshkosh despite serving a population that is roughly two-thirds its size.

This disparity, however, represents a difference in how Sun Prairie reports its fire and EMS calls. Sun Prairie records responses by fire personnel to a medical call as a fire call in addition to an EMS call. In contrast, agencies like [Appleton](#) or [Oshkosh](#) record all calls to the agency as either medical (EMS or non-medical fire), according to the agencies’ annual report. That results in much lower numbers of “fire calls” since they do not double-count fire personnel responses to EMS calls. To make a more accurate comparison with some of our peer communities, we remove fire department responses to medical calls, which brings the Sun Prairie total more in line with these other agencies. Because Fitchburg records service calls in the same manner as Sun Prairie, we also report the number of fire and EMS responses by firefighters in this way for another comparison.

Sun Prairie’s fire department also covers a far larger, less densely populated area than any of our comparison communities except Verona, largely because it serves the towns of Sun Prairie and Bristol. These two data points highlight some of the challenges facing the department. While Fitchburg, Verona, and the South Shore Fire Department represent peers in the present, Appleton and Oshkosh are currently much larger but provide potential models for Sun Prairie in the coming decades as it grows.

Fitchburg and Verona Fire and EMS

Fitchburg and Verona are neighboring communities to the south and west of Madison in Dane County. Like Sun Prairie, these two communities have experienced tremendous population growth over the past 25 years, which has strained their emergency services.

Fitchburg and Verona share with Sun Prairie similar political and economic conditions including rapid growth and high service levels, and are also partners in Dane County’s Advanced Life Support agreement. The two agencies also offer appropriate comparisons because they serve a combination of medium-sized urban areas and geographically large rural areas. Because fire and EMS services are separated, we examine each of them independently below.

Table 20: Snapshot of Fitch-Rona EMS and Sun Prairie

| | Sun Prairie | Fitch-Rona |
|-----------------------------|---------------|---------------|
| Basic Comparison | | |
| Service Area (sq. miles) | 150.0 | 71.0 |
| Service Population | 52,204 | 53,714 |
| Calls for Service (EMS) | 4,425 | 4,858 |
| Calls per Capita | 0.085 | 0.090 |
| Part Time Employees | 6 | 21 |
| Total FTEs | 28.0 | 23.5 |
| License Level | Paramedic | Paramedic |
| Stations | 3 | 3 |
| Financial Indicators | | |
| 2024 Budget | \$4,242,100 | \$3,949,574 |
| Per Capita Budget | \$81.26 | \$73.53 |
| Apparatus | | |
| Ambulances | 6 (2 reserve) | 5 (2 reserve) |
| Rescue Vehicles | 0 | 4 |
| Crews in Operation | 4 | 3 |

We compare EMS service first. Fitch-Rona typically has two paramedics staffing each of three ambulances around the clock and has shifted from a volunteer-based operation to an agency with



full-time paramedics over the past 20 years. Sun Prairie has the same setup for its two stations in the city but one more ambulance than Fitch-Rona once Marshall is factored in.

Sun Prairie EMS has a somewhat lower call volume than Fitch-Rona EMS despite having a similar population and a relatively similar median age (36.9 years for Sun Prairie compared with 38.3 for Verona and 34.7 for Fitchburg). Sun Prairie has more full-time staff (28 paramedics) than Fitch-Rona (24), which uses more paid on premise staff. The two departments generally have the same number of crews on duty at one time. Fitch-Rona has more ambulances than Sun Prairie, but some are in reserve, and generally the district has the same number of crews on duty at one time. Fitch-Rona’s ambulances operate out of three stations, including two in Fitchburg that double as fire stations.

The cities of Fitchburg and Verona provide fire service to their own communities, with Verona also serving the town of Verona. The populations served are relatively similar, given that the majority of Sun Prairie’s calls originate in the city. However, because Sun Prairie serves rural areas without fire hydrants, the city does need specialized vehicles that can bring water to the scene as well as equipment for fighting brush fires.

While Verona serves its entire area from one station, Fitchburg has three, largely due to the more even distribution of the population across its service area. However, Fitchburg only has staff available to respond from two stations and has administrative staff at the third location.

Typically, Verona

has three full-time staff members on duty at once, including one leadership officer staffing a command car, an officer, and a driver. Verona also has two paid on premise firefighters, who help to staff one apparatus. Paid-on-premises firefighters are used both to fill in gaps when full-time staff are unavailable and to provide additional capacity when responding to large incidents. Sun Prairie staffs four firefighters at a time at each of its two stations, and does so at a slightly higher per-person cost, likely due to its greater reliance on full-time firefighters than Verona.

Fitchburg also relies on a combination of career and paid on premises employees, typically staffing one truck at each of the two stations with four firefighters apiece. These four include two career

Table 21: Fitchburg, Verona and Sun Prairie Fire Service

| | Sun Prairie | Verona | Fitchburg |
|-----------------------------|-------------|-------------|---------------|
| Basic Comparison | | | |
| Service Model | Pro/Vol | Pro/Vol | Pro/Vol |
| Service Area (sq. miles) | 78.7 | 37 | 35 |
| Service Population | 46,286 | 18,488 | 35,125 |
| Fire/EMS Calls for Service | 2,679* | 1,190 | 2,600 |
| Fire/EMS Calls per Person | 0.062 | 0.064 | 0.067 |
| Part-time Staff | 59 | 44 | 26 |
| Full-time FTE | 22 | 10 | 18 |
| Stations | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| Financial Indicators | | | |
| 2024 Budget | \$3,452,100 | \$2,194,109 | \$3,661,447** |
| Per Capita Budget | \$74.58 | \$118.20 | \$104.24 |
| Apparatus | | | |
| Engine/Ladder/Tender | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| Utility/Command | 6 | 3 | 8 |
| Brush | 1 | 1 | 1 |

*Unadjusted fire response data for accurate comparison with Fitchburg.

**2023 budget data



firefighters, plus two more staff drawn from either the department’s paid-on-premise or intern firefighters. The city’s fire cost per resident is in between Fitchburg and Verona.

Fitchburg’s reported fire call volume is closer to Sun Prairie’s for two reasons. First, the department reports fire EMS responses separately from EMS calls, and second, Fitchburg firefighters respond to Echo, Delta, and Charlie EMS calls as Sun Prairie does. Verona Fire reports fire calls in the same way as Fitchburg, and makes an effort to respond to all Echo, Delta and Charlie EMS calls as well, resulting in comparable fire call volumes.

Oshkosh Fire and EMS

Oshkosh provides combined fire and EMS services through a single department. The agency responds to fire calls only in the city but provides EMS services to a larger set of communities, including the city of Omro, the village of Winneconne, and nine surrounding towns. Its EMS population served totals over 90,000 and its service area extends 263 square miles.

While Oshkosh serves a much larger population than Sun Prairie, it still provides a useful comparison. The city of Sun Prairie and surrounding towns are projected to grow to a population of more than 56,000 by 2040, while the EMS population it serves is expected to grow to 62,000, putting them both closer to the populations served by Oshkosh. Sun Prairie provides fire services to a larger geographic area than Oshkosh, while Oshkosh has a larger EMS service area.

Table 22: Snapshot of Oshkosh versus Sun Prairie

| | Sun Prairie | Oshkosh |
|-------------------------------|---------------|---------------|
| Basic Comparison - EMS | | |
| Service Area (sq. miles) | 150 | 263 |
| EMS Service Population | 52,204 | 90,042 |
| EMS Calls for Service | 4,425 | 9,106 |
| EMS Calls per Capita | .085 | .091 |
| Fire Service | | |
| Service Area | 78.7 | 26.9 |
| Fire Population | 46,286 | 67,425 |
| Fire Calls for Service | 950 | 1,243 |
| Fire Calls per Capita | 0.021 | 0.018 |
| Employees and Stations | | |
| Part Time Employees | 65 | |
| Full Time Employees | 50.0 | 115.0 |
| EMT License Level | Paramedic | Paramedic |
| Fire Service Model | Pro/Vol | Professional |
| Stations | 3 | 6 |
| Financial Indicators | | |
| 2024 Budget | \$7,694,200 | \$16,073,254 |
| Apparatus | | |
| Fire Apparatus | 13 | 16 |
| EMS Vehicles | 6 (2 reserve) | 9 (2 reserve) |

Annual fire calls per capita in Oshkosh and Sun Prairie are similar after medical responses are removed from Sun Prairie’s data. Oshkosh staffs enough firefighters to operate up to seven pieces of apparatus at a time and has five engines, one ladder truck, and one quint (a ladder and engine combination), which are all available for responses.

