

City of Portage FAQs

EMS Service Referendum



WHAT IS THE EMS SERVICE REFERENDUM THAT IS ON THE BALLOT FOR FEBRUARY 20, 2024?

The referendum will ask voters whether or not to support an increase in the City's annual tax levy, beginning with bills issued in December 2024, to cover the cost of 14 additional cross-trained firefighter / EMT / paramedics; education and training for personnel who are not already cross-trained; three new ambulances and state-required equipment; and a fire station remodel to serve increased staffing and new EMS capabilities.

WHAT ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF CHALLENGES FROM REDUCED AMBULANCE SERVICE?

The emergency medical response provided by Aspirus is insufficient for the number of emergency service calls for the City of Portage and surrounding townships it serves. Currently, Aspirus provides 1.5 ambulances for the City of Portage, leaving the City uncovered on many occasions.

With reduced ambulance service, the City of Portage relies on the support of nearby EMS services, which often means long wait times. For example, the City of Portage had a pulseless non-breathing patient wait for 20 minutes while waiting for Dells Delton EMS to arrive. Additionally, a patient had to wait for 23 minutes while waiting for Poynette EMS. In both cases, the patient did not receive advanced life support care within the national standard of 8 minutes.

The City needs 3 ambulances staffed to meet the emergency service call volume of the community. If the referendum passes, the Portage Fire Department will be able to operate 3 ambulances — rather than the current 1.5 ambulances operated by a third party — restoring us to the level of service our community is accustomed to.

HOW WILL A FIRE-BASED EMS SERVICE BENEFIT THE PORTAGE COMMUNITY COMPARED TO A THIRD-PARTY PROVIDER?

When the City unexpectedly received numerous invoices totaling \$1.1 million, from Aspirus for its services from 2021-2022, it needed to reduce service levels from 3 ambulances (level of service with Divine Savior) to 1.5 in anticipation for 2023 charges as there were no other budget resources available.

If the referendum passes, the Portage Fire Department will restore the level of service our community was accustomed to. To accomplish that, we would go from a full-time staff of 7 firefighters to a full-time staff of 21 cross-trained firefighter / EMT / paramedics.

This increased staffing will enable the Portage Fire Department to operate 3 ambulances at a cost of less than \$1.5M, **with the added benefit of bolstering our fire response, and reducing response times due to the centralized location of our fire department.** If we maintain a contract with Aspirus as a third-party EMS provider, we would need to double our current service level, from 1.5 ambulances to 3, which would cost about the same as creating our own fire-based EMS service without the other benefits.



WHAT WILL APPEAR ON THE BALLOT?

The formal resolution requesting permission to exceed the state revenue limit will appear as follows:

Under state law, the increase in the levy of the City of Portage for the tax to be imposed for the next fiscal year, 2025, is limited to 0.817%, which results in a levy of \$6,952,873. Shall the City of Portage be allowed to exceed this limit and increase the levy for the next fiscal year, 2025, for the purpose of Fire Based Emergency Medical Services, by a total of 21.319%, which results in a levy of \$8,435,145, and on an ongoing basis, include the increase of \$1,482,272 for each fiscal year going forward?

WHAT DOES IT MEAN IF A MAJORITY VOTE “NO” AND THE REFERENDUM FAILS?

A rejection of the referendum would not be the equivalent of maintaining the status quo of emergency services. If the referendum is not passed, significant budget cuts will be required to fund EMS service. While specific cuts have not been determined, it would require cuts equivalent to the combined budgets of snow plowing services, road maintenance, library programming, parks and recreation programming and maintenance, taxi and airport services, brush and large item pick-up.

If the referendum does not pass, specific details on budget cuts will be determined by the City Council.

WHAT WILL IT MEAN IF A MAJORITY OF VOTERS VOTE “YES”?

If Portage residents approve the referendum, the tax levy in 2024 – and each year going forward – would increase by nearly \$1.48M cover the cost of the 14 additional public safety personnel, education and training for those who are not already cross-trained, three new ambulances and the state-required equipment, and the remodeling of the fire station to serve increased staffing and new EMS capabilities. With these additions, Portage will be able to create a locally controlled, fire-based EMS service.

If approved, taxpayers will see a property tax increase of an estimated \$152 annually, or about \$2.92 per week on a home valued at \$100,000, starting with the bills issued in December 2024.

WHY IS THE CITY CONSIDERING A FIRE-BASED EMS RESPONSE MODEL?

The City is seeking to optimize patient care, drive efficiency and effectiveness of fire and EMS responses, minimize the impact on local taxpayers and establish and control a standard of care for Portage residents and those in neighboring communities.

WHY NOW? WHAT HAS CHANGED?

The City unexpectedly received significant invoices from Aspirus for ambulance service. The costs were unplanned, and not budgeted for. Moving forward, the City will need to make an investment, either in Aspirus' EMS delivery model, or in our own, locally controlled fire-based EMS model.

