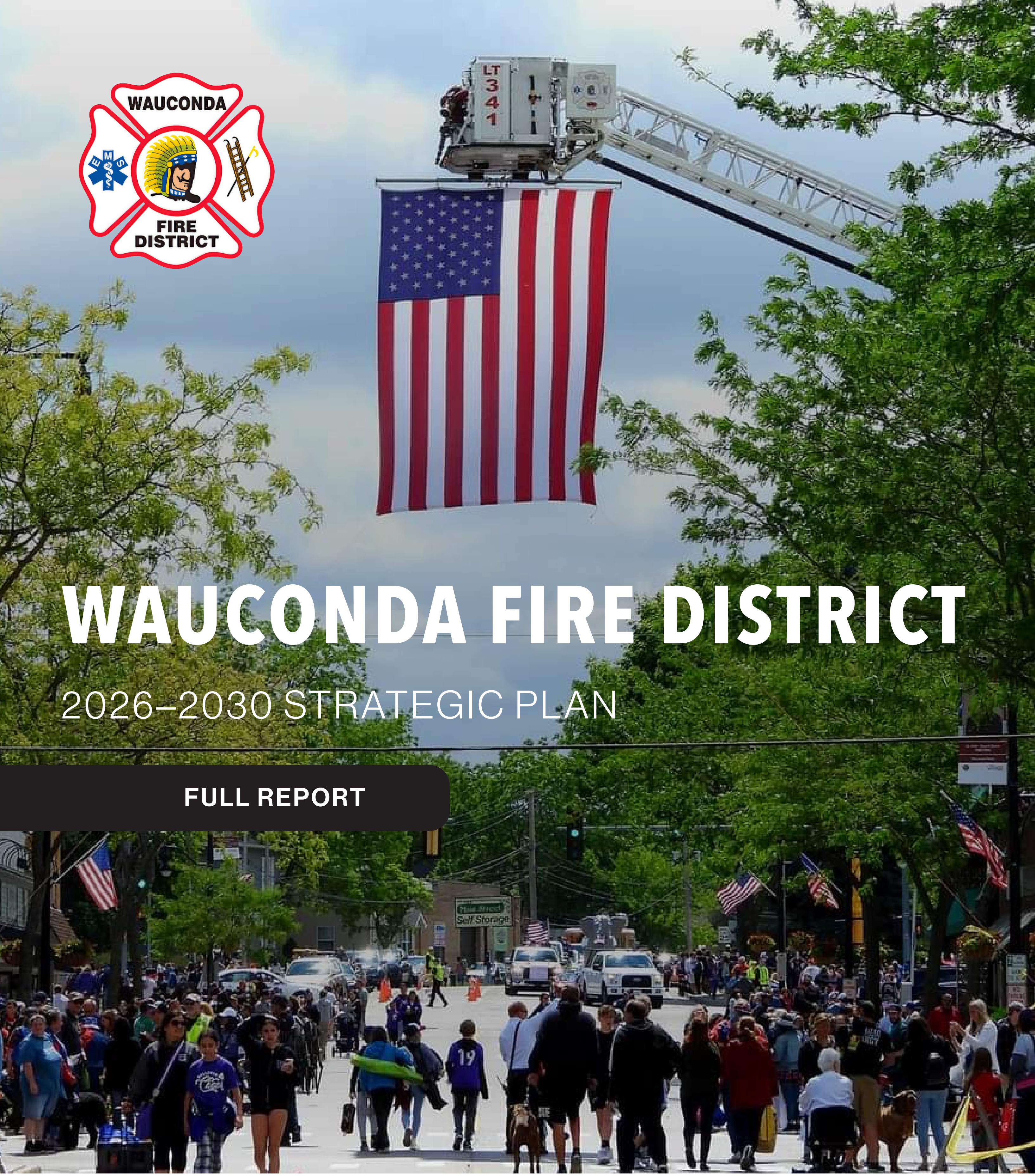

WAUCONDA FIRE DISTRICT

WAUCONDA FIRE DISTRICT

2026–2030 STRATEGIC PLAN

FULL REPORT

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
Center for Governmental Studies
Outreach, Engagement, and Regional Development

