

**North Oaks Special City Council  
Meeting Minutes  
North Oaks City Council Chambers  
May 19, 2020**

**CALL TO ORDER**

Mayor Nelson called the special meeting of May 19, 2020, to order at 7:00 p.m.

**ROLL CALL**

City Councilmembers participated **by telephone or other electronic means** pursuant to Minn. Stat. § 13D.021. Residents can view the meeting on our cable access channel and through the website portal just like other public meetings.

Present: Mayor Gregg Nelson. Councilmembers Rick Kingston, Marty Long, Kara Ries, and Katy Ross.

Staff Present: Administrator Kevin Kress.

Others Present: Videographer Maureen Anderson.

A quorum was declared present.

**PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE**

Mayor Nelson led everyone in the Pledge of Allegiance.

**APPROVAL OF AGENDA**

**MOTION by Ries, seconded by Kingston, to approve the agenda as submitted. Motion carried unanimously by roll call.**

**NEW BUSINESS**

**a. Discussion and possible action on supporting purchase of land for Lake Johanna Fire Department in collaboration with the Cities of Shoreview and Arden Hills**

Administrator Kress stated that several months ago the City started discussion regarding the purchase of land from Bethel University in conjunction with the Cities of Shoreview and Arden Hills. The Lake Johanna Fire Department (LJFD) is generally looking for support from the three cities to move forward with the land purchase.

Fire Chief Tim Boehlke said he appreciated the opportunity to speak with everyone and noted times have been challenging. He stated this process began over two years ago. After the need study and the identification of some possible sites, he randomly had a conversation with some Bethel leadership to find out if they had plans for some of their property on Pine Tree Drive. That initiated further discussions, and in approximately January he was directed to try to enter into a Letter of Intent with Bethel University. On April 1 the Letter of Intent was signed; the next step is to sign the Purchase Agreement. The Fire Department appreciates today's world with COVID-19 and knows things are not going to change overnight. He appreciates the Cities' perspective of questioning whether or not the timing is right to take the next step with the land

purchase. The Fire Department believes the property identified with Bethel is a perfect, ideal site: it is located on a secondary road that is inside the corridor they have identified, which is around County Road E between Snelling and Lexington Avenue. He stated the corridor is important because the Fire Department is trying to service southern Shoreview and southern Arden Hills as well as having good access routes north, south, east, and west to respond to calls all the way into North Oaks. Obviously, no one is making property anymore; this is kind of a one-time opportunity to purchase the property. At this point they want to sign the Purchase Agreement and move towards closing. Based on the Board of Directors and Cities' discussion, the Fire Department would wait to make sure in future years the timing is right to pursue construction on that site. He said there is a Board of Directors meeting scheduled for the next morning, and he is hoping the Board will authorize him to sign the Purchase Agreement for the 3.7 acres of property. If it is successful, the closing on the property would potentially occur in the next 2-3 months. He is fearful that if the Department does not take this opportunity to purchase this land, it will be sold to someone else. Bethel University is planning on subdividing around 10-11 acres. The parcel the Fire Department is looking at is right next to Pine Tree Drive, basically covering up the curved driveway. The driveway would be relocated. It sounds like Bethel is also negotiating with a Presbyterian Homes type of organization for an assisted-living facility on another lot. Inside that specific corridor, there is no other property that will fit the size of property that is needed. Very likely, the Fire Department would have to consider purchasing two other commercial properties and then demolish buildings. He believes the cost would be substantially more than what the price of the site is. He appreciates the timing with COVID-19 and all of the uncertainty, but the needs of public safety are not changing. They are going to continue to be more and more demanding. The Department is trying to stay in pace with current development; currently, in all three cities, there is a considerable amount of development, even without the Rice Creek property that Arden Hills is hoping to develop. They are trying to do this project for the future, and he does not think any of the cities have any illusions that construction would start in the next year and is another subject that would have to be debated.

Mayor Nelson asked if the proposed location would serve the Twin Cities Army Ammunition Plant (TCAAP) property that may be developed in Arden Hills, or if that would be another location that would be key for firefighting for that region.