IS THE PROBLEM ONLY WITH EMS, WHAT ABOUT FIRE SERVICES?

If the referendum passes, 14 cross-trained firefighter / EMT / paramedics will be added to the Department. These staff members will be available for both EMS and fire calls, reducing response times across the board and bolstering our overall emergency response.

DID THE CITY REDUCE ITS SERVICE LEVEL WITH ASPIRUS?

Yes. When the City unexpectedly received numerous invoices, totaling \$1.1 million, from Aspirus for services provided in 2021-2022, it needed to reduce service levels in anticipation of 2023 charges. As we plan for future service levels, we are considering what best meets the needs of the community.



WILL THE CITY HAVE ANY ONGOING RELATIONSHIP WITH ASPIRUS MEDEVAC?

Yes. While the fire department will handle 911 emergency calls, Aspirus will handle long-distance transfers for the City as well as interfacility transfers.

WHAT ARE CURRENT EMS RESPONSE TIMES, WILL THEY IMPROVE UNDER THIS NEW MODEL?

Despite numerous requests for proper documentation, Aspirus, our current third-party EMS provider, has not provided us with sufficient data. However, we are confident that our response times will decrease under a new City-run model due to the increased staffing, ambulance availability and the strategic, centralized location of our fire station.

WHAT IS THE COST?

If the referendum passes, the average homeowner in the City of Portage will see an annual property tax increase of \$1.48 million (\$152 annually, or \$2.92 weekly per \$100,000 of assessed property value).

WHY DO WE NEED THREE AMBULANCES?

Based on projections from a feasibility study conducted by the Portage Fire Department, three ambulances is necessary for the City to meet the national standard (NFPA 1710) for ALS (paramedic) arrival.

WHAT IS THE DEPARTMENT RECOMMENDING FOR STAFFING INCREASES?

If the referendum passes, the Department will be able to add 14 cross-trained firefighter / EMT / paramedics to our staff. Increased staffing will enable Portage Fire Department to operate 3 ambulances during a majority of each day – rather than the current 1.5 ambulances operated under the current third-party service provider whose obligations are split between Portage and the

surrounding townships.

WHAT WOULD IT COST FOR ASPIRUS TO PROVIDE THE LEVEL OF EMS SERVICES WE'RE PROPOSING THROUGH THE FIRE-BASED MODEL?

If we move forward with creating a fire-based EMS service for the City, the cost of staffing three ambulances for our community is nearly \$1.48M, with the added benefit of bolstering our fire response, and reducing response times due to the centralized location of our fire department. If we maintain a contract with Aspirus as a third-party EMS provider, we would need to double our current service level, from 1.5 ambulances to three. We anticipate this would cost about the same as creating our own fire-based EMS service.

CAN'T THE INCREASED SHARED REVENUE COVER THE COSTS OF EMS SERVICES?

No. The modest increase in shared revenue is not enough to cover the cost of either remaining with Aspirus, or moving to a fire-based EMS model. It will mostly cover the costs of inflation across City services and personnel related costs.

WHAT WAS THE CITY CHARGED FOR EMS SERVICES THROUGH ASPIRUS MEDEVAC?

Last year, Aspirus MedEvac submitted numerous invoices to the City totaling \$1,132,000 for services provided in 2021 and 2022. We are contesting these invoices as proper documentation was not provided within the timeframe outlined in our contract with them. The \$1,132,000 was for two years of service. In 2023, the City and three townships served by Aspirus were charged \$688,000 for the use of 1.5 ambulances. To meet the community's need for EMS service, we will need to double our current service level to three ambulances. Through Aspirus, this would cost nearly the same as creating our own fire-based EMS service without the advantages of local control and enhanced fire services from cross training.



WHY IS THE CITY GOING TO REFERENDUM?

Wisconsin municipalities are limited in their ability to raise local funds. The State of Wisconsin limits the amount of property taxes a municipality can collect each year. In order to exceed that levy limit, a municipality needs to secure voter approval through a referendum.

HOW DOES THE CITY RECOUP FEES FROM AMBULANCE SERVICES?

The City plans to implement a flat-fee billing system, with a cap on the maximum amount of cost to be recovered. Under the proposed model, flat fees for ambulance transport will average between \$1,600 (City and Town residents) - \$2,000 (non-residents) with an estimated mileage charge of \$20-\$28 per mile.

UNDER THE PROPOSED MODEL, WOULD THE PORTAGE FIRE DEPARTMENT PROVIDE EMS SERVICES TO NEIGHBORING TOWNSHIPS?

Yes. We anticipate providing contract-based EMS services to neighboring townships. We have tentative agreements with all four townships, much like we do for our fire service.

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS REFERENDUM?

Additional information about this referendum is available online at: www.portagewi.gov/referendum.

WHO CAN I CONTACT TO GET MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE REFERENDUM?

Send any questions or feedback to Portage Fire Chief Troy Haase at troy.haase@portagewi.gov.