PREPARED APRIL 2026

STRATEGIC PLAN PROCESS ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

WAUCONDA FIRE DISTRICT BOARD

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Deb Lezon, *Treasurer*

Tim Gertz, *Secretary*

Jason Henriksen, *Trustee*

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Ron Price, *Chairman*

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WAUCONDA FIRE DISTRICT ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERSHIP

Curt Hanselman, *Fire Chief*

Chas Buschick, *Deputy Chief*

Jason Daun, *Deputy Chief*

EJ Miller, *Division Chief of Training*

Mike DaValle, *Division Chief of Community Risk Reduction*

Jeff Giacinto, *Director of Support Services*

Samantha Vacura, *Administrative Assistant*

WAUCONDA FIRE DISTRICT COMMUNITY AND STAKEHOLDERS

The Fire District would also like to thank all who participated in the stakeholder feedback phase of the process. An effective strategic plan includes feedback from key stakeholders to ensure that organizational needs and expectations are clearly communicated and understood by leadership.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
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CONTENTS

ABOUT
THE WAUCONDA FIRE DISTRICT

The Wauconda Fire District provides Fire, Rescue, and Emergency Medical Services to a community of approximately 40,000 people. Within approximately 45 square miles, the Wauconda Fire District serves all or part of the following municipalities in northeastern Illinois: Port Barrington, Hawthorn Woods, Island Lake, Lake Barrington, Lakemoor, North Barrington, Round Lake, Tower Lakes, Volo, and Wauconda as well as some unincorporated areas of Lake and McHenry Counties.

Twenty-four-hour coverage at three fire stations provides emergency response to over 4,800 calls per year. In addition to fire, medical, and ambulance calls, full-time and part-time members perform non-emergency duties such as fire prevention, vehicle and building maintenance, fire safety education, and CPR and First Aid classes.

The Wauconda Fire District is governed by a 5-member Board of Trustees that oversees the District. The Trustees are appointed by the Lake County Board Members.

Operations of the Wauconda Fire District are managed by a Fire Chief with the support of two Deputy Chiefs, Division Chief of Community Risk Reduction, Division Chief of Training, Director of Support Services, and an administrative assistant.

Emergency response is managed through staffing of three fire stations with 39 full-time firefighter paramedics and 11 part-time firefighters. The Fire District responds from two stations staffed with three-member jump companies that respond in an ambulance or fire engine and the main station staffed with six to eight members responding with a command unit, fire engine, ambulance, truck, or tender based on the nature of the call.

Wauconda Fire District has an ISO Class 3 rating.

DEPARTMENT OPERATIONAL OVERVIEW

- The Fire District responds out of three fire stations staffed 24/7 by paid career Firefighter/EMT-Paramedics supported by a small pool of part-time personnel.
- The Fire District operates one Advanced Life Support (ALS) Pumper/Squad, two Intermediate Life Support (ILS) Pumpers, one Aerial Tower, one Water Tender, one Brush Truck, one Utility/Rehab Support Vehicle, three ALS Ambulances, one Water Rescue Boat, four Command Vehicles, five Pool/Utility Vehicles, one Reserve ILS Pumper, and one Reserve ALS Ambulance.
- In addition, the Fire District houses, maintains, and operates regional response assets including a Unified Command and Communication Vehicle, Side Scan Underwater Sonar Unit, and a number of special equipment trailers.
- The Fire District is a proud participating member with Mutual Aid Box Alarm System (MABAS) Division 4 and the Lake and McHenry County Specialized Response Team (SRT).

To learn more about the Wauconda Fire District, visit **www.waucondafire.org**.

INTRODUCTION

Strategic planning is an effective way for an organization to identify and confirm their future vision and clarify purpose and direction. The Wauconda Fire District ("District") engaged the Northern Illinois University Center for Governmental Studies ("NIU-CGS") in June 2025 to facilitate its strategic planning process (Figure 1). The value of such processes continues to be recognized by policy-making boards, councils, and executive staff in both private and public organizations.

From October 2025 to January 2026, the NIU-CGS team gathered input from the District's internal and external stakeholders which was shared at the strategic planning leadership workshop held in January 2026. The workshop offered the District's leadership an opportunity to explore the organization's vision for the future, reflect on stakeholder feedback, and ultimately establish short- and long-term goals and priority areas. The workshop also provided a positive atmosphere where leadership could discuss the best ways to serve the organization and the broader community in the coming years.

