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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – April 23, 2025
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Potential Funding Solutions Presented to Sun Prairie City Council

During a Special Committee of the Whole meeting on April 22, the Sun Prairie City Council reviewed an options assessment report detailing the need for additional funding to maintain services and continue investing in service improvements. The report also identifies potential solutions for raising additional funds, including through a referendum to increase the property tax levy. No formal actions were taken by council members.

“The City of Sun Prairie is a vibrant community, recognized regionally for a high quality of life, excellent parks and recreation programs, and progressive approach to development and redevelopment,” said Aaron Oppenheimer, city administrator. “As costs to provide services continue to increase, we will need to make important decisions regarding funding and staffing for the services that make Sun Prairie a place where the community loves to live, work, and play.”

As the process continues, the Sun Prairie community will play a significant role in defining the City’s path forward, which is likely to be determined in late 2025 or early 2026.

Increasing Costs to Maintain Existing Services

As outlined in the report, starting in 2026, budget gaps are projected. By design, Wisconsin municipalities have a limited ability to increase funding. Levy limits established by the State of Wisconsin set the amount of funding Sun Prairie can raise through property taxes, and both the debt service and operational levies are now hitting their limits.

Over time and with community growth, the City’s funding needs are driven by increasing costs for contracts, equipment and vehicles, though the primary driver is staff compensation. With over 300 FTE

providing a wide range of services and a need to retain and recruit talent, the City's structured pay increase system ensures ranges remain in line with the average increase in comparable communities.

Additional Funding Needed to Continue Improving Services

In addition to the rising costs to maintain services, the report outlines how funding would be needed to invest in adding staff to departments in order to improve services.

Departments have identified service improvements possible by adding staff over the five-year span between 2027 and 2031, including:

- **Police Department:** Adding 13 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff would increase shift staffing levels, increase capacity for proactive community engagement and cultivate positive relationships between law enforcement and the community.
- **Fire and EMS Department:** Adding 13 FTE staff would ensure sufficient staff are available at all times from all stations to help address the sharp increase in calls for service (197.6% increase from 2015-2024).
- **Library:** Adding 11.7 FTE staff would support facility operations in a building twice the size and with double the amount of programming.
- **Public Services Department:** Adding 2 FTE staff would address the growing need to maintain infrastructure and operate stormwater utilities.
- **Parks, Recreation and Forestry Department:** Adding 1.5 FTE staff would support the upkeep of critical maintenance in parks and continued service connections for residents.

Options to Fund Current Services and Invest in Improvements

The report outlines several potential funding approaches for the community to consider:

1. **Fixed Funding, Projected Decline in Core Services:** The Sun Prairie community may opt to take no action to increase revenue. Facing a budget deficit beginning in 2027, the city will have to make difficult and potentially painful decisions each year thereafter about how to cut services, programs and staffing levels to balance the budget gap.
2. **Continue Funding Existing Services for Three Years:** To meet growing costs and continue funding existing local services through 2029, the city would need an additional \$4.5 million for the annual operating budget. This money could be generated by:
 - a. **Exceeding property tax limits via referendum**

b. Imposing an increased wheel tax

3. **Continue Funding Existing Services for Five Years:** To meet growing costs and continue funding existing local services through 2031, the city would need an additional \$8 million for the annual operating budget. Funds could be obtained by exceeding property tax limits through a referendum.
4. **Continue Funding Existing Services for Five Years and Invest in All Requested Service Improvements:** To continue funding existing services and improve services through all proposed investments in staffing through 2031, the city would need an additional \$12.8 million for the annual operating budget. The city could generate this money by exceeding property tax limits via referendum.

Additional information about the impacts of each option is available in the full report, on pages 25-29.

Next Steps, Community Involvement

As dialogue around city services continues, each household in the city will receive a survey in September. The survey will request input about residents' preferred investments and approaches to funding local services.

Results from the survey and input generated through community engagement opportunities will be key in determining the path forward. The final direction forward may look different from the options above as the community identifies priority areas of investment.

Additional information about the need for additional funding and the options assessment report is available at <https://www.cityofsunprairie.com/1997/Sun-Prairie-Proposed-Funding-Solutions>

About City of Sun Prairie

Sun Prairie is a vibrant and thriving community located in northeastern Dane County, just east of the City of Madison. The City of Sun Prairie has experienced strong population growth since its incorporation from a village to a city in 1958, undergoing a transformation from a relatively small community of less than 4,000 to an estimated 39,419 today.