

**CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION
CITY OF WATERTOWN
January 11, 2021
7:00 p.m.**

Mayor Jeffrey M. Smith Presiding

Present: Council Member Sarah V. Compo
Council Member Ryan J. Henry-Wilkinson
Council Member Jesse C.P. Roshia
Council Member Lisa A. Ruggiero
Mayor Jeffrey M. Smith

Also Present: Kenneth A. Mix, City Manager, City Attorney Robert J. Slye

City staff present: Fire Chief Matthew Timerman

DISCUSSION

EMS Dispatch/Fire Department Response

Mayor Smith began the meeting by giving an overview of how EMD (Emergency Medical Dispatch) had evolved over the years. He noted that the City's rescue trucks went into service in 1984 or 1985 and that the City handled its own dispatch from City Hall up until the time that the Public Safety Building was constructed, and the Police Department relocated there. Mayor Smith stated that medical dispatch began some time in the 1990s with Guilfoyle performing this service for the City. He added that at some point, the City applied for and received basic life support certification and that the current certificate was good until September of 2022.

In response to Mayor Smith's question of when the City Fire Department initially applied for this certification, Chief Timerman stated that it was in place before he began his service with the department in 1997. He noted that the certificate is updated periodically with the addition of new staff.

Mayor Smith wondered if the EMS Agency agreements were a contract that should be approved by City Council. He stated that he had searched through resolutions and asked a prior Mayor and found no evidence of any type of contract that spelled out an agreement for dispatch.

Attorney Slye advised that any type of agreement between agencies such as this should come before Council for approval and that Council should be the body to set the level of service.

Chief Timerman noted that a contract is not required by the State.

Mayor Smith commented that the agreement is with Guilfoyle and the County, not the State.

Turning his attention to the EMS info sheet, Mayor Smith pointed out that it says the City will follow EMD guidelines but that is not the case.

Chief Timerman clarified that the form says “as determined by Dispatch and/or EMD” so the City is following that guideline by responding to Dispatch. In response to Mayor Smith’s question about responding to non-priority calls, Chief Timerman stated simply that the department responds when dispatched.

Discussion turned to the types of calls that warrant “lights and sirens.”

Bruce Wright of Guilfoyle said the goal of EMD was to send the appropriate response in the shortest time but there is an assumed risk every time they drive with lights and sirens. He stated that some drivers simply do not know what to do and accidents can occur, not necessarily with the rescue vehicle, but potential “wake accidents” in the surrounding traffic.

Chief Timerman noted that officers have the latitude to make decisions about downgrading response and that it is a subjective call.

Mayor Smith redirected the discussion back to the County’s dispatch system and wondered why the County was not providing the same level of service to the City as they provide to all the other towns and villages in the County, noting that the City paid the same taxes as other communities and received no rebate for not getting the EMD service the County provides. He added that the point of this discussion is to make sure that the City is responding only to priority calls and to be “mindful of its resources” and stated an overwhelming number of calls are not life-threatening.

Chief Timerman indicated that he did not believe there would be massive reductions if the County were to start dispatching for the City, but added he was “all for” the department only responding to calls where they were needed and not to calls where they were not.

As an example of the complications of dispatch, there was a lengthy discussion about falls, all the different types of falls there are and all the various outcomes of those calls.

Chief Timerman suggested that dispatchers do not get enough credit for the work they do. He noted that the EMD system works well but that it does take time and that the cost of that time must be considered. In response to Council Member Ruggiero’s question of whether he thought EMD would slow the fire department’s response time down, Chief Timerman said that EMD would mean slower response with more information.

Mayor Smith pointed out that EMD is proven safer and is used Nationwide. He added that the City of Watertown must be more cognizant of its resources and reminded Council that not every call is “doom and gloom. He stressed some calls are just not priority calls that the Fire Department does not need to respond to. He added that Guilfoyle does a great job for the City.

Council Member Ruggiero noted that the Fire Department provides their service without charging a fee. She offered an example of how Guilfoyle charges for their service by detailing the incidents surrounding her brother-in-law’s death.

Mr. Wright said that his company is a business and does charge for its service.

Council Member Ruggiero commented that the Mayor had said in an email that all EMS should be eliminated, which would mean that all calls would be billed by Guilfoyle.

Mayor Smith attempted to interject that this was not factual.

Council Member Ruggiero replied that she was not finished with her statement.