It is important to keep in mind that the judicious use of the organization's limited resources, including financial resources and professional staff time, is key to achieving good results. Only a limited number of goals and objectives can be managed and implemented effectively at any given time. In a very realistic sense, clear and stable priorities must be maintained if the organization desires to stretch its resources as far as they can go.

Figure 1. Strategic Planning Model

PRE-WORKSHOP
ENVIRONMENTAL SCANNING AND STAKEHOLDER INPUT

The District's leadership recognizes the importance of gaining a comprehensive understanding of their organization and the broader community they serve by gathering input from various stakeholders. Collecting stakeholder feedback is essential to the strategic planning process because effective planning starts with listening. During the environmental scanning phase of the strategic planning process, the NIU-CGS team employed a comprehensive engagement approach. Findings from the stakeholder input phase were presented in thematic form at the strategic planning leadership workshop, providing valuable insights to guide discussion.

EXTERNAL PERSPECTIVES

Incorporating external perspectives into the Fire District's strategic plan is important for capturing the diverse needs and aspirations of its community, businesses, and partners, ensuring the plan is responsive to their input. This approach fosters greater trust and engagement, leading to more effective and sustainable outcomes. To that end, NIU-CGS conducted three in-person external stakeholder focus groups.

Focus groups are designed to be a highly interactive approach, allowing for robust and informative conversation with and between participants. In October 2025, focus groups were conducted in person with several of the Fire District's partners and external stakeholders. The number of participants in each group ranged from 10 to 13.

- **Civic and Intergovernmental Organizations** (including community leaders serviced by the Fire District, municipalities, schools, hospital in their paramedic network, etc.)
- **Large and Small Businesses throughout the Fire District's Service Area** (cross-section of varying size, industry, tenure, etc.)
- **Cross-sectional Residents** (cross-section of residents including diversity in age, gender, race, geography, residential tenure, etc.)

INTERNAL PERSPECTIVES

Gathering internal perspectives when developing the Fire District's strategic plan is also crucial, ensuring the plan is informed by the insights and experiences of those who understand the organization's unique operations, challenges, and opportunities. To collect these internal perspectives, the NIU-CGS team conducted virtual and in-person interviews and working sessions and facilitated two in-person focus groups.

Interviews result in highly personalized participation and the in-depth sharing of ideas. The focus of the interview sessions is to gain an initial perspective by building a balanced and informed view of the District from each stakeholder's unique vantage point. In November 2025 and January 2026, a series of virtual and in-person interviews and working sessions were conducted with Board members, Commissioners, and the Chief and Deputy Chiefs.

Focus groups were conducted in person in January 2026 with the Battalion Chiefs, Lieutenants, and firefighters and fire medics. The number of participants in each group ranged from four to 13.

Findings from the stakeholder input phase were synthesized into key themes and shared at the strategic planning leadership workshop to inform and guide discussions. A brief overview and key highlights of all stakeholder priorities are provided below. For detailed summaries of stakeholder feedback, including focus group methodology, see **Appendix A**.

WHAT WE HEARD:
STAKEHOLDER PRIORITY THEMES

Feedback from both internal and external stakeholders emphasized the importance of positioning the District for continued excellence as it navigates growth, workforce transitions, and increasing service demands. Maintaining operational reliability through the strategic use of technology and data-driven tools was also identified as essential to preserving rapid response, life safety, and high-quality service across the District.

At the same time, sustainable fiscal stewardship and long-range infrastructure planning were highlighted as critical to modernizing aging facilities, supporting future expansion, and ensuring long-term financial resilience. Strengthening organizational capacity through workforce development, succession planning, and a strong organizational culture will help the District attract, retain, and prepare the next generation of first responders.

Figure 2. Top Priorities of All Stakeholders

- **Operational and Service Excellence**
- **Sustainable Infrastructure, Facilities, and Fiscal Stewardship**
- **Workforce Development, Capacity, and Organizational Culture**
- **Community Engagement, Partnerships, and Communication**

Finally, deepening community engagement and partnerships through transparent communication, public education, and regional collaboration will strengthen trust, better align services with evolving community needs, and reinforce the District's role as a visible, proactive, and trusted public safety provider.