Notably, Oshkosh only staffs its trucks with three firefighters rather than four like Sun Prairie, which means both savings on staffing costs and some reduction in speed and capability during responses. For example, guidelines from the National Fire Protection Association state that when two firefighters are suppressing a fire inside a building, two more should be standing by outside to assist.

There are more EMS service calls in Oshkosh, but they occur at a similar rate per resident as in Sun Prairie. In EMS responses, Oshkosh uses dual-trained firefighter paramedics while Sun Prairie



employs dedicated paramedics. Oshkosh has three fully-staffed ALS ambulances on call at one time and can also use on-duty firefighter paramedics and four additional ambulances as needed. Oshkosh officials indicate that they respond with only a fire apparatus for some types of medical calls such as lift assists – cases in which a patient has fallen and cannot stand on his or her own.

For now, Sun Prairie has good reason to retain some paid on premise firefighters who are EMTs and not paramedics. However, the city could choose to explore Oshkosh’s model of upgraded licenses for at least a limited number of full-time firefighters, such as two per shift. This would give Sun Prairie another option for filling open paramedic shifts and potentially allow the agency to respond to EMS calls that require a higher level of medical training with firefighter-paramedics operating either out of a backup ambulance or a fire engine as necessary and appropriate.

Sun Prairie could choose to deploy an additional ambulance or engine with firefighter paramedics only when the city’s three front-line ambulances were already in use. This back-up crew might arrive faster in the city than either the Marshall ambulance or a neighboring agency through a mutual aid request. Exploring this model could allow the city to have another ambulance available without adding to its staffing levels and might help Sun Prairie to get by until such time as it chooses to add a fourth ambulance within the city.

Appleton Fire and EMS

Like Oshkosh, Appleton provides fire and EMS services through a single agency. Appleton is our only peer agency that serves just one municipality, though it does provide automatic aid in fire response to Grand Chute, Neenah-Menasha, Fox Crossing, Little Chute, and Kimberly. The overlapping Appleton fire and EMS service areas are the smallest of our peer communities. Despite these differences, Appleton provides a useful model of a larger fire and EMS department.

Appleton firefighters are trained to the EMT-basic license level but are expected to upgrade to paramedic licensure by the summer of 2025. A private ambulance contractor handles EMS calls that require transport or an ALS level of care. Outagamie County handles dispatch services for Appleton. When comparing raw call volume, Sun Prairie’s fire department responses outpaced Appleton’s by roughly 1,000 in 2023. However, the differences fall away when comparing Sun Prairie’s much smaller number of non-medical fire calls to

Table 23: Snapshot of Appleton vs. Sun Prairie

| | Sun Prairie | Appleton |
|-------------------------------|---------------|--------------|
| Basic Comparison - EMS | | |
| Service Area (sq. miles) | 150 | 25.8 |
| EMS Service Population | 52,204 | 75,745 |
| EMS Calls for Service | 4,425 | 5,322 |
| EMS Calls per Capita | 0.085 | 0.070 |
| Fire Service | | |
| Service Area | 78.7 | 25.8 |
| Fire Population | 46,286 | 75,745 |
| Non-EMS Fire Calls | 950 | 1,671 |
| Fire Calls per Capita | 0.021 | 0.022 |
| Employees and Stations | | |
| Part Time Employees | 65 | |
| Total Full Time Employees | 53 | 96 |
| EMT License Level | Paramedic | EMT Basic |
| Fire Service Model | Pro/Vol | Professional |
| Stations | 3 | 6 |
| Financial Indicators | | |
| 2024 Budget | \$7,694,200 | \$14,454,610 |
| Apparatus | | |
| Fire Apparatus | 13 | 16 |
| EMS Vehicles | 6 (2 reserve) | None |



Appleton's calls. Appleton responds to slightly more calls per person per year (0.22) than Sun Prairie (0.21).

Appleton has six stations. All of them have at least one apparatus staffed at all times, and one station has two fully-staffed apparatus. Appleton assigns a minimum of three and optimally four firefighters to each apparatus, so the city sometimes operates with smaller crews than Sun Prairie.

Like Dane County, Outagamie County uses the [medical priority codes](#) from the National Academies of Emergency Dispatch. Appleton firefighters respond to all types of calls because they are the only public emergency responders. On the most severe calls and those requiring transportation, private ambulances also respond. Appleton officials indicate that it's likely they would continue this practice if the city shifted away from the private ambulance service model, as there are benefits for response times and value in having additional personnel.

Appleton has a slightly younger median age (36.5) than Sun Prairie. However, despite Appleton having more than 20,000 more people than Sun Prairie, the city responded to less than 1,000 more EMS calls. This difference cannot be attributed to a higher poverty rate in Sun Prairie, as 2023 Census Bureau data estimates that 8.5% of Appleton residents live in poverty, compared to Sun Prairie's poverty rate of 6.1%. It may be attributable in part to Sun Prairie's lower owner-occupancy rate of 61.8% compared to 66.7% in Appleton.

Sun Prairie could adopt Appleton's model of sending firefighters that are licensed at the EMT level to respond to less serious EMS calls that do not require patient transport such as lift assists. This approach could give the city the ability to respond to these less severe calls with four firefighters instead of two paramedics and four firefighters, while keeping the city's more highly trained paramedics and ambulances for more severe calls and reducing their call load.

South Shore Fire Department

The South Shore Fire Department serves the villages of Mount Pleasant and Sturtevant in Racine County, providing fire and EMS services to both communities after the services were combined in 2009. Both communities contribute to the single agency budget, with the village of Mount Pleasant serving as the fiscal agent. Like Sun Prairie, Mount Pleasant and Sturtevant have experienced economic and population growth, and the combined department presents an example of an agency that provides both fire and EMS services to somewhat smaller communities.

While the South Shore department serves a less densely populated area than Oshkosh or Appleton, it does not cover large, truly rural areas as Sun Prairie does. Sun Prairie firefighters respond to more overall calls than the South Shore department but fewer non-medical calls and less than half the number on a per capita basis.

Most South Shore firefighters are also licensed at a paramedic license level, giving these staff the capability to respond to emergencies with either an ambulance or a piece of fire apparatus. According to our [previous research](#), the department has three ambulances available at all times, distributed across the agency's stations. Two ambulances are staffed with two dedicated firefighter paramedics each, while a third station has a three-person crew that can shift between a fire apparatus and an ambulance. Each of the department's four stations has a fully-staffed rescue



engine, with three staff members per vehicle. By having cross-trained firefighters, the department can provide the equipment and response that is most relevant to an incident. With this model, the agency has set an organizational goal to have staffing for up to five ambulances available with on-duty personnel in the event they need to be called into action.

South Shore EMS calls per person are higher than in Sun Prairie and the highest among our peer comparison cities. Sturtevant, with a median age of 36.5, and Mount Pleasant, with a median age of 45, have older populations than the Sun Prairie service area. As a result, Sun Prairie responded to only about 500 more EMS calls in 2023 than the South Shore department, even though Sun Prairie serves nearly 20,000 more people.

Both agencies employ paramedics for EMS response. South Shore operates out of four EMS stations, in part because of the geographic size of Sturtevant and Mount Pleasant and the distribution of housing across the area.

Like South Shore, Sun Prairie could consider dual paramedic and firefighter licensing for some full-time firefighter staff. These dual-licensed responders could staff a station with both a fire engine and an ambulance. Sun Prairie could choose to deploy this additional ambulance when the three front-line ambulances in the city were already in use, and this back-up crew could arrive faster than either the Marshall ambulance or a mutual aid response.