Mayor Smith used his gavel and stated that, as he was the chair of this meeting, Council Member Ruggiero was out of order for failing to yield the floor to him. He reiterated that her statement saying the Mayor advocated for ending all EMS service was incorrect.

Council Member Ruggiero remarked that if the City stopped responding to EMS calls, anyone who calls for help would get a bill from Guilfoyle and City residents would pay more for services.

Mayor Smith noted that Guilfoyle already responds to all EMS calls and that service would not change. He explained that the email which Council Member Ruggiero was referring to was in response to the Fire Department's concerns about COVID-19 during emergency calls. He added that in the email he was in agreement with the Chief that the Fire Department should not respond to EMS calls when they have COVID-19 concerns.

Chief Timerman noted that EMD is the best system for dispatch and he would be in favor of using it but that he did have concerns about the additional time it would take.

Mr. Wright noted that the County dispatchers identify the issue and the level of response in the first few seconds of a call and that can be adjusted as more information is obtained. He noted that he agreed that a vast majority of calls are not a "lights and sirens" situation but that callers are always in an excited state. He stated that in his opinion, the Fire Department and Guilfoyle have a good system and, although he fully respects the City's position, he is confident that it works well. He noted that there are 375 determinates for an emergency call and that there are 36 categories. Mr. Wright added that EMD is the standard internationally, but that the system being used now in the City of Watertown, although it could be fine-tuned, is a good system that is giving the taxpayers in the City a good service.

Mayor Smith redirected the conversation back to the question of why the County does not provide EMD to the City of Watertown as it does all other communities in the County.

Council Member Ruggiero suggested that the cost for adding the dispatchers needed to provide EMD service to the City could be \$100,000 and asked who would pay for that.

Mayor Smith noted that City taxpayers already pay County taxes for the service and should be receiving that service.

There was a general discussion about scene safety and access to buildings within the City of Watertown.

Council Member Ruggiero suggested that the system currently in place works well and just needs some tweaking.

Chief Timerman stated his belief that Watertown City residents are receiving top-notch care.

Mayor Smith stated that the City of Watertown is looking to cut costs before they reach the fiscal cliff at the end of the hydro contract and that is what the reduction of Fire Department response is about.

Chief Timerman gave some examples of costs that would be cut if the Fire Department were to stop providing EMS service and noted that there were some savings, but they were “pretty slim.”

Council Member Ruggiero stated that the City should not put a price on saving a life.

Mayor Smith reminded Council that the goal is to reduce Fire Department response to non-priority calls and there would be no change in Guilfoyle’s response as they already respond to all calls.

Council Member Roshia clarified that the City is not trying to do away with Fire Department EMS and that Guilfoyle can always request assistance from the Fire Department.

Mayor Smith suggested setting a time frame for the County to comply and start providing EMD service to the City. He suggested three months.

Jefferson County Legislator Anthony Doldo suggested that it would take some time as the County had been operating the current way for years.

Mayor Smith asked Mr. Doldo what the County would do if Guilfoyle, as a private business, stopped providing service to the City.

Mr. Doldo informed Council that he believed Mr. Wright would never do that to the County without giving the County time to transition. He also informed Council that he felt the residents outside of the City received no delay in service and were happy with the EMD response. He suggested transitioning to providing EMD service to the City would take some time. In response to Council Member Roshia’s question regarding the County’s budget year, Mr. Doldo said the budget year ran from January 1st to December 31st and so a new budget year had just started.

Mayor Smith noted that he would like to set a policy that gave the County time to offer EMD to the City and if three months were too little, perhaps six months.

Council Member Ruggiero indicated a desire to sit down and discuss this with the County before making any decisions and setting a policy.

Council Member Roshia reminded her that this was exactly the opposite of what the County had requested, and that Jefferson County Legislative Chairman Scott Gray wanted the City to set a policy before a meeting was held.

Mayor Smith noted he had invited the Chairman and all members of the County Legislature to participate in these discussions and only two were in attendance. He thanked Legislator Doldo and Legislator Francine Calarco for attending.

Council Members Compo and Henry-Wilkinson agreed that the Council should set the policy and give the County direction.

Council Member Roshia reminded Council that the County's budget was already completed for this calendar year so a deadline of the next calendar year would make sense.

Legislator Doldo informed Council that it takes six months to train a dispatcher so that would figure into the time frame.

Mayor Smith directed that a resolution be prepared giving the County a directive to provide EMD service to the City of Watertown before the start of the County's next budget in 2022.

Work session ended at 8:45 p.m.

Lisa M. Carr
Deputy City Clerk