Key Highlights from All Stakeholder Feedback:

OPERATIONAL AND SERVICE EXCELLENCE

Leveraging technology to improve response times, dispatch efficiency, and situational awareness across the District will be key to maintaining high-performing, reliable emergency services. Stakeholders emphasized proactive investment in AI and data-driven systems to enhance both internal operations and public-facing services, while preserving life safety, operational readiness, and strong community trust.

SUSTAINABLE INFRASTRUCTURE, FACILITIES, AND FISCAL STEWARDSHIP

Long-range, financially responsible planning will ensure facilities, apparatus, and staffing capacity keep pace with growth, aging infrastructure, and increasing service demands. Initiatives include modernizing stations and equipment, aligning capital planning with call volume and community expansion, pursuing cost efficiencies and partnerships, and increasing transparency around financial drivers to support long-term economic viability.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT, CAPACITY, AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Stakeholder feedback indicated a strong emphasis on developing a resilient, engaged, and future-ready workforce. Priorities include strategic recruitment, succession planning, and ongoing professional development. Stakeholders identified strengthening leadership pipelines, mentoring pathways, and standardized training programs as possible growth opportunities. Additionally, stakeholders noted that fostering a collaborative, community-oriented culture that builds trust, morale, and a sense of ownership among a younger and evolving workforce is a high priority for District leadership.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, PARTNERSHIPS, AND COMMUNICATION

Strengthening relationships with residents, businesses, and regional partners through consistent communication, public education, and collaborative service delivery was emphasized. Priorities include expanding prevention and safety education, increasing transparency and visibility, enhancing media and outreach strategies, and leveraging partnerships, volunteers, and youth programs to ensure services remain aligned with community needs and expectations.

LEADERSHIP WORKSHOP
OUTLINE OF EXERCISES AND DISCUSSION SESSIONS

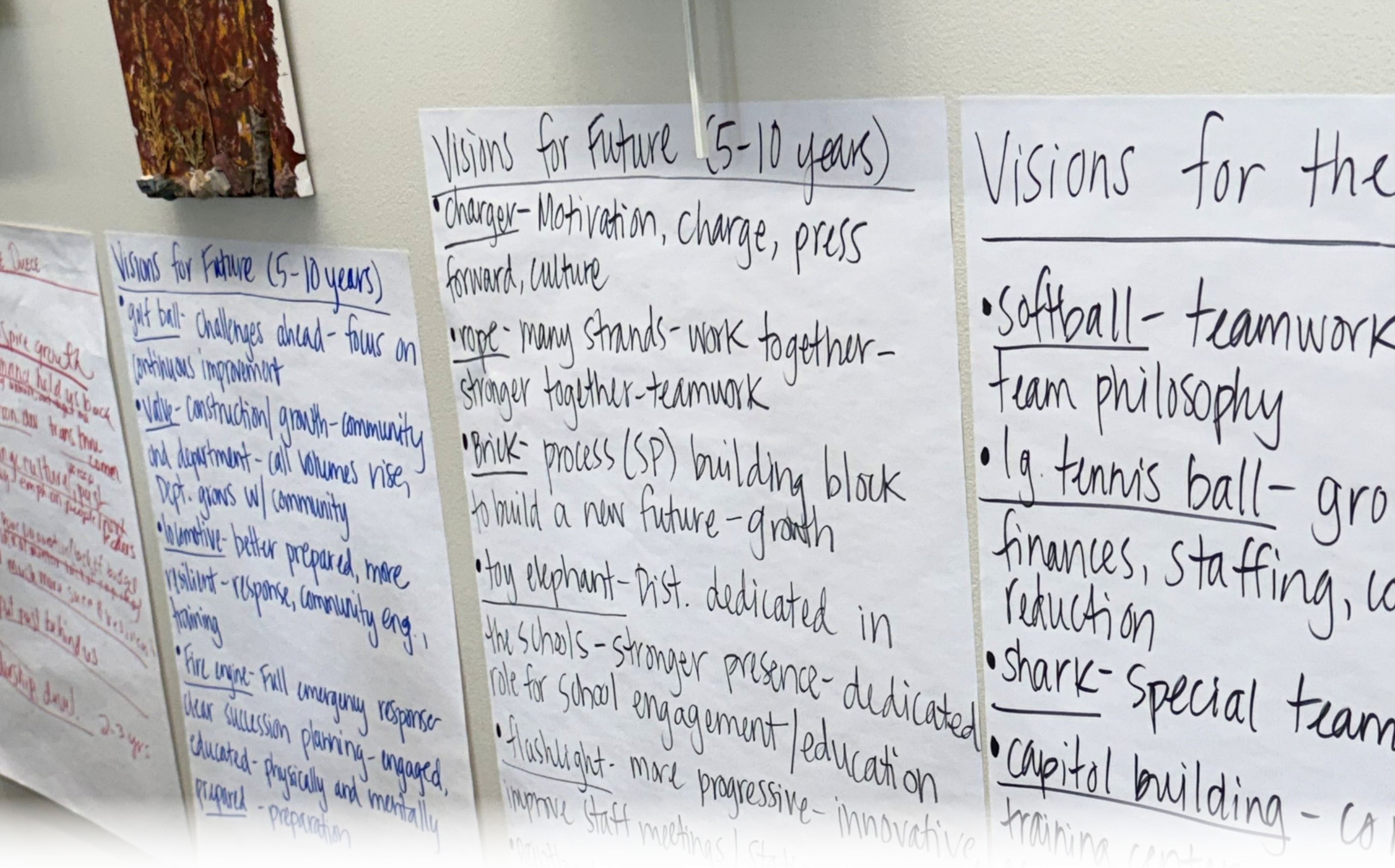
All discussion sessions at the strategic planning leadership workshop, held in January 2026, employed highly participative and interactive approaches. The workshop facilitators utilized a group discussion approach that assured each participant an equal opportunity to speak and share opinions with the larger group. Participants were also able to weigh alternatives and refine their thinking through dialogue in small-group activities at the workshop. As ideas were shared and debated, the group worked steadily toward a consensus regarding the organization's mission, future direction, goals, and priorities.