Table 24: Snapshot of South Shore versus Sun Prairie

| | Sun Prairie | South Shore |
|-------------------------------|---------------|--------------|
| Basic Comparison - EMS | | |
| Service Area (sq. miles) | 150.2 | 38.0 |
| EMS Service Population | 52,204 | 33,653 |
| EMS Calls for Service | 4,425 | 4,467 |
| EMS Calls per Capita | 0.085 | 0.133 |
| Fire Service | | |
| Service Area | 78.7 | 38.0 |
| Fire Population | 46,286 | 33,500 |
| Fire Calls for Service | 950 | 1,410 |
| Fire Calls per Capita | 0.021 | 0.042 |
| Employees and Stations | | |
| Part Time Employees | 65 | N/A |
| Total Full Time Employees | 53 | 67 |
| EMT License Level | Paramedic | Paramedic |
| Fire Service Model | Pro/Vol | Professional |
| Stations | 3 | 4 |
| Financial Indicators | | |
| 2024 Budget | \$7,694,200 | \$10,698,701 |
| Apparatus | | |
| Fire Apparatus | 13 | 8 |
| EMS Vehicles | 6 (2 reserve) | 7 |

Peer Leadership Comparisons

Our peer departments all have similar leadership structures with a single chief at the top supported by deputy and battalion chiefs, but there is still substantial variation between departments. A simple way to compare these different departments is by dividing the number of total fire and EMS positions by the number of chief, deputy chief, and battalion chief positions, resulting in the number of employees per non-union leadership positions. While not a perfect comparison, it provides insight into the workload on agency leaders. Our peer communities vary, with the lowest number of staff per leadership position in the Fitch-Rona EMS department (11.1) to the highest in Oshkosh (12.7). Table 25 shows how each of the peer communities compare on this metric.

Sun Prairie has one chief, one full time deputy fire chief, three battalion chiefs, and two part-time assistant fire chiefs. Together, they lead a department with 28 full time paramedics and 22 full-time



firefighters, plus a large number of paid on premise firefighters and paramedics, with a total head count of 115. This means Sun Prairie has 10 full-time fire and EMS employees for every non-union leadership position, which would be less than some peers. However, if we add paid on premise employees, Sun Prairie’s ratio compares much less favorably to the peer communities, increasing to 16.4 employees for each leadership position. It is worth noting that some management tasks such as employee evaluations must be carried out for each employee whether he or she is paid on premise or not. In addition, there are no deputy chief positions dedicated to leading Sun Prairie’s EMS division. Among our peer agencies that operate both EMS and fire departments, Oshkosh has a dedicated EMS chief, while South Shore does not as its fire and EMS operations fully are integrated.

When part-time employees are included, Sun Prairie has a greater staff to officer ratio of any of our peer communities. Elevating one position to the battalion chief level, focused on EMS service, would bring the ratio to 14.1 employee per officer, still well above the peer communities. Elevating three existing positions to the battalion chief level would drop the ratio to 11.2 employees per chief, in-line with our peer communities.

Table 25: Fire and EMS Staff to Leader Ratios by Community

| Community | Total Employees per Leadership Position |
|---------------------|---|
| Sun Prairie* | 16.4 |
| Oshkosh | 12.7 |
| Appleton | 12.0 |
| South Shore | 11.2 |
| Fitch-Rona EMS* | 11.1 |
| Fitchburg Fire* | 11.7 |
| Verona* | 13.5 |

Source: WPF research. *Includes part-time employees



OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

Overall, Sun Prairie's fire and EMS services are of good quality and are delivered in close cooperation with the city's neighbors. However, rising costs, shrinking part-time labor pools for both firefighters and paramedics, limited city revenues, and to some extent lengthening response times suggest the status quo may be difficult to sustain over time.

We now present options for consideration by Sun Prairie leadership as they seek to respond to these challenges. While not an exhaustive list, these potential actions illustrate a range of directions open to the city. They are based on our analysis of Sun Prairie's current services, agreements, call data, and financial figures, as well as lessons learned from other studies and our analysis of peer communities.

Many of these options come with tradeoffs, and city leaders may view some unfavorably or as options to use only as a last resort. However, spending on fire and EMS services in Sun Prairie is growing more rapidly than the city's levy for operations is allowed to rise under state limits and more rapidly than the cap for state expenditure restraint aid. Without some changes, the city may be unable to sustain these services or only able to do so by sharply limiting spending on other priorities.

The first group of potential solutions are options to meet the growing costs of EMS and fire services over time without major service changes for Sun Prairie. We also include alternatives related to working with neighboring communities to control costs and improve services and strategies to control spending that would involve more substantial changes to Sun Prairie's current approach to delivering services.

Respond to Rising Costs without Changing Services

Revisit the Agreements with Marshall and Other Towns and Potentially the Town of Hampden

Our analysis of the agreement with the village of Marshall and the towns of York and Medina shows that Sun Prairie is paying more than half of the cost of the current EMS crew there. That share is somewhat surprising given that the Marshall ambulance crew primarily serves the village and surrounding towns and does not provide extensive service to Sun Prairie because the distance between the two communities lengthens response times. The agreement with Marshall and two towns expires at the end of 2025, providing an opportunity for Sun Prairie and the other communities to revisit the agreement. Any changes to it could lead to challenges for Marshall, and for that reason Sun Prairie officials may wish to pursue a collaborative approach.

The city could change the agreement in various ways that might make it more favorable for Sun Prairie. That could include increasing the contribution of the partner communities, the fees charged for ambulance services in those communities, the level of service, or the placement of the ambulance and station. For example, the ambulance in Marshall could be permanently stationed in Sun Prairie or it could be called temporarily to a Sun Prairie station when all three ambulances in the city are in use and the fourth crew in Marshall is unoccupied. Either approach would provide more rapid responses in Sun Prairie, where most of the calls occur, but would also lengthen responses in Marshall if calls were made there.



To reduce costs, Marshall officials have suggested that officials could also consider reducing the staffing and service hours of the ambulance crew in the village through an approach such as eliminating the night shift, a period during which the least calls occur. Last, one remaining factor to discuss would be who would cover the eventual costs of replacing the aging ambulance in Marshall. With all of these points, community leaders may wish to approach this negotiation with care, as it may ultimately lead to the dissolution of the agreement.

Right now, the fundamental issue from the perspective of Sun Prairie is the current formula used to allocate costs between the two communities. That formula, which accounts for population, property values, and EMS call volume, could be seen as fair for communities that are sharing the benefits of the EMS crew in Marshall to a more or less similar extent. However, the city and town of Sun Prairie and town of Bristol are making much less use of the ambulance than Marshall, Medina, and York even though Sun Prairie and its closer towns are paying roughly half of the costs of the rig after accounting for its fee revenues. The agreement could become somewhat more favorable for Sun Prairie when the city eventually adds an additional ambulance crew within its borders since the costs will be shared by Marshall and the surrounding towns. However, that would be in the future and Marshall might choose not to accept those future costs.

EMS costs are also relatively high at present for the town of Sun Prairie and Bristol. Looking at the 2025 allocation of total EMS costs under the McGrath formula (which factors in call volume, equalized value, and population), the town of Bristol is paying \$179,587, or 7.9%, of the EMS costs for the six communities that are not covered by ambulance fee revenue. Bristol, however, only generated 3.5% of the total call volume between 2021 and 2023, the period used to allocate costs. Bristol is paying \$23,107 more than Marshall, which has an ambulance stationed in the village and generated 8.1% of the call volume, or more than twice as much as Bristol.

Similarly, the town of Sun Prairie generated 3.6% of the calls, but is paying \$108,209 or 4.7% of the costs. Renegotiating the Marshall agreement could potentially lower the costs for the town of Bristol and Sun Prairie as well as the city of Sun Prairie, though it would mean higher cost for the remaining three communities.

At the request of Sun Prairie officials, we created an optional formula to allocate the costs of the Marshall ambulance. This formula does so based solely on calls for service, which means omitting equalized value and population. This approach essentially treats the Marshall ambulance as a contract service being paid for by the communities using it. The first step is allocating the budgeted costs of the Marshall service in 2025, including the salary and fringe for the paramedics, as well as the operating costs of the ambulances and administrative costs such as billing. We also add one-eighth of the cost of both the agency chief and deputy chief since roughly half of their duties are dedicated to EMS service and one quarter of the ambulances operate out of the Marshall station ($\frac{1}{2} \times \frac{1}{4} = \frac{1}{8}$).

