

# CITY OF JEFFERSON PUBLIC SAFETY REFERENDUM

## Frequently Asked Questions



*We're going outside.*

### **What is the proposed public safety referendum that is on the ballot for Tuesday, April 4?**

The referendum will ask voters to decide whether they approve an increase in the City's annual tax levy, beginning in December 2023, to cover the cost for six additional full-time EMS fire-trained staff and to provide a competitive, hourly wage for volunteer Fire Department staff.

### **What will appear on the ballot?**

The formal resolution requesting permission to exceed the state revenue limit will appear as follows on the April 4 ballot:

“Under state law, the increase in the levy of the City of Jefferson for the tax to be imposed for the next fiscal year 2024 is limited to .395% which results in a levy of \$4,633,031. Shall the City of Jefferson be allowed to exceed this limit and increase the levy for the next fiscal year 2024 for the purpose of staffing and compensating Fire and Emergency Services Staff, by a total of 10.792%, which results in a levy of \$5,133,031, and on an ongoing basis, include the increase of \$500,000 for each fiscal year going forward?”

### **Why do we need a referendum to raise the tax levy limit?**

The State of Wisconsin limits the amount of property taxes a city can collect each year. In order to exceed the levy limit, the city 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 4, the City of Jefferson will be able to add six full-time EMS fire-trained staff, bringing staffing levels up to ensure that there are adequate staff to sufficiently respond to

calls for both fire and EMS service from residents. It will also enable the Department to increase hourly wages for volunteer Fire Department staff and increase its ability to retain and recruit new volunteers.

### **What does it mean if a majority vote “no”?**

If the referendum is rejected by a majority of voters, the ability for the Jefferson Fire and EMS Department to respond to emergencies will continue to decrease. A rejection of the referendum would not be the equivalent of maintaining the status quo of emergency services.

Volunteer staff are facing inadequate compensation, which cannot be addressed without securing additional resources to pay volunteers under a new, more competitive system. Without additional support, it is likely that existing staff members and volunteers may seek employment elsewhere, and Jefferson residents may face lower-quality emergency services as a result of these departures.

### **What will be the impact on taxpayers if the referendum passes?**

If city residents approve the referendum, the tax levy in 2023 — and each year going forward — would increase by approximately \$500,000 to cover the cost of six additional full-time EMS fire-trained staff and to provide a competitive, hourly wage for volunteer Fire Department staff.

This translates to a property tax increase of an estimated \$75.72 annually, or about \$1.45 per week on a home with an assessed value of \$100,000. The impact to a property valued at \$200,000 would be \$151.44 annually, or \$2.91 a week.

Figures are based on 2021-2022 valuations, and may change based on 2022-2023 valuations.



### **Why is the City proposing this referendum now?**

The Department's current volunteer-reliant staffing model is insufficient to meet the growing current and projected future service demands and needs of our community. In the last decade, calls for fire service have increased by 102% while volunteer participation has dropped 28%.

In addition, inadequate compensation for full-time and paid-on-premise EMTs, coupled with rising training requirements and costs, are hindering the Department's ability to attract and retain high quality EMTs to serve the community and respond to an increasing number of calls for service.

In order to meet these needs, the City must hire full-time EMS fire-trained staff and increase wages to retain volunteers, and an increase to the tax levy has been deemed the best available option to fund those positions.

### **Why do we need additional full-time firefighter/EMT personnel?**

The City of Jefferson Fire and EMS Department operates 24-hours-per-day, 7-days-per-week to respond promptly to calls related to fire suppression, fire prevention and EMS services for the City of Jefferson and the surrounding townships of Farmington, Hebron, Jefferson, and Oakland.

The Fire and EMS Department has historically relied on volunteer fire staff, and both full-time and paid-on-premise EMS staff, as part of its operations. The volunteer workforce is now aging and fewer volunteers are signing up to join. While the volunteer model worked in decades past when call volumes were lower, it is simply unsustainable to rely so heavily on a primarily volunteer staff given the growing current and anticipated future demand for emergency responses in the area. Over the past 10 years, Fire Department volunteerism has decreased by 28% despite calls for service increasing by 102% in the same time period.

Adding six full-time EMS fire-trained staff members would reduce the reliance on volunteers and help ensure the Department is adequately equipped to respond to calls for service in a timely manner.

### **How does the current compensation system to pay volunteer firefighters work?**

The Jefferson Fire Department currently relies on an outdated system that does not adequately compensate Fire Department volunteers, and current funds cannot support a much-needed shift to competitive hourly compensation. Compensation in the Jefferson Fire Department follows a point system for volunteers, which provides only minimal compensation—one 'point' (equivalent to \$13.61) per call for service, regardless of how long that call takes.

Increasing compensation for volunteers will increase the Jefferson Fire Department's ability to retain and recruit new volunteers.

### **What is the Department doing to actively recruit new volunteers?**

The Department works closely with the community and has a robust high school recruitment and ride-along program that provides visibility into becoming a volunteer firefighter, and gives Jefferson youth a glimpse of what volunteerism entails and the impact it has on the community. This program results in a successful pipeline of future talent. Currently, there are six high schoolers participating in the ride-along program, and two recent high school graduates who are training to receive EMT certifications. While the program is successful, it isn't a sustainable long-term option to address the need for additional volunteers.

### **Why do other townships utilize the City of Jefferson Fire and EMS Department?**

The City of Jefferson Fire and EMS Department is contracted by the surrounding townships of Farmington, Hebron, Jefferson, and Oakland to provide fire and EMS services to those areas. These townships pay the City of Jefferson for services in proportion to the additional population served.



**What other funding sources are available / has the City of Jefferson considered leveraging to mitigate increased needs for public safety services?**

The Department has done all it can to meet the growing needs of the community by working smarter, creating efficiencies and making the most of our current budget. While the Department regularly pursues external grant opportunities, these are unable to provide the consistent support necessary and therefore not a viable long-term funding option. ARPA funding was also considered to address these needs, but had already been designated for other uses and was not an option.

**I've heard a lot about public safety referendums recently. Why is this a topic in the news?**

According to a recent study from the Wisconsin Policy Forum, while volunteer-reliant staffing models have successfully served smaller communities for many years, rising EMS call volumes and staffing challenges are causing many smaller municipalities to move toward a model that makes greater use of full-time staff. This is requiring more municipalities to seek funding for their public safety departments through a referendum. Peer communities including Whitewater, Fort Atkinson, Milton, Johnson Creek and others are also rethinking their staffing structures, the two former municipalities having already gone to referendum to raise the tax levy limit.

**When and where do I vote?**

Jefferson voters can cast their vote in 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 4, 2023.

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 30, 2023. 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 4, 2023. Absentee ballots may be returned at your poll site on Election Day. Absentee ballots received after the close of polls will not be counted.

In-person early voting will take place Tuesday, March 21 through Friday, March 31, 2023 and is from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

On April 4, all polling places will open at 7:00 a.m. and will close at 8:00 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 referendum is available online at: <https://jeffersonwis.com/residents/referendum/>.

**Who can I contact to get information about the referendum?**

Send any questions or feedback to the City of Jefferson at [referendum@jeffersonwis.com](mailto:referendum@jeffersonwis.com).