INTRODUCTIONS AND VISIONING FOR THE FUTURE EXERCISE

Participants were asked to introduce themselves and share how long they have been serving in their current position or role with the Fire District. Next, they engaged in a visioning exercise. In this exercise, workshop participants selected an item from the "garage sale" table that described the desired future direction of the District by answering the following question: "If you left for 5, 10 years, what do you think you will see or what do you hope you will see when you return in terms of services, programs, improvements, or changes?" This was a brainstorming exercise, and no evaluative or judgmental debate was permitted during this session. Next is a list of those answers (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Visioning for the Future—Hope or think you will see in 5–10 years

GARAGE SALE ITEM	VISION FOR THE FUTURE
Golf Ball	Challenges ahead – focus on continuous improvement
Valve	Construction and growth – community and department – call volumes rises, Department grows with community
Locomotive	Better prepared, more resilient – response times, community engagement, training
Fire Engine	Full emergency responses, clear succession planning – engaged and educated – physically and mentally prepared – preparation
Charger	Motivation, "charge", press forward, culture
Rope	Many strands working together – stronger together – teamwork
Brick	Strategic planning process is a building block to build a new future – growth
Toy Elephant	Youth and schools – District has a dedicated presence in the schools, dedicated role for school engagement and education
Flashlight	Innovation – District becomes more progressive – innovative, improve staff meetings and stations
Paintbrush	Continuous improvement, continue painting a picture of improvement
Softball	Teamwork, team gain, team philosophy
Large Tennis Ball	Growth – District growth, finances, staffing, community risk reduction
Shark	Growth and expansion of special teams, including aquatics, etc.
Capitol Building	Continued growth, training center, growth in revenue (e.g., Buffalo Grove), Fire District expands, becomes a destination department
Hard Hat	Building a foundation, growth, building for future (including staff and facilities)



ENVIRONMENTAL SCANNING
SURRENDER OR LEAD

Next, participants were introduced to a leadership exercise titled, “Surrender or Lead.” During this exercise, participants were organized into small groups to respond to a series of structured questions. These questions aimed to reveal hopes, perspectives, challenges, opportunities, and possible barriers based on the collective view of each group. The responses were recorded and the combined themes from the three groups are reported next. For a full list of Surrender or Lead responses from each individual group, see **Appendix B**.