We then calculate an average revenue per ambulance run of \$549 in 2024 and multiply that by the number of Marshall station runs to calculate a total fee revenue for the station for 2024. Average run revenues are lower than the \$1,500 ambulance fee from 2024 because this transport fee does not apply to every single call that the department receives, and there are numerous cases where the agency was unable to recover the entire fee. Instead, the average run revenue represents the total



revenue divided by the total call volume. That total is subtracted from the station’s costs to arrive at a net cost figure. The total net cost is multiplied by the percentage of runs to each community originating from Marshall to arrive at an allocated cost. This means the city of Sun Prairie, village of Marshall, and surrounding towns all pay for the Marshall crew on a per-call basis. Because Marshall and the town of Medina received the most calls from this ambulance, they pay more under this formula. Though we have prepared the formula with just one year of EMS calls, doing so with three years of data might be preferable to reduce volatility.

The remaining costs for Sun Prairie’s EMS services such as the other three ambulances stationed in the city are shared among the city and towns of Bristol and Sun Prairie. To come to the remaining cost of services, we simply subtract the costs associated with the Marshall ambulance from the total EMS budget. We then subtract revenue associated with the remaining EMS runs from the remaining expenditures to arrive at the net costs. We then split these net costs among the city of Sun Prairie and the towns of Sun Prairie and Bristol by applying the current McGrath formula.

At this point, we add up the payments owed by each community for the Marshall ambulance to the payments owed if any for the other three ambulances (these costs only apply to the city and town of Sun Prairie and Bristol). Table 26 below shows the new payments under this potential formula, the 2025 payments under the existing McGrath formula, and the difference between the two. The city of Sun Prairie and the town of Bristol would see drops in their payments, while the town of Sun Prairie would experience little change, and Marshall, Medina and York would see increases.

Table 26: EMS Costs by Community Under Current and Proposed Cost Formulas

| Community | 2025 Payment Under Current Formula | Payment Under New Formula | Difference | Percentage Change |
|---------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------|------------|-------------------|
| City of Sun Prairie | \$1,770,930 | \$1,447,060 | -\$323,870 | -18.3% |
| Town of Bristol | \$179,587 | \$138,049 | -\$41,538 | -23.1% |
| Village of Marshall | \$156,480 | \$449,836 | +\$293,356 | 187.5% |
| Town of Sun Prairie | \$108,209 | \$109,531 | +\$1,322 | 1.2% |
| Town of Medina | \$60,013 | \$128,524 | +\$68,511 | 114.2% |
| Town of York | \$12,505 | \$14,727 | +\$2,222 | 17.8% |
| Total | \$2,287,724 | \$2,287,727 | \$3 | 0.0% |

Examine Frequent EMS Users

Our analysis of call data finds that a small number of addresses account for a disproportionate number of the city’s EMS calls. This is not surprising, as large multi-family residential buildings generate more calls, particularly those that are nursing homes or assisted living facilities. Still, just four addresses accounted for nearly 650 EMS calls in 2024, a sizable proportion of the total. Those addresses are all in the city itself and include two senior living facilities and two apartment buildings.

The large number of repeat visits suggests that Sun Prairie might benefit from formally adopting the practice of Mobile Integrated Healthcare (MIH), a program in which paramedics and other medical staff work proactively work with frequent EMS users to prevent medical emergencies and to reduce future EMS calls. Also known as community paramedicine, this approach calls for working in the



patient's residence to manage chronic conditions and ensure residents have access to medical care outside of an emergency room. The Forum's recent report on [EMS services in Milwaukee County](#) has more details on Mobile Integrated Healthcare and details local agencies such as Milwaukee, West Allis, and Greenfield that have implemented this approach.

Sun Prairie officials say they had a similar program during the COVID-19 pandemic, funded through grants, but when these grants ran out, the program stopped. City leaders may wish to assess how successful that program was and whether it is reasonable to continue in a similar or modified form.

Though MIH can save money over time, it comes with an upfront cost. For that reason, Sun Prairie might benefit from collaborating with its neighbors or Dane County to invest in staff or services, either a formal MIH program or a less advanced effort that would use social workers and a case management approach. The city also appears to have a larger than average portion of its fire calls to come from false alarms, so this might be another area in which the city could work with property owners to reduce its calls. On the other hand, as we have noted, the city does have a partnership with Madison to respond to mental health crises through the CARES program and address these events with a less cost-intensive response. This program may address a least a portion of the excess EMS calls.

A Property Tax Referendum to Cover Fire and EMS Costs

Throughout this report, we have examined factors that have contributed to rising fire and EMS costs and looked for options to slow that growth. However, solving these budget challenges using cost cutting alone may prove challenging given the continued development in Sun Prairie and state restrictions on local government revenues and state aid (for a discussion of these limits, see our 2019 report on municipal finances "[Dollars and Sense](#)").

One option being considered by Sun Prairie leaders to manage the city's overall finances is the possibility of a referendum asking voters for the authority to exceed state-imposed limits on the city's property tax levy used for operations. This approach has been used by other Dane County communities such as Madison, Middleton, and Monona (for more information see our recent analysis of the [city of Madison budget](#) and our brief on the [November 2024 referendum results](#)). However, not all referenda pass. A similar ballot measure in Fitchburg failed last year and the referendum in Monona passed by only a slim margin.

In its referendum request, the fire and EMS department seeks 11 new positions over the next five years. Within the fire division, the plan would request a full-time fire inspector position in 2026 and an additional inspector position in 2030 plus and five full-time firefighters between 2026 and 2029. These positions are intended to help fill shifts despite the ongoing loss of part-time firefighters.

On the EMS side, the plan suggests adding three full-time paramedic positions over five years, plus one deputy EMS chief in 2028. The plan would also promote three existing EMS positions to battalion chiefs in addition to the city's three existing EMS lieutenants. As noted in our analysis of peer communities, the addition of the deputy chief and promotion of the existing positions would address the general lack of organizational leadership for Sun Prairie's fire and EMS divisions, which together currently have one chief and one deputy chief. Sun Prairie officials suggest that the



additional EMS staff would also allow the department to add an additional ambulance, once all three positions are added.

In terms of staffing needs, our overall analysis suggests that the greatest pressures on both the fire and EMS divisions come from responses by both to EMS calls, the ongoing decline in the number of older part-time firefighters, and the city's limited number of leadership positions. Though additional fire inspection capacity is also needed, the city could consider whether to address that need through either freeing up existing firefighters through some of the policy changes suggested in this report or by partnering with a neighboring community.

Currently, the EMS service operates four ambulances, which would average approximately 1,200 calls per ambulance per year, if the calls were divided equally between the four crews. However, because the Marshall ambulance handles between 500 and 600 calls per year, that means the three other ambulances average more than 1,400 calls per year. With growing medical call volume, it is likely that at some point between now and 2028 the three ambulances stationed in the city of Sun Prairie will become overstressed. They will potentially be serving more than 1,900 calls per year and, with the closure of the SSM Emergency Center, they will still be transporting many patients into downtown Madison hospitals.

This would suggest the more immediate need for additional EMS personnel in some fashion to address this growing call volume. However, if the ambulance and crew in Marshall can be used to address a substantial portion of the additional workload, the need for a new ambulance might be delayed. In the absence of a new agreement with Marshall or some other development such as greater services at a closer emergency room such as the UW Health East Madison Hospital, it is likely that the agency will need an additional ambulance in the next several years to avoid significant impacts to response times. By 2030, the city is likely to need the additional ambulance even if the Marshall ambulance crew can be more fully integrated into the city's response options.

In terms of additional leadership positions, the city seems justified in adding a deputy EMS chief, since Sun Prairie would still have a higher staff to management ratio than our analysis found in its peer communities. Such a move would free up the current deputy chief to provide greater management attention to the fire division as well. Our peer analysis shows that if Sun Prairie also added all three of its EMS battalion commanders, its staff to management ratio would be somewhat lower than its peers. On this point, city leaders may wish to further review the potential costs and benefits.

