

**CITY OF EAGLE LAKE
SPECIAL CITY COUNCIL MEETING
SEPTEMBER 25, 2023**

CALL TO ORDER

- Mayor Norton called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

ROLL CALL

- Council Members present: Garret Steinberg, Beth Rohrich, Anthony White, John Whittington, and Mayor Lisa Norton.
- Staff present: City Administrator Jennifer Bromeland, Police Chief John Kopp and Deputy Clerk Kerry Rausch.

APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA

- Council Member Steinberg moved, seconded by Council Member White, to add Public Comments to the agenda. The motion carried with Council Members Steinberg, Rohrich, White, Whittington, and Mayor Norton voting in favor.
- Council Member Whittington moved, seconded by Council Member Rohrich, to move the Public Comments period to after new business. The motion carried with Council Members Steinberg, Rohrich, White, Whittington, and Mayor Norton voting in favor.

NEW BUSINESS

1. Police Department Staffing Challenges and Coverage Options

- Administrator Bromeland explained that this special City Council meeting has been called for the purpose of discussing the ongoing police department staffing challenges that Eagle Lake continues to experience and identify options for the best and most complete law enforcement coverage for the residents and businesses.
- Also explained was that Eagle Lake is a growing community with a current population of 3,331 which is 53 residents higher than the 2020 census count of 3,278. Eagle Lake is forecasted to continue increasing in population. Maintaining a consistent, dedicated police presence is important to deter crime while ensuring the safety and well-being of all residents and businesses. Proactive and consistent community policing is just as important in forging relationships between members of the community and law enforcement.
- For background purposes Administrator Bromeland explained that Eagle Lake has historically been staffed with three full-time police officers and 1-2 part-time police officers, providing approximately 20 hours of coverage a day. Part-time officers were previously utilized to help fill gaps in coverage when full-time officers were not available or needed time off.
- A shift in staffing began in late 2020, first with difficulty retaining part-time police officers. As a result, the City began to see police coverage decrease on weekends and most weekend day shifts were replaced with daytime on-call. This shift placed a strain on full-time officers who had difficulty taking time off while still needing to be available on call. Coverage in 2021 and 2022 consisted mostly of 20 hours of coverage per day, Monday through Friday, and daytime on-call coverage Saturdays and Sundays.
- Also explained was that in July 2022, the City of Eagle Lake entered into an agreement with Blue Earth County Sheriff's Office for emergency on-call service. The purpose of entering into this agreement was to help alleviate some of the pressure felt by full-time officers not being able to fully take time off because of regular daytime on-call hours scheduled every Saturday and Sunday.

