

Memo



To: Mayor Muhlfeld and City Council

From: Fire Chief Hadley and City Manager Meeker

Date: July 14, 2026

Re: Construction of a Second City Owned Fire Station North of the Baker Avenue Viaduct

Background

The City of Whitefish has a long history of proactive planning and investment in infrastructure to support responsible growth. Roads, utilities, parks, emergency services, and public safety facilities generally are planned and constructed before demand exceeds system capacity and reduces the level of services expected by the community.

Whitefish has seen significant growth in residential, commercial, and visitor activity, especially north of the BNSF railroad corridor where emergency response is dependent upon crossing the Baker Avenue Viaduct or one of the limited at-grade railroad crossings. With all City fire suppression and Advanced Life Support (ALS) ambulance resources responding from the Emergency Services Center located south of the railroad corridor, an operational vulnerability exists whenever emergency responders cross the railroad during periods of traffic congestion, train activity, severe weather, or multiple simultaneous emergency incidents. The effectiveness of both services is directly related to response time. Delays can lead to accelerated fire growth, reduced survivability, increased property damage, and delayed medical care for time-sensitive emergencies.

The need for a second fire station has been identified in multiple City planning documents as follows:

Vision Whitefish 2045 identifies the need for a future fire station north of the railroad corridor to support planned growth and maintain acceptable emergency response times. The proposed station advances the City's goals for: Public Facilities, Community Safety, Responsible Growth, Infrastructure Planning, and Community Resilience.

The **2022 Whitefish Transportation Plan** recognizes emergency access as a critical transportation function and emphasizes the importance of maintaining reliable emergency response capabilities as traffic volumes increase and transportation constraints continue to impact mobility throughout the community.

The **Fire Department Master Plan** recommends expansion of fire station infrastructure to maintain emergency response performance as Whitefish continues to grow, and the **Whitefish Fire Department Strategic Plan** recommends starting preliminary work on this project in the fourth quarter of Fiscal Year 2026.

The **Service Area Report and Impact Fee Study** adopted in 2023 included a second fire station north of the Baker Avenue Viaduct as a capital project with the expectation that the station be completed within 10 years. The City continues to assess impact fees on new developments for a second fire station.

Establishing a northern fire station would reduce the department's reliance on a single primary transportation corridor and improve emergency access, response reliability, and operational flexibility throughout the response area. A strategically located station on the northern side of the response area would also provide significant benefits during large-scale emergencies by supporting more timely and organized evacuation operations. Additionally, improved access to the northern portion of the community would enhance initial attack capabilities for wildland fire incidents, allowing firefighters to reach emerging fires more quickly and potentially reducing the overall size, duration, and impact of these incidents.

Adding a second fire station, however, is not simply a one-time capital investment. Constructing a fire station does not improve emergency response. Only a continuously staffed station provides immediate emergency response capability. A station without assigned firefighter/paramedics would require personnel to travel from another location before responding to an emergency. This would eliminate nearly all response time improvements the station intends to provide and would not represent a practical or operationally effective emergency response model.

Unlike many rural communities that rely on volunteer response models, the City of Whitefish experiences emergency incidents twenty-four hours per day, seven days per week. Fire suppression, emergency medical services, technical rescue, hazardous materials incidents, and other emergencies occur without regard to the time of day. A fire station without continuously assigned personnel functions primarily as an equipment storage facility rather than an emergency response station.

At the time of preparation of this report, the Whitefish Fire Department has experienced a cumulative total of 204 hours, 24 minutes, and 57 seconds since January 1, 2026, during which no immediately available emergency response unit was in service due to department resources being committed to other incidents or patient transport. This operational reality demonstrates the increasing demand placed on the City's existing emergency response system and highlights the importance of expanding emergency service capacity.

As the community continues to grow, the likelihood of simultaneous emergency incidents will continue to increase. A second continuously staffed fire station provides additional operational redundancy, allowing the Department to maintain emergency response capability when the primary station's resources are committed. This improves system reliability, reduces dependence on outside agencies, and ensures residents, businesses, and visitors continue receiving timely emergency services throughout the community.

A continuously staffed second station north of the Baker Avenue Viaduct will provide:

- Improve emergency response times throughout northern Whitefish.
- Improve Advanced Life Support ambulance response and transport capability.
- Increase safety of firefighters, paramedics, community members and visitors.
- Improve response reliability during simultaneous emergency incidents.
- Support continued residential and commercial growth.