If Sun Prairie leaders do not wish to change any policies to reduce the need for firefighting staff, then the city would likely need to add firefighter positions as requested by the department. The number, however, is difficult to predict since it would depend on the rate of attrition of the older part-time firefighters. The cost of additional management capacity for the department, for example, might be justified if it allowed leadership to sustain its part-time firefighter arrangement for longer.

Increasing Fees for Fire and EMS Services

Another possibility for raising revenue would be fees for false alarms generated from fire alarm systems. These false alarms impose significant work on fire and police departments, as they must respond to these calls as if they were truly structure fires. False alarm fees are typically imposed as



civil fines, with the amount of the fine increasing along with the number of false alarms. Many communities, including all of our peer communities, have instituted these fees.

For example, in Appleton, one of our peer communities, the first false alarm call from a location does not result in a fine, but the subsequent calls lead to a fine of \$173.47 for each one. Sun Prairie could consider a similar fee to recoup costs associated with responding to false alarms and this fee might have the added benefit of incentivizing property owners and managers to take steps to reduce false alarms.

In a similar vein, some nursing homes and assisted living facilities have made it a practice to call fire and EMS crews to lift residents who have fallen and cannot stand on their own. This approach can save worker’s compensation costs for these facilities but results in an added workload for the city’s already stressed first responders. The city could consider imposing a fee on institutions for these lift assist calls.

The city already increased its ambulance fees in 2025 from \$1,500 for residents and \$1,700 for nonresidents to \$1,900 across the board, to reflect the effects of inflation and other cost drivers, so the fees could not be raised further in the near term. However, in specific cases of unpaid ambulance fees such as cases involving minors, the city may be able to increase fee revenues by simply gathering enough information about the patient and his or her parents or guardian to allow for proper billing and payment.

Table 27: Fire and EMS Impact Fees on Residential Homes by Type

| Community | Fire/EMS | Fire | EMS | Public Safety** | Total |
|------------|----------|-------|-------|-----------------|-------|
| Deerfield* | \$679 | | | | \$679 |
| DeForest* | | | | \$736 | \$736 |
| Fitchburg | | \$622 | | | \$622 |
| Middleton | | \$238 | \$260 | | \$498 |
| Oregon | | \$112 | | | \$112 |
| Verona | | \$310 | | | \$310 |
| Windsor* | | | | \$335 | \$335 |

*Flat fee on all residential developments **Includes police in some cases
Sources: University of Wisconsin-Extension and WPF research

Last, the city could consider a public safety impact fee, which would be imposed on development to cover the capital costs of investments such as a new fire or EMS station that would help to serve those areas. This approach acknowledges the costs associated with providing emergency services to new development while avoiding imposing those costs on all taxpayers (for more information on impact fees, see our 2024 [report on the Milwaukee County Parks](#)). While Sun Prairie has a transportation impact fee, the city does not currently impose a fire and public safety impact fee.

At least seven Dane County communities use these fees to help pay for their fire, EMS, and public safety infrastructure, according to a [study by UW-Extension](#). Table 27 shows these communities and the fees on new single-family homes. These fees can also apply to new multi-family, commercial, and industrial developments. DeForest’s impact fee was [recently changed](#) to account for the construction with the village of Windsor of a new joint fire and EMS station. Windsor is considering a fee change as well to pay for the project, to \$831 for a single family home, but as of the time of preparation of this report the fee has not yet been changed. The fees vary by community, with some based on the value of the development and others based on the proposed square footage of the development.



One factor to consider is that these fees are in addition to any other impact fees that these communities may impose for infrastructure such as parks, sewer, police, and other services. Decisions about any fee would need to take into account the total cost of all the impact fees in place in a community on new developments as well as the tradeoffs in imposing these added costs on new dwellings at a time of high housing costs.

Collaborate with Neighbors on Shared Challenges

Further Cooperation on Direct Services May Take Time

Conversations with neighboring communities, and a review of their geography, stations, and call volumes, suggest that it may prove difficult in the near term to expand direct collaboration on EMS services with the neighboring communities that participated in this study. One of the main challenges is simply the distance from the city of Sun Prairie (where most of the current calls originate) to those other communities, which impedes a speedy response.

For now, the most likely partner for additional collaboration appears to be the city of Madison, which like Sun Prairie is experiencing substantial development on the border between the two communities. That at least opens the possibility of collaboration on a level such as a shared station or ambulance crew from one community housed in the building of another, with Madison's station 11, located on the city's far east side and only minutes from Sun Prairie, as one possible option. Madison officials indicate that this station has one open vehicle bay that could accommodate at least one additional emergency response unit.

Sun Prairie is already collaborating closely with Madison through its fire protection agreement and new partnership to deploy the Madison CARES team to respond to behavioral health incidents. To continue the process, Sun Prairie officials might consider doing joint training and coordination of purchasing and equipment to make further collaboration more feasible in the future. This possibility would have to be examined carefully, since the greater staffing and training requirements for the Madison Fire Department might affect the savings otherwise possible through collaboration. Yet Madison officials have expressed openness to more collaboration between the two cities, as evidenced by the agreements they have already reached with Sun Prairie on EMS and in other areas such as Metro Transit bus service.

It is worth noting, however, that there is a substantial difference in fire and EMS spending levels between Sun Prairie and Madison. Our [Municipal Datatool](#) uses state Department of Revenue data to compare municipal spending for every community in the state. Those data show that in 2022 Sun Prairie spent \$124 per resident on fire and EMS, but Madison spent \$230 per capita. The lower costs in Sun Prairie reflect factors such as the city's extensive use of part-time firefighters and firefighters trained as EMTs rather than paramedics. These data suggest that it would be difficult to adopt large expansions of the current partnership such as a full merger since it would involve much greater costs for Sun Prairie. However, this difference might shrink over the coming years as Sun Prairie loses part-time staff and relies more and more on full-time firefighters. Despite the cost differences, there may be a number of areas where collaboration short of fully merging can benefit both communities, so leaders should look for these opportunities.

The next logical community for additional collaboration would be the village of Windsor, but officials there opted not to participate in this study. Cottage Grove officials are open to a discussion on collaboration but are limited by the distance between Sun Prairie and the village of Cottage Grove as well as the fact that the village and town of Cottage Grove have a joint EMS district with the town and village of Deerfield and would typically need to reach mutual agreements about service. Development between Sun Prairie and Cottage Grove could change this picture over time. The construction of an Amazon distribution facility in the village of Cottage Grove north of Interstate 94 may usher in even more development. Given that the Deer Grove station is located to the south of the village of Cottage Grove, there may be room for collaboration on direct services in the future.

Other Forms of Collaboration May Merit Consideration

In the near term, our conversations uncovered a number of potential options for collaborating on back-office activities, fire inspection, and other activities rather than direct emergency response. These possibilities include:

- Adopting the free Dane County contract that provides ImageTrend reporting software for tracking EMS runs and for billing. All other municipalities in Dane County use ImageTrend software for these purposes, but Sun Prairie pays for its own software from ESO. Dane County would not charge implementation or onboarding fees associated with switching to the new platform as well as an investment of staff time and training, but would charge an annual fee of \$500. Officials from Sun Prairie note that they use their current ESO platform for scheduling and that it integrates with their cardiac monitors, allows for automatic uploading to the National Fire Incident Reporting System and to the city's EMS billing agent, tracks fire and EMS incidents, and manages fire inspections and permits. Dane County officials say their ImageTrend contract would allow Sun Prairie to perform most of those functions for free except for scheduling (not available) and managing inspections and permits (available but at an additional cost). The software also includes mapping functionalities to track incidents that the county can customize to serve the needs of Sun Prairie. Given the \$16,700 annual cost of the city's current software platform for EMS (which does not include the \$12,600 ESO charge for fire service software), Sun Prairie officials may wish to consider this change.
- Joint EMS billing or joint contracting for billing, given that most of the agencies in the county already use the same billing agent, EMS|MC. Sun Prairie could potentially partner with other communities on a single contract. A factor for consideration in this respect is Sun Prairie's choice for call reporting software, which would need to be factored into any plans for billing. Notably, however, other communities that use the Dane County choice for run reporting software also use EMS|MC, so the systems should be reasonably compatible.
- Jointly purchasing materials. Currently, Dane County provides medical supply vending machines where ambulances can refill first-aid supplies and medicines. These supplies are purchased by Dane County through a local hospital pharmacy leverage high-volume pricing and to ensure these purchases are prioritized by vendors. Participating communities then reimburse the county. The vending machine concept helps demonstrate the potential for joint purchasing of other products such as fire hoses, defibrillators, stretcher systems, and more. This could be done through the county or simply in conjunction with other



communities. In addition to the potential for cost savings, there are other benefits of following this model, including standardization of equipment across agencies, which would improve their ability to collaborate more closely in the future. In addition, by working together on purchasing, agency leaders would be able to build relationships and foster further collaboration. The most likely partners for this effort would be Dane County or other suburban communities. Because of its size, Madison would have less to gain from joint purchasing, although the Madison fire chief did not rule out the possibility of at least exploring such an agreement in the future.