- Administrator Bromeland also explained that in June of 2023 two full-time police officers submitted their resignations back-to-back within a span of weeks and the City was suddenly down to one full-time police officer, the police chief, for scheduled law enforcement coverage. Despite adding funding to the 2023 budget for a 4th full-time officer, we have been unable to fill the position because we cannot first fill the existing vacancies.
- With the City running out of options, in July 2023, the City Council approved another contract with the Blue Earth County Sheriff's Office for up to twenty hours of scheduled patrol coverage per week. While the current situation is working for now, it is not a viable long-term solution. Under the current agreement, the Blue Earth County Sheriff's Office has provided excellent, reliable service, without having a dedicated law enforcement presence in Eagle Lake, but there are still gaps in coverage that create vulnerabilities.
- Efforts continue to be made to hire new police officers, such as increased pay, but there are fewer candidates and less qualified candidates. There is a significant demand for police officers in Minnesota and a limited pool of qualified applicants. Even when Eagle Lake has been able to extend an offer to a qualified candidate who meets all requirements for the position, the vicious cycle of expending time and resources on hiring, training, and turnover remains. There are not enough officers to fill every opening in law enforcement across the state and the City is competing with law enforcement agencies that possess more resources.
- Given the ongoing police officer shortage and the City's inability to fill vacancies, the City's Personnel Committee, which is comprised of Council Members Beth Rohrich and John Whittington, have been periodically meeting with the police chief to discuss staffing updates and coverage needs. No long-term viable internal solutions have been identified in those meetings other than to continue trying to fill vacancies and hope that the hiring landscape changes soon. The committee also met with the Blue Earth County Sheriff's Office to hear more about what it would cost and look like to contract fully for law enforcement coverage.
- Contracted service with Blue Earth County's Sheriff's Office allows Eagle Lake to have dedicated law enforcement coverage 18-20 hours a day Monday through Friday, and 12 hours a day on Saturdays and Sundays. All other times and resources would be covered with a response from the Sheriff's Office at no additional cost, ensuring 24/7 coverage. Under this scenario, a lieutenant and two deputies would be assigned to Eagle Lake and the wording "serving Eagle Lake" would be added to the squads used for patrol in Eagle Lake. An anticipated cost to contract fully for law enforcement coverage is \$502,000 for 2024. Eagle Lake's 2023 budget for the police department totals \$469,361. Not reflected in the police department budget and allocated elsewhere in the general fund budget are the costs for insurance, such as health, dental, work comp, property and casualty and liability insurance. The police department's share of insurance costs is approximately \$40,000. When insurance costs are factored into the overall cost to operate a police department, the total cost is like what it would cost to contract with Blue Earth County. An additional benefit to contracting police coverage is that the County employs a total of 37 full-time officers, additional deputies are immediately available in the event of a major incident in Eagle Lake.
- Council Member John Whittington, a member of the personnel committee, stated the City has struggled with staffing issues for several years and the personnel committee has met with the Police Chief and City Administrator looking for ways to provide safety for the community. Mr. Whittington stated that the personnel committee does not believe it will be able to staff the police department at this time and feels it would be good for the City to contract with Blue Earth County's Sheriff's Office. The deputies are well trained and will allow for more patrol time and less administrative time. There will be three officers assigned to Eagle Lake and the County would have other officers available to back them up when needed. He stated the goal of the personnel committee to keep the community safe.

- Council Member Rohrich, also serving on the personnel committee, stated this issue has been several years coming and that the personnel committee has tried to be creative and think outside the box. Year to date the City has received few applications for three positions and not all have been qualified. The goal is community safety and consistency in coverage. Mrs. Rohrich stated that Chief Kopp has had great support from the County, but the County's staff is not currently dedicated to the City and therefore changes need to be made.
- The City's Attorney Chris Kennedy explained that the City will need to determine if contracted police coverage would be a temporary or permanent change. If a permanent change, the city code would need to be amended and could include options. He also stated that temporary service could be several years in duration.
- Chief Deputy Jeremy Brennan with Blue Earth County's Sheriff's Office stated the County was approached by the City to look into contracting police services. Blue Earth County Sheriff's Office's mission statement under the leadership of Sheriff Jeff Wersal, is to provide quality services that promote and protect the safety, security and well-being of all the people in our community.
- Blue Earth County's administrative officers consist of Sheriff Jeff Wersal, Chief Deputy Jermmy Brennan, Captain Paul Barta and Emergency Management Director Eric Weller. They also have a patrol division, an investigative Division which includes the Minnesota River Valley Drug Taks Force, a Records/Evidence/Office Coordinator, and a Communication Center and Detention Division.
- The contracted law enforcement proposed services would include the Sheriff's Office providing 3 full-time staff to cover approximately 6,240 hours of patrol coverage with 1 Lieutenant and 2 Deputy Sheriff's to be dedicated to the City of Eagle Lake. This would provide approximately 20 hours of patrol coverage each day for the City Monday through Drive and approximately 12 hours of patrol coverage Saturday and Sunday. It would provide 24 hours 7 days a week Sheriff's Office response to calls. The Sheriff's Office is staffed 24 hours a day with licensed Deputy Sheriff's. The Sheriff's Office is currently fully staffed with 37 full-time licensed peace officers.
- Benefits to contracting law enforcement services include financial advantages such as known costs, automatic replacement for injured/sick deputies, provided with fully trained/experienced officers, Sheriff's Office pays to hire and train deputies, and access to additional resources. Increased level of service benefits include additional deputies are immediately available in the event of a major incident in Eagle Lake, access to the Sheriff's Office Divisions and Specialized Units, additional resources to address specific concerns.
- Other resources Blue Earth County's Sheriff's Office has available include a dive team, drone team, DWI/traffic enforcement, emergency management, water patrol/boat/ATV, and 2 K9 teams which will be coming soon.
- Deputy Chief Brennan stated that the contracting of police services through Sheriff's departments is a tried and proven concept and shared with the City Council agencies currently contracting for this service. He also stated it is expected that contracted police services will increase greatly.
- The Sheriff's Office currently contracts law enforcement for several small cities within the County. Deputies have participated in several functions within those cities, attend and participate in city council meetings, community events, school events and participate in community interaction.
- Mayor Norton asked about transition time needed to contract police services. Chief Deputy Brennan stated that a contract will need to be in place and an effective date be established. From there the contract would go to the Blue Earth County Board for approval.
- Council discussion included the desired length of contract, which could range from 3-5 years, the possibility of extending the contract, and the desire to restore the local police department when the hiring environment improves.