THEMES FROM SURRENDER OR LEAD:

- **Financial Sustainability**
  Ensuring long-term financial stability while pursuing responsible growth, including exploring new revenue sources and funding strategies.
- **Invest in People and Leadership**
  Strengthening the organization by investing in staff development, mentorship, training, and cultivating the next generation of leaders.
- **Organizational Culture and Communication**
  Fostering a positive culture through transparency, improved communication, and addressing past challenges to build trust and cohesion.
- **Strategic Planning and Accountability**
  Establishing a clear vision and roadmap for the future with strong planning, prioritization, and accountability to guide sustainable progress.

ENVIRONMENTAL SCANNING

LARGE GROUP SWOC ANALYSIS

The next exercise at the strategic planning workshop allowed participants to further review and account for the internal and external factors present that could potentially influence the District, both negatively and positively. Workshop participants were asked to identify the District's **strengths (S)** and **weaknesses (W)**. In what areas does the organization regularly excel, and in what areas are there difficulties or shortcomings in terms of expertise, resources, or training? What **opportunities (O)** are on the horizon that can be used to the District's advantage? Conversely, what trends or **challenges (C)** lie ahead that would be obstacles or hindrances? These elements could include both internal and external factors, conditions, trends, regulations, agencies, and resources. The full list of responses to the exercise is provided in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Large Group Rapid Fire SWOC Analysis

An asterisk (*) indicates that others expressed agreement with the statement.

STRENGTHS

- Strong reputation
- Passionate staff
- Personnel
- Communication
- Community involvement and engagement
- Supportive community
- Emergency response
- Accountability improving, improved accountability
- Willingness to work together
- Collaboration with external partners and municipalities

WEAKNESSES

- Financial constraints
- Memories of the way things used to be done, holding the District back from moving forward
- Improve internal culture
- Need to enhance public education and engagement (e.g., broaden educational opportunities spread across District, and offered more often)
- Can improve communication efforts
- Data analysis, need to use data more for decision making
- Social media needs to be utilized more often
- Current facilities are older, need updating
- Vehicle fleet maintenance and repair need to continue with improvement efforts

Figure 4. Large Group Rapid Fire SWOC Analysis (cont.)
An asterisk (*) indicates that others expressed agreement with the statement.

OPPORTUNITIES

- Recruitment
- Public education
- Partnerships with schools, elderly and senior citizens, community at large
- Leadership development, training, succession planning*
- Increased communication
- Unified goal prioritization amongst the ranks
- Build efficiencies using technology (e.g., drones as first responders, incorporate AI, enhanced software programs, etc.)
- Social media – get the word out about Fire District – visibility, relevance, spread the word about events
- Formal facilities assessment – identify upgrades and needs
- More training opportunities for part-time staff

CHALLENGES

- Financial constraints
- Building a more resilient culture
- Recruitment
- Political landscape
- Uninformed or misinformed community – communication in general
- Prioritizing goals – differing priorities internally
- Time constraints and costs for training, lack of formal plan or succession plan
- Technology – not all up to speed with technology, not everyone has computer access, training, etc.
- Culture, memories, old way of doing things – focus on moving forward
- Facilities and infrastructure updates, vehicles and apparatus
- Large geographical area covered – growing, changing demographics, inclusion of the outlying district areas

NOMINAL GROUP GOAL IDENTIFICATION

With the preceding discussion sessions and exercises acting as a sound foundation for goal setting, the next exercise provided time for a healthy group discussion and development of goals and objectives to achieve the future visions as expressed by workshop participants.

Participants convened in the same small groups for goal development. Each group was allotted time to develop, and then report out, important policy and program goals that they thought the District should accomplish. Groups were asked to create goals using two different time frames: short-term goals, which could be started or accomplished in the next one to three years, and long-term goals, which could be accomplished in a four- to eight-year time frame. Each small group then shared their goals with the larger group. Goals could be highly specific or general, but all goals pointed to important outcomes that leadership hopes to see in the years ahead.

Short-term goals are those goals or objectives that could or should be completed or substantially underway in the next one to three years.

Long-term goals are those goals or objectives that could or should be completed or substantially underway within a four- to eight-year time frame.

Open Group Discussion and Consolidation of Goals and Objectives

This final phase of the goals discussion served as a forum for workshop participants to refine and compare the ideas and goals offered by each participant. Participants gave their opinions and further explained the alignment, ideas, and policy outcomes expressed in the goals and discussed if additional goals or details were needed.