- Partnering with neighboring communities for joint fire inspection services or shared staff. Currently, Sun Prairie firefighters face challenges in completing inspections, suggesting the city might need to add staff in the years to come. If other communities were experiencing the same workload issues and would be willing to share the cost of adding personnel, this could be a place where distance would make less of a difference in providing services.
- Using existing Sun Prairie mechanics and facilities to do work on public safety vehicles from neighboring communities such as ambulances for a fee. An official from the Deer Grove EMS District expressed an interest in this possibility. Sun Prairie officials would need to assess whether in fact they have capacity among their mechanics and that the revenues to be gained through such a contract would be worth the effort.
- Work with other partners such as Dane County to create a pool of paramedic staff who are available for part-time employment and who have the proper certifications and credentials. This pool could be structured in various ways to ensure a smooth system for participating communities while still addressing important considerations such as liability and insurance concerns. Dane County officials have expressed a willingness to further explore this idea, which if successful might be extended to part-time firefighters as well.
- Communities across the county already collaborate to ensure common EMS protocols and benefit from at least some coordinated medical direction from Dane County. Some communities indicate they would like to have more medical direction from the county so they would not need to contract for those services. However, there are some benefits to decentralized medical direction, including collaborative decision-making about changes to protocols and spreading the workload associated with training EMS staff. Sun Prairie already spends some funds of its own on medical direction. The city could work with county leaders to devise a system for more integrated county medical direction that maintains the benefits of the current system. In the absence of county interest, Sun Prairie could pursue a partnership with its neighbors on a joint medical direction contract. Deer Grove EMS is one entity that has said it needs additional medical direction beyond what is available through the county medical director and might serve as one potential partner.

Principles for Evaluating Service Sharing Opportunities

Sun Prairie officials have asked for principles to use in assessing whether to partner with other communities on local services. Ultimately, the most important question for them to ask is whether a



merger or other partnership would make the local governments more efficient or effective in their work, both as a group and individually. To get at that larger objective, one initial question is whether the collaboration would make use of existing and potentially duplicative assets, staff, or vendors of one or both local governments or if both communities already have a need to make additional expenditures on a similar function or geographic area because of factors such as growth along a shared border. If that is the case, then the two local governments may be able to spread the cost of those overlapping outlays across more parties.

However, if the collaboration would require at least one party to make otherwise unplanned expenditures for staff such as an EMS crew or an asset such as a fire and EMS station, the partnership will have to be scrutinized more carefully because of the additional spending involved for at least one of the parties. In the case of the agreement with Marshall, York and Medina, the city of Sun Prairie needed to add an ambulance crew to serve the village and towns (the station and ambulance were already in place), whereas in the case of the similar agreement with the town of Sun Prairie, the city could serve the town with its existing crews and stations.

At the outset, it's also important to assess the existing relationship between the potential partners and address questions of governance and leadership. Ideally, the two communities should have at least a reasonable working relationship already and a willingness to agree on the form of governance that the agreement will use, whether it is a strictly contractual service or the creation of a shared fire or EMS district. It's also important to agree on who will lead the new service, so the retirement of a key leader such as a fire or EMS chief in one municipality can create an opening for that community to work with another. Last, local leaders can ask whether regional bodies such as Dane County might play a supporting role, as the county is doing in the case of the CARES agreement with Madison.

Another crucial question for partnerships is distance. The distance from the village of Marshall to the city of Sun Prairie means that EMS responses cannot currently be made rapidly between the two communities. In the similar town of Sun Prairie agreement, most of the town is closer to the city and more easily served from existing city stations and crews. Notably, back-office functions such as software or billing are not at all dependent on distance and other functions such as inspections or maintenance are much less dependent.

An additional question for a potential partnership is the current level and cost of the respective services in the two communities. If costs and service levels are significantly greater in one community, that can make it more difficult for the two communities to agree on the concrete details of a shared service plan and sustain it. In the case of Marshall, for example, the village EMS service was previously delivered by EMTs rather than paramedics in the case of Sun Prairie. Our analysis of the partnership with Madison notes that the Forum's [Municipal Datatool](#) can be used to easily compare Sun Prairie's fire and EMS spending per capita with all other Dane County municipalities.

One more notable question in a partnership is how costs and benefits will be allocated. In the case of the Marshall station, relatively few of the responses of the new paramedic crew have benefited the city of Sun Prairie and its two closest towns, but the costs have been allocated in a way that implies the benefits were more broadly shared. In cases where a service will be used primarily by one



partner but delivered by another, it may be more appropriate to have the costs paid on a contract basis or through a formula more similar to that.

Service Changes May Help Address Growing Challenges

Sun Prairie's current challenges include rapidly rising costs, a shrinking pool of part-time firefighters, and modest increases in response times. These options might help to respond to those pressures while maintaining adequate service levels.

Cross-Train Firefighters as Paramedics

Our review shows that Sun Prairie's use of part-time firefighters is a good approach and should continue for as long as the city can recruit and retain these staff. However, over time the challenges associated with doing so are pushing the city to shift to more full-time firefighters.

While this shift is unfavorable from a financial perspective, it would allow the city to make its operations more flexible by training or hiring some full-time firefighters to be licensed at the paramedic level. City officials have expressed concern that requiring all firefighters to become paramedics would create challenges such as eliminating some workers who are only interested or able to serve as paramedics.

This concern could be addressed by retaining all current paramedics and only certifying a limited number of firefighters as paramedics. However, this option could give the city more flexibility with its workforce. First, this role might appeal to some firefighter candidates who like the idea of also working as a paramedic, potentially offering a new segment of job seekers. Firefighter paramedics might also help the city fill open paramedic shifts, reducing either overtime or part-time paramedic hours. Certification as a paramedic does carry a cost in terms of time and money, taking [1,200 hours or more](#) compared to [180 hours of training](#) to become an advanced EMT. However, paramedics can perform additional tasks such as using a needle for chest decompression and intubation, so this additional cost for staff would come with new capabilities.

Other options include:

- Following the lead of the [South Shore](#) department or Oshkosh and stationing paramedic-trained firefighters in a location with both an ambulance or fire engine, with the type of vehicle used dependent upon the type of call received. This would allow the department to staff an additional ambulance when the city decides that it is necessary without the costs of an additional full-time crew. Currently, the west side EMS station has the space to add an additional vehicle, where the agency could station one of its backup ambulances, and use this for responses in cases in which the other three ambulances stationed in Sun Prairie were in use. Though this could slow the city's response to a potential fire, it might be seen as preferable to delayed responses to serious EMS calls or the increased spending for a fourth (or eventually a fifth) ambulance crew within the city of Sun Prairie.
- If Sun Prairie does not wish to seek paramedic firefighters, the city could follow the lead of Appleton and Oshkosh and use firefighter EMTs or firefighter paramedics as first responders



in less severe cases such as lift assists. This would reduce the need for responses to these calls by the city's ambulance crews, keeping them in reserve for more severe calls.

Limit the Number of Cases to Which Fire Crews Respond

Currently, the city of Sun Prairie dispatches an ambulance with two paramedics and an engine with four firefighters to all EMS calls that are coded as a Charlie-level priority or greater by Dane County Dispatch. As previously noted, Charlie calls can involve serious situations such as heart problems, shortness of breath, or stroke. This practice is used by communities such as Madison and Fitchburg and has advantages, since firefighters are trained to at least the EMT level and sometimes arrive to emergency calls before the ambulance does and deliver initial care such as chest compressions or a defibrillator. Firefighters may perform other crucial tasks such as carrying heavy patients out of buildings, managing bystanders, and serving as an ambulance driver so both paramedics can work on a patient. These tasks may speed up the ambulance crew's overall response and return it to service more quickly.

