

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

## **WHAT IS THE PROPOSED FIRE/EMS REFERENDUM ON THE BALLOT APRIL 2?**

The referendum will ask voters to decide whether or not to support a \$1,175,000 annual increase in the property tax levy to fund six full-time fire/EMS positions, and retain the three full-time staff members currently funded through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) grants.

## **WHAT WILL APPEAR ON THE BALLOT?**

The formal resolution requesting permission to exceed the state revenue limit will appear as follows on the April 2 ballot:

*“Under state law, the increase in the levy of the City of Port Washington for the tax to be imposed for the next fiscal year, 2025, is limited to 1.215%, which results in a levy of \$8,203,430. Shall the City of Port Washington be allowed to exceed this limit and increase the levy for the next fiscal year, 2025, for the purpose of hiring and retaining additional fire and emergency medical services personnel for the City of Port Washington Fire Department, by a total of 14.323%, which results in a levy of \$9,378,430, and on an ongoing basis, include the increase of \$1,175,000 for each fiscal year going forward?”*

## **WHY IS THE CITY ASKING FOR THIS INCREASE NOW?**

Our current fire/EMS funding level and staffing levels are insufficient to meet the growing current and projected future needs of our community. While our department has risen to meet the needs of our community by working smarter and creating efficiencies, the City has been receiving an increasing amount of calls for emergency service over time. Coupled with an aging population, limited staff to respond to calls and interim funding aid set to expire soon, the City needs additional ongoing funding to provide an adequate level of emergency services to its residents.

## **WHY DO WE NEED A REFERENDUM TO RAISE THE TAX LEVY LIMIT?**

The State of Wisconsin limits the amount of property taxes a municipality can collect each year. In order to exceed the levy limit, the municipality needs voter approval through a city-wide referendum.

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

If the referendum is approved by a majority of voters on April 2, the City of Port Washington will be able to fund six full-time Fire/EMS positions, and retain the three full-time staff members currently funded through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) grants. This will increase staffing levels to ensure that there are adequate staff to sufficiently respond to calls for emergency services from Port Washington residents.

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

If the referendum is rejected by a majority of voters, the City will be faced with difficult decisions about how to address the growing need for fire/EMS services. A rejection of the referendum would result in increased emergency response times, significant gaps in coverage and limited ability for personnel to attend to residents in an emergency.

As response times are a factor in Insurance Service Offices (ISO) scoring, a failed referendum may lead to an increase in insurance rates for commercial property owners.

## **WHAT WILL BE THE IMPACT ON TAXPAYERS IF THE REFERENDUM PASSES?**

If the referendum is approved, taxpayers will see an estimated property tax increase of \$91 annually, or \$1.75 per week per \$100,000 of assessed value, starting with bills issued in December 2024. For a median value home of \$235,000 that would result in an increase of \$213.85 annually, or \$4.11 a week.

## WHY IS THE INCREASE IN STATE SHARED REVENUE NOT THE SOLUTION?

The increases in shared revenue helped fund the 2024 budget, and will be used to continue to fund those services. The proposed resolution will cover the expiring City and County ARPA funding that currently pays for three existing full-time staff through 2024, as well as provide funding for six additional full-time staff beginning in 2025.

## WHY DO WE NEED ADDITIONAL FIRE/EMS PERSONNEL?

Over the past decade, Port Washington's staffing levels have decreased — even though the **calls for service have increased by 53%**. This has made it increasingly difficult for the Department to respond to calls for service and remain compliant with the national standard of response time to an emergency.

## HOW DID YOU DETERMINE THE NUMBER OF PERSONNEL NEEDED?

The three lieutenant positions are needed to provide leadership both on the scene of the emergency and in the station. They will be responsible for day-to-day crew management, new employee onboarding, and training. The additional staff added in the referendum will ensure that we can provide reliable emergency services, no matter what the call type. This will give the Department three full-time employees and two part-time employees in the station 24/7 who are ready and able to respond to primary EMS calls, secondary EMS calls, or a fire call.

## WHAT ALTERNATIVES WERE CONSIDERED TO FUND FIRE/EMS SERVICES?

The City of Port Washington has explored and secured alternate funding sources whenever possible, but they do not provide the consistent, reliable funding that is needed to maintain the ideal level of emergency response services.

One example, is our use of ARPA grants — approved through the Common Council and Ozaukee County — to fund three fire/EMS positions. These types of funding sources, however, are temporary and not a sustainable source for long-term staffing needs.

After carefully assessing the limited revenue options available to Wisconsin municipalities, we determined a referendum is the best path forward to ensure high-quality service to the community.

If the City were to later receive additional grant funds and the referendum was already approved, the City would have the option not to levy the full amount.

## HAVE YOU CONSIDERED CONSOLIDATION?

Consolidation has been a topic of conversation for many years among fire/EMS providers in Ozaukee County. After a thorough vetting process, both the City Council and Police and Fire Commission determined that consolidation was not in the best interest of Port Washington residents. An independent department was found to be more financially sustainable and also ensured that department resources were allocated directly to our community's needs, not shared throughout the county.

## I'VE HEARD THAT THE CITY IS ALSO LOOKING TO BUILD A NEW FIRE/EMS BUILDING. IS THIS REFERENDUM RELATED TO THAT PROJECT?

No, this referendum is solely about funding for additional fire/EMS personnel.

Separately, the City is exploring the need for a new public safety complex. If the City decides to advance that facility it would require separate approval by the City Council and be funded by the issuance of bonds.

## I'VE HEARD A LOT ABOUT FIRE/EMS REFERENDUMS RECENTLY. WHY IS THIS A TOPIC IN THE NEWS?

The situation we are facing in Port Washington is not unique. Across the state, the needs of fire/EMS responders have grown, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to meet the growing demands for service without additional resources.

Regarding fire/EMS services, according to a recent [study](#) from the Wisconsin Policy Forum that focuses on Ozaukee County, rising call volumes and staffing challenges are causing many smaller municipalities to move toward a model that makes greater use of full-time staff. This requires more municipalities to seek funding for their fire/EMS departments through a referendum.

## WHEN AND WHERE DO I VOTE?

Port Washington voters can cast their vote one of three ways: through absentee mail-in ballots, early in-person voting at the City Clerk's office, or in-person voting on Election Day, April 2, 2024.

Voters can request a mailed absentee ballot from the City Clerk's office. You may request an absentee ballot be mailed to you until 5 p.m. on Thursday, March 28, 2024. If you plan to return your absentee ballot using the U.S. Postal Service, please remember that the ballot must be RECEIVED by the Elections Office by the close of polls on Election Day, April 2, 2024. Absentee ballots may be returned at your polling location on election day. Absentee ballots received after the close of polls will not be counted.

In-person early voting will take place at City Hall on the following dates:

- March 19–22 from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.
- March 25–28 from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.
- Friday, March 29 from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

On April 2, all polling places will open at 7 a.m. and will close at 8 p.m. Wisconsin voters are required to show an acceptable photo ID in order to vote.

Additional voting information, including about polling places and requesting an absentee ballot, can be found on [myvote.wi.gov](https://myvote.wi.gov).

## WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS REFERENDUM?

Additional information about this fire/EMS referendum is available online at [portwashingtonwi.gov/our-city/referendum](https://portwashingtonwi.gov/our-city/referendum).

## WHO CAN I CONTACT FOR MORE INFORMATION?

Send any questions or feedback to the City of Port Washington at [referendum@portwashingtonwi.gov](mailto:referendum@portwashingtonwi.gov).