Chief Boehlke stated the Fire Department envisions servicing the Rice Creek Commons area from all three stations. If it is a fire alarm type of call, all three stations would respond. It is almost in the middle of all three stations, but it has very good access going north on Snelling from the Pine Tree site. They have been working hard to downsize and streamline the operation. The buildings cost a lot of money, both to build and maintain. It is also very difficult to staff multiple stations, so their ultimate goal is to continue to operate three stations; within 4-8 years they would end up staffing the fire station at Lexington and County Road I and have staffed stations all the way around. He stated part of the idea is to be able to respond to the number of calls; they want crews available for all emergency calls. Calls will continue to go up, and the Department wants to be in a position to serve without any restrictions. This is looking ahead, and this facility is needed. A big part of the facility is a lot of the different training props, including

live-fire training. Currently they drive 19 minutes out of the City with Firefighters and equipment. They are trying to take the first step with securing a property; it can be debated in the future what time is best to build the facility.

Councilmember Kingston noted Chief Boehlke is anticipating additional growth in the cities they are going to need to accommodate. He asked him to speak to the needs for the new facility if there was not new growth.

Chief Boehlke said in the COVID world, he is not sure he can predict how things will continue. At the peak of when the COVID crisis came in front of them, Police and Fire calls dropped off quite a bit county-wide, which was often due to people being afraid to be taken to the hospital and/or exposed to anyone else unless it was a dire emergency. They anticipate a 4-6% increase in calls, knowing what projects are under construction/going to be starting in the next 1-2 months. That has been a fairly regular measurement of call increases over the last many years. He has no idea when the Rice Creek Commons area will kick off; but when it does, it is likely going to develop relatively quickly. The Fire Department is not in a crisis, but it is common to have 2-3 calls occurring at the same time. They cover almost 36 square miles, and they think they can do that effectively with three fire stations. He does not see calls diminishing in the future. He thinks the economy will have to get back to its normal pace and additional growth will continue.

Councilmember Long stated it has only been 10 weeks since the COVID issue came, and prior to that, this was about the only property available if everything would have continued. He said there will be multiple businesses shutting down in the area with good-sized parcels which would not have been available two months ago. Prior to all of the world changes, Bethel seemed to be the best property. He has a hard time believing there won't be offices shut down in addition to retail. He is wondering if Bethel is pushing this or it is the Department's fear. He asked if this is a smart thing to be doing right now.

Chief Boehlke said Councilmember Long may very well be right as far as businesses closing. Because property is not being made anymore, in the specific corridor, a lot of the property is too small to build the future facility. There are a few parcels that are greatly oversized and significant structures would need to be demolished before starting the building process, or multiple commercial properties would be bought and multiple buildings demolished. One of the interesting and perfect things about the proposed location is that the frontage for the future station would be on Pine Tree Drive, which is a secondary street. In the current stations, the Fire Department is driving out and across as many as 5-6 lanes of traffic. At the Victoria station, cars are coming from every direction and it is next to the railroad tracks. At the Hodgson Road station, the cars are coming by at 50-60 miles an hour. Regardless of having lights on, everyone is driving their speed because they have someplace to go. The station at Lexington and County Road I is attractive as it is on a secondary street, so when trucks are leaving on calls, they are able to activate the Opticom light a block away and have control of the intersection so that when the trucks get there, it is safer for the Firefighters and the public.

Mayor Nelson asked if Roseville converted their multiple fire stations to one big fire station.

Chief Boehlke stated that over a period of 10-15 years, they went from three fire stations to one fire station. Roseville covers an area less than half the overall area the LJFD covers. They are more of a traditional city and have many transecting roads that go north, south, east, and west, whereas LJFD has lakes, rivers, streams, and federal installations. That makes it harder to navigate because there are limited choices for roads that transect the City. He would love to be able to protect the cities with two stations; but given the size, shape, and access of all three cities, it would be next to impossible.

Councilmember Long said there was a phone call with the Mayor, Administrator Kress, and Chief Boehlke. He asked if Shoreview was on the call and what their response was. He noted Shoreview is the largest partner and has the biggest piece of the cost.

Administrator Kress said generally Shoreview is on board with the land purchase. Their biggest concern was the time period to construct the actual building. They would like to see that pushed out a little further. Both three years and five years were thrown around. In general, they were on board with this land purchase and securing this site. They realize that there may be other retail sites, but the problem with those sites is that you have to pay for demolition of anything on-site, so at the end of the day you end up paying more for the parcel than for this specific parcel. He stated Arden Hills met the previous night; they are also on board. He said he had a conference call with them in the afternoon with Chief Boehlke to get feedback from them so the North Oaks City Council could be given that feedback.

Councilmember Ries asked Chief Boehlke to talk about some of the current challenges Station 4 has next to the tracks and how this new location would be an advantage. She said that because the fire station will move its headquarters out of Shoreview, they will have to deal with a vacant building, and they still see a huge benefit. North Oaks has the smallest percentage. North Oaks has to make a responsible decision, but the two cities with the lion's share are still on board, which is something to also consider.