- Improve emergency preparedness for major incidents and disasters.
- Reduce dependence on mutual aid for first-due responses.
- Improve system resiliency if the Baker Avenue Viaduct or railroad crossings become inaccessible.
- Protect public and private investments throughout the community.
- Support future annexation and long-term community planning.
- Maintain the level of emergency service expected by residents, businesses, and visitors as Whitefish continues to grow.

Current Report

The first step to build a second fire station is to identify and acquire a piece of land. In spring of 2025, Fire Chief Hadley and City Manager Meeker were approached by Iron Horse HOA President, Scott Sanderude, regarding a possible opportunity for the City to utilize a piece of land owned by the HOA or Iron Horse Golf Club for a second fire station. City staff determined the ideal location would be the southwest corner of the Iron Horse Golf Club's property along East Lakeshore Drive.

Over the past year, we have worked with the Iron Horse HOA and Golf Club and are excited to present this project to the City Council. Currently, the Iron Horse Golf Club has agreed to generously donate the land to the City for a second fully staffed fire station. The Iron Horse HOA is also committed to leading a capital campaign to fundraise the cost of the station and necessary apparatus. The City would be responsible for funding the operational costs of the station, including a minimum of 12 additional firefighters and other related operational supplies. If the City Council is interested in proceeding with this project, a memorandum of understanding should be prepared and considered at a regular City Council meeting like what was done with the North Whitefish Lake Community Fire Association.

We understand this is a significant commitment and expansion project. Construction of the facility should be viewed as long-term public safety infrastructure comparable to roads, bridges, utilities, and other essential municipal facilities. While staffing represents the largest ongoing operational investment, personnel, not the building itself, will deliver emergency services. Therefore, the value of the capital investment is realized only when firefighters/paramedics are present and available to respond immediately. Recruitment, hiring, and training of personnel must occur prior to the official opening of a second station to ensure immediate operational capability.

Financial Analysis

Assuming the land is donated by the Iron Horse Golf Club and most of the capital costs are covered through the efforts of the Iron Horse HOA's capital campaign, the City's costs for the actual construction of the second station will be limited to impact fees currently on hand at that time. The current impact fee balance is \$787,698.

As a service organization, the city often sees wages as the highest cost in most operating budgets. With a current average of \$140,000 per firefighter/paramedic including wages, benefits, and all employer costs, for new hires, 12 firefighters/paramedics would require approximately \$1,680,000. This cost will increase as years pass due to wage increase and rising health insurance costs.

In addition to personnel costs, the City will incur additional costs for PPE, training, information technology, utilities, fuel, and other repair and maintenance supplies estimated at \$275,000. However, most of the supply costs will remain steady as the intent is to operate with the same number of ambulances and fire engines. The current second due ambulance and engine would be in operation with the third ambulance and engine as reserves.

With personnel and operational costs required, it is estimated that the City will need between \$1.95 million and \$2.25 million if the station is completed in three years. This is the equivalent of approximately 18.35 mills – 21.18 mills levied based on the estimated FY27 taxable value. While the City may have enough carryover mills to accommodate this increase, it results in a substantial property tax increase. Thus, it is our recommendation to put the question before the voters through a ballot initiative if the City Council wishes to proceed with this project.

Summary

Construction and staffing of a northern fire station represent one of the most significant public safety investments the City of Whitefish can make to maintain emergency service levels while accommodating future growth.

The project directly supports the City's transportation, infrastructure, and long-range planning objectives while addressing the geographic challenges created by the BNSF railroad corridor. It strengthens fire suppression, Advanced Life Support ambulance service, rescue capabilities, and overall emergency response reliability while improving firefighter safety and increasing the City's resilience during major emergencies.

To realize these benefits, the station must be continuously staffed with firefighter/paramedics twenty-four hours per day. Without permanent staffing, the facility cannot provide response time improvements, operational effectiveness, or public safety enhancements that justify its construction.

The proposed second fire station on the Iron Horse Golf Course property is a strategic investment in Whitefish's future based on a public private partnership. It will position the City to provide timely, reliable fire suppression, emergency medical services, ambulance transport, rescue operations, and disaster response while supporting responsible growth and preserving the high level of public safety expected by the Whitefish community for decades to come.

Discussion and Requested Direction

Staff are respectfully requesting the City Council discuss the proposed project, ask questions of staff and the Iron Horse HOA Board members, and provide direction on how to proceed with this project, including the potential development of a memorandum of understanding or agreement for consideration at a future City Council meeting.

General Property Location Identified for Second City Fire Station

