July 20, 2022

Dear Orono Citizens,

As former mayors of Orono and Long Lake, we want to have the best fire services for our cities. Orono and Long Lake have been in a co-operative fire agreement since 2002. This partnership came about when the Highway 12 Bypass location required the removal of Long Lake's existing fire house. At that time the two cities worked together to find a replacement site and design a modern building, with the two communities sharing fire services. Orono worked jointly with Long Lake to secure sufficient funds from MnDOT, and the Willow Station site was chosen as a response location to serve both cities. A new station was built, and a Fire Advisory Board, represented by both cities, meets throughout the year to work on the budget and provide guidance on fire operations.

This has served both communities well for 20 years. With the contract coming up for renewal, there would have been opportunities for any changes in the contract to be discussed. Instead, last year with no public input and no supporting rationale, the Orono City Council notified Long Lake it will be terminating the fire services agreement in 2025. Orono claims the reason it wants sole ownership and control of Long Lake Fire is because Orono pays over 80% of the fire budget. (Orono, under any agreement would pay more for fire service than Long Lake. It is 15 times larger and has 5 times its population).
Instead of opening negotiations with Long Lake about contract changes, Orono has threatened to use taxpayer dollars either to buy out Long Lake's stake in the Willow building, or build a brand fire station from scratch, both ideas costing multi-millions.

Now is not the time to create a new fire department. The future of fire-fighting is heading towards consolidating services, not dividing resources. Orono's quest to try and start its own fire department contains many risks including escalating costs to build and equip a new facility. There are unknowns regarding training and recruitment of volunteer firefighters, and potential increased response times due to station location changes. It is an expensive way to tamper with a public safety service that is not broken.

Most importantly this has began to create an environment of mistrust and ill will between our two neighboring communities. This is unfortunate, for our two cities are inextricably intertwined. We share infrastructure, fire service, shoreline on Long Lake, commercial blocks along County Road 112, interconnecting bike trails and lots of retail amenities our citizens like to use. It is important for Orono to maintain open and honest communication with Long Lake to work out this issue. Long Lake has offered to start negotiations on a new contract and we are sincerely hoping the Orono council representatives begin these talks in earnest.

We specifically want Orono representatives to set up a series of public meetings with the Long Lake representatives to negotiate contract renewal. The taxpayers of our cities need full and transparent public meetings with agenda topics and minutes available on the cities' websites so the rest of us can be kept apprised on the negotiations.

Thirty years ago, Orono and Long Lake faced difficult challenges related to the drastic changes the siting of the Highway 12 bypass created with the condemnation of houses, disruption of business traffic and reconstruction of Long Lake's main street. Both city councils, throughout those decades, worked side-by-side to solve these issues for the betterment of our communities. It is our belief that this fire contract can be resolved and renewed in a manner that is fair to both sides and continues to successfully meet the public safety needs of our two communities well into the future.

Sincerely,

Former Mayors of Orono

Lili McMillan

Gabriel Jabbour

Barbara Peterson

Jim White

Former Mayors of Long Lake

Tim Hultmann

Janet Schaefer

Marty Schneider

Donny Chillstrom