Chief Boehlke stated it is very important to try to relocate the future station on the south side of the railroad tracks. It is not uncommon for crews to be delayed because of trains. Currently, the number of trains has diminished a little, but there are about 9-12 trains a day, day and night. At the peak of the oil boom in the Dakotas, 21-23 trains were going through. The crews have to make a choice when responding to a call, based on what type of call and how serious it is, whether or not it is worth it to try to reroute and drive to another crossing. Usually it is not worthwhile to do that, so the crew has to wait until a train passes to respond to a call. If the station is built, the headquarters would be relocated to the Arden Hills site because so much of the training would occur there, and it would allow the Department to build offices and facilities that can accommodate the Fire Department for 10-30 years. He mentioned to all three City Councils that everyone gets service from all three stations, whether they are staffed or unstaffed. All the shared equipment and shared costs benefit each city's Insurance Services Office (ISO)

rating and practical response time. By the time the future station is built, the Department anticipates all three stations would be staffed.

Councilmember Ross said another important thing to remember as the Council makes this decision is that North Oaks Company is starting to build a lot, so North Oaks will grow and be bigger than they currently are and require more services from the Fire Department over time.

Councilmember Long said this process has been done in the right way. He wanted to make sure that it hadn't come so far that it couldn't be stopped and everyone was still thinking clearly. If it is just purchasing the land, the location is right and it makes sense. He appreciates the ability to have the meeting tonight. Last week things seemed to be happening very quickly based on one phone call. He appreciates Staff contacting the other cities and feels more comfortable now.

Councilmember Ries noted it is important to take steps and think about what the Council is doing, especially in today's environment. This will be a phased process. This is the land purchase; building will be another phase years down the road. She noted if the market decreases, there will be some advantages such as cheaper labor or bonding rates. The land available south of the railroad tracks is quite limited and a lot of it is residential, and there are many challenges finding land that would be equally as attractive that would be available in time.

Mayor Nelson asked Chief Boehlke if there was a possibility of getting an option/optioning the property to let COVID run its course for 6-8 months and then seeing where things are.

Chief Boehlke said he would be guessing, but he thinks Bethel is looking for the Fire Department to sign the Purchase Agreement and commit to the property. They have plans with the Lot 1 area immediately west, and if LJFD is not a serious buyer, their current buyer would probably be interested in taking this parcel as well to make a bigger facility. That question has not been asked, but they have been eager to get the deal done. He noted there are additional costs for the relocated roadway and they are starting to incur costs for both the design and construction which would start once the sale would be closed. He fully appreciates the pressure from all three City Councils and that the timing could not be worse. There has been a tremendous amount of time given to get to this point, and the Fire Department is confident this is the best location to serve the three cities well into the future. It is unfortunate that everyone is in the middle of the COVID situation, but he believes in 2-5 years there will be another version of a different virus, and they need to be prepared to be able to respond to the calls well into the future. He believes in his heart it is the right thing to do in a tough time.

Mayor Nelson stated he is reminded that the value of property is "Location, location, location" and said this is a good location. He asked Administrator Kress what should be done next.

Administrator Kress said there does not need to be a motion of the Council, adding that it sounds like the Councils of Shoreview and Arden Hills have generally pledged their support to the Fire Department. That can be discussed with the Fire Board. The purpose of the meeting was to make

sure North Oaks City Council was supportive of the project so Chief Boehlke had enough support to go ahead with the Purchase Agreement.

Mayor Nelson stated he has concerns but thinks the purchase of the property is much less concerning than the building of the building. He can see going ahead to secure the property through one process or another. He said it might be appropriate to check with the seller about an option to let COVID play out a little; but if that is not an option, he would still support it. He understands the price of the property is expensive; but it is commercial property, it has been vetted, and the Fire Department has been looking into it a long time.

**MOTION by Kingston, seconded by Ries, that North Oaks City Council supports moving ahead and supports the Purchase Agreement as outlined in the documents provided. Motion carried unanimously by roll call.**

**ADJOURNMENT**

**MOTION by Ross, seconded by Ries, to adjourn the Council special meeting at 7:36 p.m. Motion carried unanimously by roll call.**

*Kevin Kress*  
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Kevin Kress, City Administrator

*Gregg Nelson*  
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Gregg Nelson, Mayor

Date approved 6/11/2020