POST-WORKSHOP
GOAL PRIORITIZATION AND RANKING EXERCISE

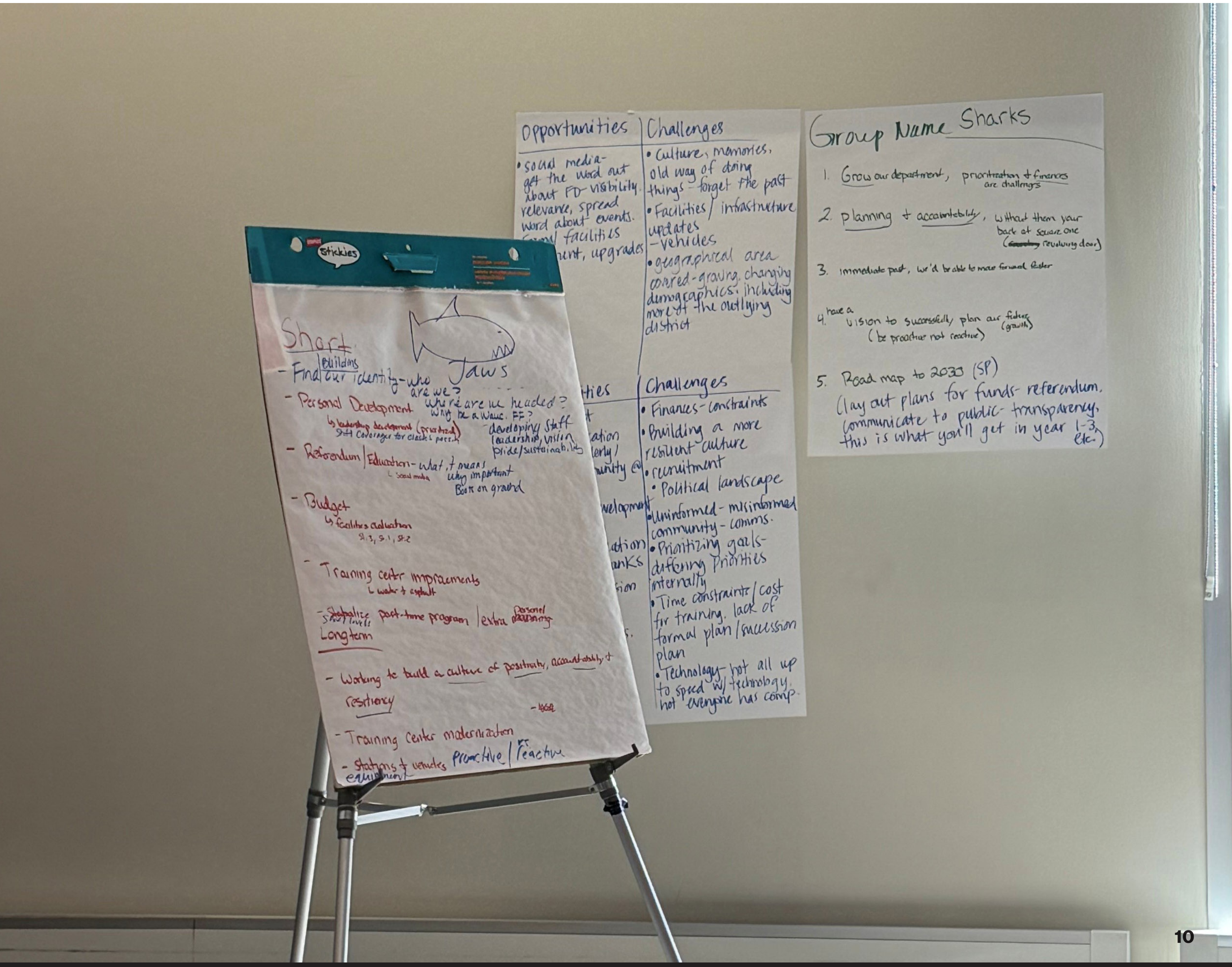
Following the workshop, NIU-CGS worked with District leadership to refine the strategic goals, ensuring they aligned with the direction set by leadership, clarified intent, and eliminated redundancies. In total, nine short-term and seven long-term goals were developed. The District's senior leadership team, consisting of the Deputy Chiefs and Chief, worked together with the final list of goals to determine which goals should be given the highest priority.