- Attorney Chris Kennedy stated the police department currently follows the City Council’s lawful orders and if police services are contracted the City Council would lose that control. He also stated that it should be determined if the City Council is looking at disbanding the police department or rebuilding it over time.
- The meeting was opened to public comments with the following comments being taken.
- Ken Reichel, 101 Maywood Avenue, stated that if the police department is eliminated and later reinstated it would cost approximately \$750,000 to set it up. He asked the City Council to slow down the process and try to find a different solution, such as increasing police officer pay to entice them to Eagle Lake. He stated he has compared the 2022 and 2023 budgets and they are not an apple-to-apple comparison with Blue Earth County. Mr. Reichel went on to state it is important for residents to know there is police coverage and concluded by stating he is not in favor of contracting police services.
- Council members addressed some of Mr. Reichel’s concerns by explaining that the current staffing situation is not sustainable long term, that wages have been increased without the desired results and there are a lack of qualified applicants.
- Tim Auringer, 405 Perry Street, stated he believes contracting of police services is a great idea and that the City has struggled with staffing concerns for 10-12 years. This is the best thing the city can do for the residents and will result in more patrolling of the streets in the community. He also stated he likes the price tag and fully supports the contracted service.
- Council Member Andrew White read an email submitted by Jim Beal, 420 Owl Lane, which stated he, Mr. Beal, has always felt safe living in Eagle Lake and thinks that is one of the biggest quality of life reasons people move here. He hopes most of our citizens realize the visual presence of a policing agency and that it certainly helps with reducing the potential to commit a crime. He believes right now it is extremely difficult to hire police officers for our city. For now the best answer is to contract with Blue Earth County. We need to have a reliable policing agency in our growing community. Blue Earth County would provide professionally trained officers to our city. While the council may prefer a city police department, the current staffing makes that extremely difficult. We need professionals when it comes to an emergency situation. It appears the contract would be on an annual basis. This would give the city the opportunity to review as necessary. As time and budget allows it is always possible to go back to a city police force.
- Council Member Whittington moved, seconded by Council Member Rohrich, to continue contract discussion with the Blue Earth County’s Sheriff’s Office and to bring information back to the City Council. The motion carried with Council Members Steinberg, Rohrich, White, Whittington, and Mayor Norton voting in favor.
- Chris Kennedy stated he could provide ordinance information to the City Council. He also indicated this contract may take until January or February of 2024 to be implemented.

ADJOURNMENT

- Council Member White moved, seconded by Council Member Steinberg, to adjourn the meeting at 8:13 p.m. The motion carried with Council Members Steinberg, Rohrich, White, Whittington, and Mayor Norton voting in favor.

Lisa Norton, Mayor

Kerry Rausch, Deputy Clerk