

Fire dept. flare-up puts cities at odds

Orono wants to break with Long Lake, which suspects takeover instead.

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The Lake Minnetonka city of Orono has spent more than \$750,000 this year to hire a fire chief and buy a ladder truck — for a department that doesn't yet exist.

City officials say they want to break away from the fire department Orono shares with neighboring Long Lake, and that they're putting pieces in place to establish a new Orono Fire Department. But Long Lake leaders see a hostile takeover, with Orono hiring away their fire chief and asking state legislators for control of pension funds.

"They haven't given any good reason why they needed to take these steps and create their own fire department," Long Lake Mayor Charlie Miner said. "It seems much of this is about power and control and egos."

Leading the charge in Orono is Mayor Dennis Walsh, who said he wants his city to have full control of its fire services.

Long Lake administers the shared department, which also serves parts of Medina and Minnetonka Beach, but Orono pays for most of it.

"We're bringing it in-house because we're big enough, we can do it ourselves," Walsh said.

Orono is the largest of the four cities, which fund the shared department based on the number of calls for service each year. Orono, as the city with the most calls, funded just under 85% of the department's budget last year. Under the shared-services contract, Orono also has veto power over the department's capital and operating budgets.

Orono has chafed at this arrangement in recent years, with discussion of forming its own fire department since at least 2016. The four cities had been talking about forming a fire district to cooperatively run a fire service, but in 2021, Orono notified Long Lake that it would be ending its service contract when it expired in 2025.

Last year, Orono offered to buy the Long Lake Fire Department's operations, equipment and fire stations for just under \$1.6 million, and provide fire service to Long Lake for \$70,000 a year. Long Lake presented a counteroffer, but negotiations have since stalled.

Walsh said he's not aware of any incidents under the shared department model that have endangered public safety. But learning more about the department has raised concerns, he said, including about aging equipment and operations spending — which jumped more than 19% from 2022 to 2023.

Long Lake Council Member Jahn Dyvik said last year's budget increase came largely because firefighters got a raise and other expenses — like insurance, equipment and fuel — surged in cost. Orono approved that increase, he said, and has denied capital budget increases for a decade.

It's not clear what a new department in Orono would cost. City leaders there are waiting for a "needs assessment," a draft of which is set to be presented to the City Council on May 8.

But cost is already a concern, especially the upfront expenses of a fire station and equipment that could cost millions.

"It is an expensive way to tamper with a public safety service that is not broken," wrote a group of eight former Orono and Long Lake mayors in a letter opposing Orono's split.

Orono City Council Member Alisa Benson has called for the council to be more open to public input, and for more decorum at meetings. The decision to split from Long Lake, buy the ladder truck and hire Long Lake Fire Chief James Van Eyll preceded Benson's time on the council, but she has voted against spending since, such as outfitting the truck with radio equipment.

"Maybe you figure out what the needs of the community are first. Where's the funding? Where's the risk? And if all roads point to that decision, maybe then you look toward procuring equipment," she said. "What I'm not in favor of is spending real dollars and real time for a department that doesn't exist."

Department in waiting

The Orono City Council approved buying a used ladder truck from Coon Rapids in October — a vehicle that Long Lake officials had wanted to buy. The truck cost \$349,000, but repairs, new equipment and marking decals raised the price to \$644,492.

Van Eyll was hired to lead the Orono department starting in December 2022. His annual pay is \$116,513.63, which Miner said is more than what Van Eyll made in Long Lake.

Van Eyll said he decided to take the job with Orono because it seemed to offer more long-term stability, and the idea of building a department from scratch was a challenge.

Van Eyll also has the use of an Orono Fire Department SUV, which he said he uses to commute to and from City Hall as he works with city staff on the fire needs assessment. He also conducts fire inspections and grants burn permits, he said.

Van Eyll's departure hurt feelings in Long Lake, but Miner said he is more concerned about Orono's moves at the State Capitol.

Earlier this year, Orono council members lobbied for legislation that would give control of Long Lake Fire Department pension funds to Orono in 2024 — two years before the Long Lake contract expires.

Miner said he worries Orono will try to recruit firefighters away from Long Lake even as the Long Lake Fire Department is still active and trying to respond to emergencies.

"The way they've been going about it, we feel they've been taking steps to take over our fire department," Miner said.

Walsh countered: "This is not a takeover."

Cooperation possible?

During a May 2 Long Lake City Council meeting, several residents of Long Lake and Orono pleaded for cooperation between the two communities.

But Miner and Dyvik said Orono has declined invitations to negotiate, with Orono leaders saying they want to finish the needs assessment before resuming talks.

The shared service contract ends Dec. 31, 2025, but Long Lake wonders if Orono has broken the contract with its actions, such as the hiring of Van Eyll, the fire truck purchase and the efforts to control pension funds.

Walsh said supply chain snags and workforce shortages made Orono want to start assembling a department well before the contract ends. But seeing a threat, Long Lake sent a letter to the Orono council on April 25, warning of a possible lawsuit.

"There can be no reasonable explanation for Orono hiring a fire chief and purchasing a ladder truck three years before the expiration of the Agreement, or approaching the Minnesota Legislature about moving the Fireman's Relief Association over two and a half years before the expiration of the Agreement," the letter reads.

Long Lake officials say they're open to partnerships, but Miner said he worries about being a client of an Orono-run service, given how unpredictable these negotiations have felt to him.

"The current dynamics in Orono make it very challenging for us to navigate through this situation," he said.

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