For these reasons, reducing the level of service provided in these cases would be a difficult decision for city leaders to make and one that could affect patient care in some cases. However, we have documented that the rise in EMS and fire costs for the city has been substantial in recent years and is expected to continue.

In 2024, the city paid for six staff to go to more than 2,300 EMS calls in city and town of Sun Prairie and Bristol, or nearly half. Roughly one-quarter of those, or nearly 1,200, were Charlie calls. Not all cities have adopted this approach and Sun Prairie itself did not do so prior to 2017. If city leaders are unable to find the necessary revenues for these cost increases and feel compelled to find areas to cut, this would be one area that they could contemplate.

Limit the Number of Firefighters on Each Engine

As we have noted, some other peers such as the South Shore Fire Department assign at times only three firefighters to an engine or other apparatus. Assigning four firefighters is preferable from a service quality perspective and represents the target number in National Fire Protection Association guidelines. For example, a [2010 report](#) by the National Institutes on Standards and Technology found that "four-person crews were able to complete necessary fireground tasks on a low-hazard residential structure fire...nearly 25 % faster than the three-person crews." Three firefighter crews could also delay responses to calls through the Mutual Aid Box Alarm System, which [requires four firefighters](#) on an engine at all times.

However, having two additional firefighters on each shift (one for each fire station) represents a substantial cost for Sun Prairie, and it will grow over time as the city has greater difficulty filling the part-time spots on its roster. If city leaders are unable to absorb those costs within financial constraints such as state levy limits, this change would represent one option to help address that challenge. The city could also choose to implement this reduced staffing for the night shift only – it might help to lessen the loss of older part-time firefighters who work at night.



Build a Third Station for EMS Response

Sun Prairie officials have said that in time they believe they will need to build a third station on the north side of the city that would initially house one ambulance and its crew. As we have noted previously, the city would not need to add a new ambulance or paramedic crew initially and could simply shift one of its current ambulances there. The station could be built to eventually house an additional fire engine once one is needed.

Sun Prairie officials have provided two stations in other communities as examples of the potential costs involved in building a new facility of this type, including a 20,700 square foot facility in La Crosse that cost \$8.2 million and a 12,600 square foot station in Baraboo that cost \$6.5 million. Fire officials in the state estimate that construction costs for a new fire station range between \$250 to \$500 per square foot.

Sun Prairie officials may wish to start discussions with the town of Bristol and attempt outreach with other neighbors such as the village of Windsor to explore whether it would be possible to defray some of the costs of this potential investment by making it a part of the agreement with Bristol or by entering into a new agreement with Windsor to have the station service parts of that community as well. It is difficult to speculate on the feasibility of a new partnership with Windsor given that the village did not participate in this study, but given the substantial growth in the village it is clearly worth continued communication with elected officials there. Last, as we have noted, state law allows for impact fees on development for financing fire stations and that remains another possibility.



CONCLUSION

As we have outlined, Sun Prairie's fire and EMS services have undergone substantial change over the past several years. In 2023, the city added the village of Marshall and three more towns to its service area, and in 2024 the city absorbed the departure of the town of Burke, converted its nonprofit fire department to a city agency, and then merged it with the city EMS service. In addition, all these changes have taken place in a community that has grown more over the past two decades than almost any city in Wisconsin.

Overall, Sun Prairie has managed these transitions well, extending its EMS service out to an area that now totals more than 150 square miles. The city has partnered with Madison to ensure better responses to structure fires and a new service to respond to mental health crises. At the same time, Sun Prairie faces challenges from rapidly rising costs, the loss of its longstanding part-time firefighters, and state-imposed limits on both city revenues and spending.

Our review finds that the growing costs over the years reflect many factors. Those include the increase in Sun Prairie's EMS service area and the city payments for the Marshall EMS station, the closure of the SSM Emergency Center and the added time for EMS transports, the conversion to a city fire department and shift to more full-time firefighters, the growing and aging population, the recent surge in inflation and record low unemployment, and policy decisions such as expanding the range of EMS calls to which the fire department automatically responds.

The resulting service demands are sobering: the number of medical and non-medical responses by firefighters have tripled 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. Clearly, the city must be strategic to cope with these increases.

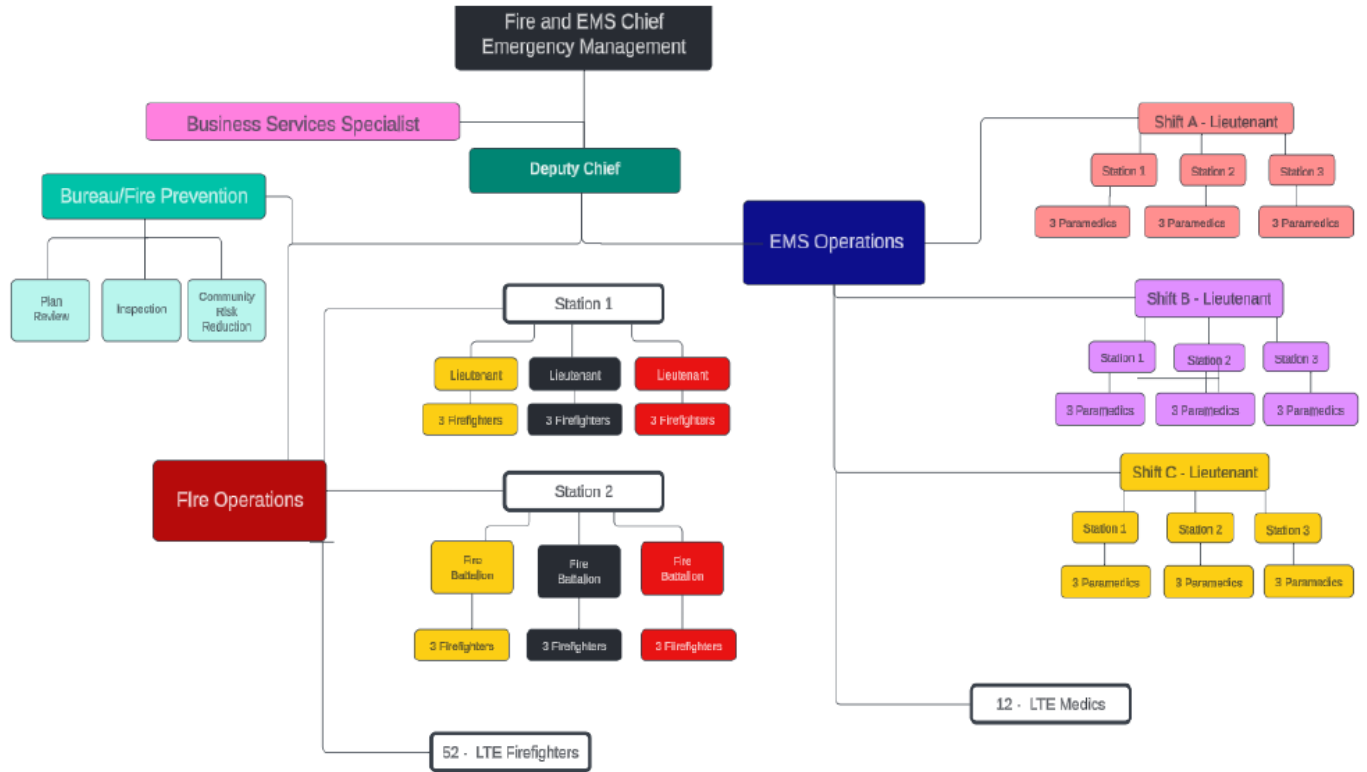
Some of these service demands and cost drivers lie outside Sun Prairie's control, but the city still has some potential options for addressing them. Those include revisiting the EMS agreement with Marshall, York, and Medina; using a Mobile Integrated Healthcare approach to reduce frequent EMS users; looking at a referendum to cover new operating costs, and exploring fines for false alarms or impact fees on development to cover eventual capital costs such as a third EMS and fire station. Sun Prairie could also consider partnerships with other local governments now to share software and other services that are not hampered by distance. For the future, city leaders could continue to discuss possible agreements with Madison, Cottage Grove, and Windsor to cope with the continued growth in northeast Dane County.

