

# County trying to plan for fire, EMS futures

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Walworth County's long-running discussion about the future of fire and emergency medical services moved forward again in January, as members of the county's Fire/EMS Study Committee met to prepare guidance for municipal leaders reviewing a countywide service study.

More discussion from its Jan. 28 meeting:

## Regional consolidation

During the October presentation to the Intergovernmental Cooperation Council, researchers illustrated how consolidation could change fire and EMS operations in the county's southwest region, where several smaller departments operate in close proximity.

Currently, that region is served by departments based in Darien, the City of Delavan, the Town of Delavan, Sharon, Fontana, Walworth, and Williams Bay, operating from eight separate stations. The study presented a hypothetical regional consolidation model showing how those departments might function as a single regional service rather than separate agencies.

Under the example model, operations would be reorganized so staffing and equipment are deployed regionally rather than by municipal boundaries. The proposal assumed a combined career and paid-on-call staffing structure led by a single chief with shared administrative and command staff.

The model also assumed that some stations would close while others would operate with full-time staffing. Specifically, stations in Walworth, Williams Bay, and one Town of Delavan location would be consolidated into nearby stations, which would then operate with full-time crews.

Researchers noted that even though travel distances might increase slightly for some calls, response times could improve because crews would already be on duty rather than responding from home or work.

The presentation also noted facility implications. For example, the Fontana station, which would assume coverage for larger areas including Williams Bay and Walworth, would likely need renovation or replacement to accommodate around-the-clock staffing. Local officials have already begun discussing station improvements, making that assumption realistic within the model.

Researchers stressed the scenario was illustrative rather than prescriptive, intended to show operational and financial implications rather than dictate action. Still, they outlined potential benefits, including a larger shared workforce improving recruitment and retention, consolidation of administrative functions, unified training, strategic deployment of staff, and possible reductions in duplicate apparatus and facilities.

At the same time, the report noted potential concerns, including reduced local control, uneven financial impacts among communities, and the complexity of merging staffing and command structures. Ultimately, the study emphasized that consolidation decisions would depend on local negotiations and political willingness.

## Budgets widely vary

Not all communities operate independent fire or EMS departments.

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Williams Bay, for example, receives service through cooperative arrangements involving neighboring departments, primarily Fontana Fire & Rescue. Similarly, the Town of Geneva contracts for fire and EMS services, primarily through the Lake Geneva Fire Department and neighboring agencies, rather than maintaining its own department.

The Village of Walworth, however, does operate its own department through Walworth Fire & Rescue, which reported a 2024 operating budget of approximately \$468,000, serving both village residents and portions of surrounding communities under mutual aid and service agreements.

Budget data compiled as part of the Wisconsin Policy Forum study illustrate how differently fire and EMS services are funded across Walworth County communities.

Larger regional departments serving cities or mul-

tipal municipalities operate with multi-million-dollar annual budgets. In 2024, for example, Elkhorn Area Fire & EMS operated with a budget of approximately \$4.7 million, while Lake Geneva's fire department budget totaled roughly \$3.5 million.

Departments in East Troy, Fontana, and Whitewater reported annual budgets between roughly \$1.3 million and \$1.5 million, reflecting larger staffing levels and broader service areas.

Mid-sized communities operate with budgets generally ranging between \$500,000 and \$900,000, including departments serving Bloomfield-Genoa City, Darien, Lyons, and the Town of Delavan.

At the lower end, departments relying heavily on volunteer staffing operate with much smaller budgets. Sharon Fire & Rescue reported a 2024 operating budget of roughly \$293,000, while Troy Center Fire Department

operated with approximately \$60,000, reflecting limited staffing and reliance on neighboring departments for EMS transport.

Study authors note such wide differences explain why service solutions effective in one community may not easily apply in another.

### Apparatus costs

During presentation of the study to the Intergovernmental Cooperation Council in October, researchers emphasized that rising equipment costs are one of the primary long-term pressures facing departments.

For planning purposes, the study used the following replacement cost estimates:

- Ambulances: approximately \$350,000 each
- Fire pumper/tanker trucks: about \$1 million
- Ladder trucks: approximately \$2.25 million
- Heavy rescue trucks: around \$400,000

Researchers noted that

departments often must operate multiple vehicles simultaneously while maintaining backups during repairs, meaning replacement cycles represent recurring financial pressures. In consolidation modeling presented to officials, analysts estimated that reducing duplicate apparatus across regions could eventually save more than \$10 million over a decade, though such savings depend on local governance decisions and operational changes.

### Long-term stability

The study categorized departments by projected long-term sustainability based on staffing, finances and organizational structure, not current service quality.

Departments serving Delavan (town), Fontana, Lake Geneva, East Troy, Elkhorn and Whitewater were identified as having stronger long-term stability.

Departments serving Walworth, Lyons, Sharon,

Darien, City of Delavan and Bloomfield-Genoa City were categorized as stable today but facing potential future pressures.

Departments serving Williams Bay, Troy Center and Lauderdale-LaGrange were identified as facing greater long-term sustainability challenges, largely due to reliance on shrinking volunteer or paid-on-call staffing models.

Researchers stress these classifications reflect future risks rather than present service shortcomings.

The study presentation also reviewed Insurance Services Office ratings measuring fire protection capabilities. Ratings range from 1, indicating exceptional protection, to 10, meaning minimum standards are not met, and can influence insurance costs.

Departments serving Whitewater, Elkhorn, Delavan, Fontana and Lake Geneva carry ratings of 3 within their primary service areas,

reflecting strong fire protection capabilities.

Most other departments fall into average ranges, while a few rural departments carry ratings of 7 or higher, often due to infrastructure factors such as water supply or staffing availability rather than operational performance.

### Next steps

No structural changes were approved at the January meeting. Instead, the committee plans to provide municipal officials with guidance and discussion points at an upcoming ICC meeting expected later this spring.

For now, departments continue operating under current structures while communities consider how best to prepare for future service demands.

Committee members emphasized their goal is not immediate change, but ensuring communities understand decisions they may face in coming years as fire and EMS service needs evolve.