Our review of Sun Prairie's peers and its own past operations also finds several options the city could draw on to control costs. Those include introducing the use of at least some firefighter-paramedics; limiting crews to three firefighters per apparatus instead of four; charging for repeated false fire alarms or EMS lift assist requests by businesses; and reducing automatic firefighter responses to Charlie priority EMS calls.

Many of these options for the city come with tradeoffs, but so do the rising costs and challenges of the status quo. We hope this analysis has been helpful to city leaders, staff, and residents as they attempt to manage the growing pains of recent years and move into the future together.



APPENDIX I: FIRE AND EMS ORGANIZATION CHART

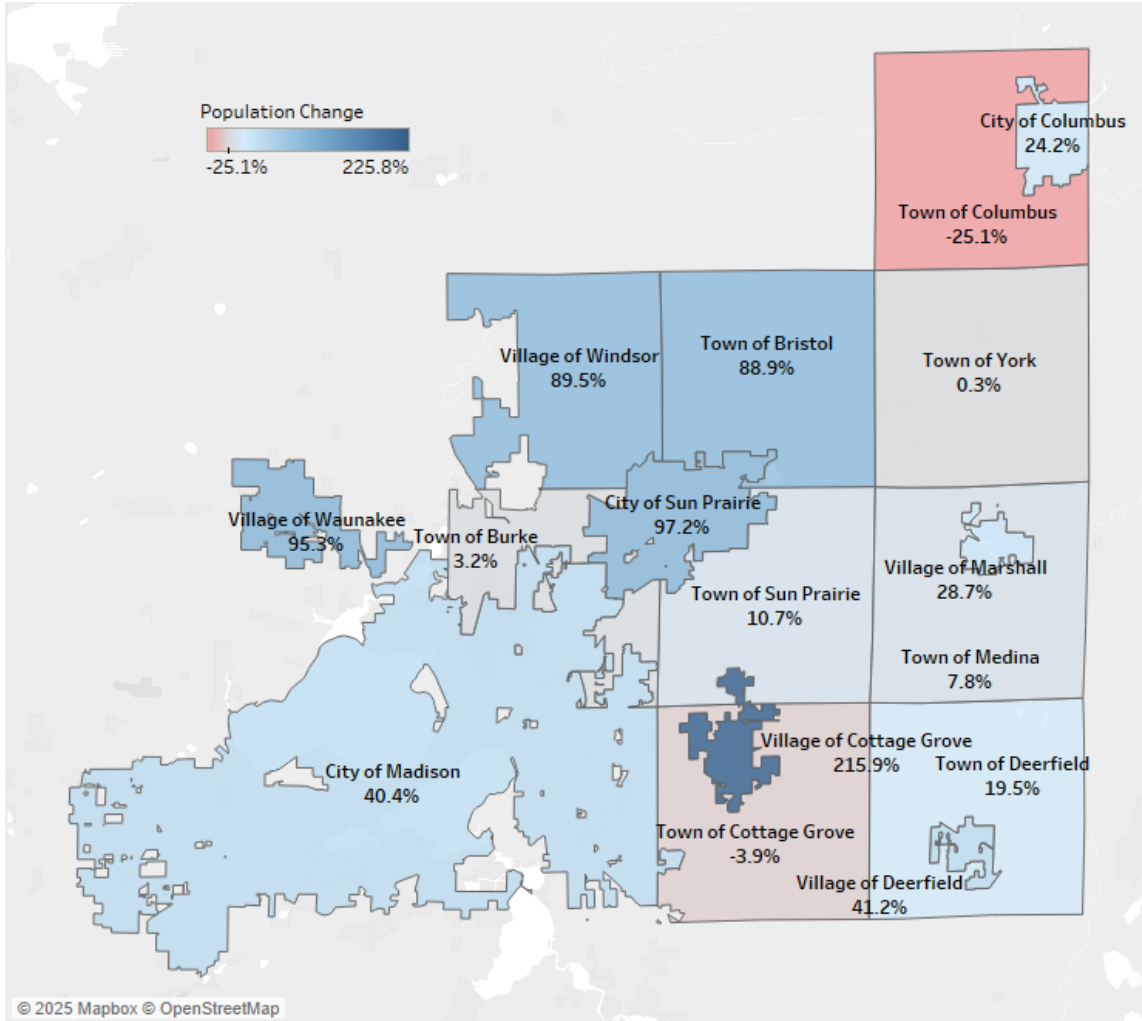


Source: City of Sun Prairie



APPENDIX II: POPULATION GROWTH

Figure 7: Population Rising in Northeast Dane County, Especially in Cities and Villages
 Percentage change in population, 2000 to 2024



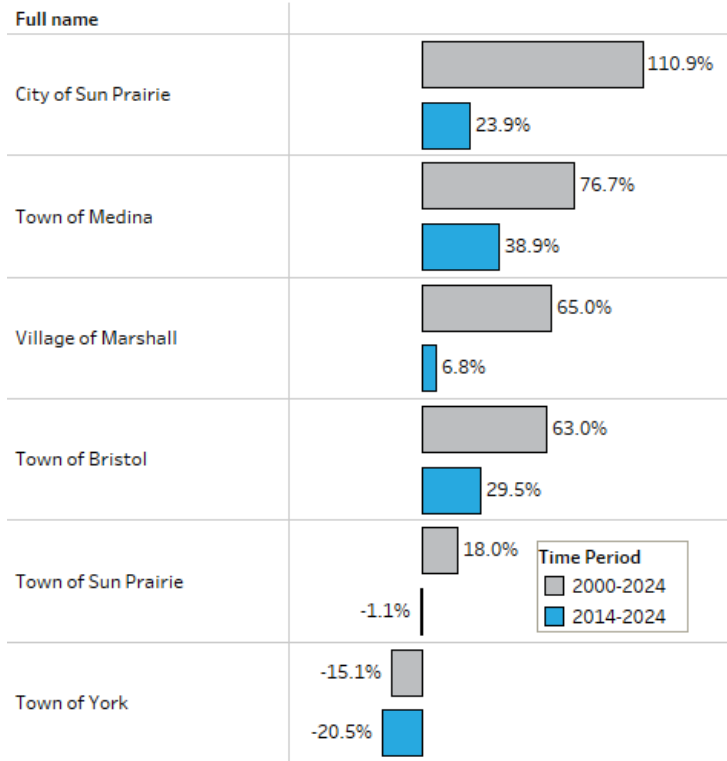
Sources: Wisconsin Department of Administration; Village of Windsor incorporated during this period.



APPENDIX III: OTHER CHARTS

Figure 8: Growth in Tax Levies Lags that of Property Values

% change in municipal total tax levy, adjusted for inflation



Source: Wisconsin Department of Revenue

Table 28: Sun Prairie’s Fire and EMS Vehicles

| Year | Type | Life Cycle in Years | Cost to Replace | Station Number | Owner |
|------|-----------------|---------------------|-----------------|----------------|-------|
| 2013 | Staff Car | 10 | \$60,000 | 1 | City |
| 2007 | Pumper/Tender | 20 | \$1,000,000 | 2 | Towns |
| 2017 | Command Car | 10 | \$85,000 | 1 | City |
| 2013 | Pumper | 15 | \$1,000,000 | 1 | City |
| 2019 | Pick Up | 10 | \$45,000 | 1 | City |
| 2020 | Chiefs Car | 10 | \$65,000 | 2 | City |
| 2017 | Ladder | 15 | \$1,800,000 | 1 | City |
| 2024 | Ladder | 15 | \$1,600,000 | 2 | City |
| 2019 | Brush Truck | 15 | \$285,000 | 1 | Towns |
| 2019 | Squad | 20 | \$750,000 | 2 | City |
| 2022 | Pumper | 15 | \$1,000,000 | 1 | Towns |
| 2017 | Tender | 20 | \$490,000 | 1 | Towns |
| 2008 | Light Tower | As needed | | 1 | City |
| 2022 | Utility Vehicle | As needed | | 1 | City |