The District's prioritized goals dashboard, including assigned priority levels (High, Medium, or Lower) within each time frame, are presented in Figure 5. This visual clearly summarizes the strategic goals, objectives, and action items for the District to focus on in the months and years ahead.

Figure 5. 2026–2030 Prioritized Goal Dashboards

SHORT-TERM GOALS (1–3 YEARS)	Priority Level
Advance workforce sustainability while fostering a culture of engagement, development, and shared accountability. • Strengthen succession planning, leadership pathways with upward mobility, and mentoring opportunities • Increase leadership and professional development opportunities (including PT employees) • Evaluate the current staffing model (combination vs. full-time, shift schedules, etc.) • Explore implementing recruitment initiatives and reviewing current hiring practices	High
Ensure the Fire District's long-term financial stability and ability to deliver high-quality, reliable emergency services through responsible fiscal planning, sustainable revenue strategies, and transparent public engagement and education on District growth needs. • Support referendum planning and success by proactively educating and communicating with the public about the referendum's purpose, financial implications, and service impacts through coordinated, consistent outreach efforts • Enhance the District's social media presence and external communication by distributing e-newsletters, flyers, and seasonal safety messaging – share the wins, positive messages, events, "meet your EMS"	High
Evaluate and develop a comprehensive long-term facilities plan that aligns fire station infrastructure, apparatus storage, training space, and administrative needs with projected service demands, response time standards, community growth, and financial capacity. • Determine the future of Station 3 and identify facility gaps and priorities	High
Evaluate staffing needs across the District to help align resources with call volume, community needs, and employee well-being and satisfaction. • Work with District leadership to identify and prioritize areas of need, costs, etc. • Conduct a staffing study as needed	Medium
Strengthen internal communication through consistent updates, transparency and engagement opportunities to keep all staff informed and involved.	Medium
Expand community risk reduction and public education initiatives. • Enhance prevention training programs • Explore staffing options for initiatives and public engagement	Medium
Evaluate current training models and improve efficiency. • Review current training program and get feedback on areas of improvement • Coordinate policy review and training needs • Evaluate probationary programs to identify redundancies	Medium
Develop and update operational policies that support budget priorities and use clear, reliable data to inform planning decisions, measure performance, and guide how resources are used.	Lower
Implement strategic, proactive investments in technology, enhancing internal efficiency while strengthening the quality and accessibility of services. • Explore AI tools, apps for location sharing, routing, monitoring, and efficiency, etc. • Enhance data use in decision making • Utilize shared services and collaboration with regional partners where it makes sense to reduce costs, improve services, increase efficiency, etc.	Lower

LONG-TERM GOALS (4–8 YEARS)	Priority Level
Continue to build a strong internal culture focused on teamwork, accountability, resiliency, and shared direction. • Improve internal communication and operational practices to support proactive planning and effective service delivery	High
Position the District to proactively address current and evolving service demands, future growth, and demographic changes by implementing recommendations from the staffing evaluation. • Maintain high performance standards while supporting employee well-being, fiscal responsibility, and community expectations • Appropriate staffing levels, station coverage, and specialty capabilities	High
Use the strategic plan as an active, working tool by clearly communicating it to all staff, regularly tracking progress, and holding the organization accountable for implementation to maintain momentum, transparency, and engagement.	High
Implement and maintain a vehicle and equipment program to ensure reliable, safe, and up-to-date apparatus and tools.	Medium
Implement the long-term facilities plan that guides decisions on station renovations or upgrades and/or replacement based on service needs, community growth, and the assessment of facility priorities.	Medium
Pursue regional partnerships to strengthen training capacity, staffing support, shared purchasing, and operational efficiency.	Lower
Invest in training center upgrades and maintenance to improve training readiness, professional capability across staff levels.	Lower



STRATEGIC PRIORITY AREAS

Based on an evaluation of the entirety of the process, including the interviews, working sessions, focus groups, discussions at the workshop, and goals developed, three high-level strategic priority areas emerged. These priority areas represent larger themes that encompass all the strategic goals and highlight the activities and initiatives that the District will focus on in both the short and long term. The strategic priority areas identified as a result of the strategic planning process are shared and fully defined next (in no particular order). For goal and stakeholder feedback alignment related to each priority area, see **Appendix C**.

WORKFORCE AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

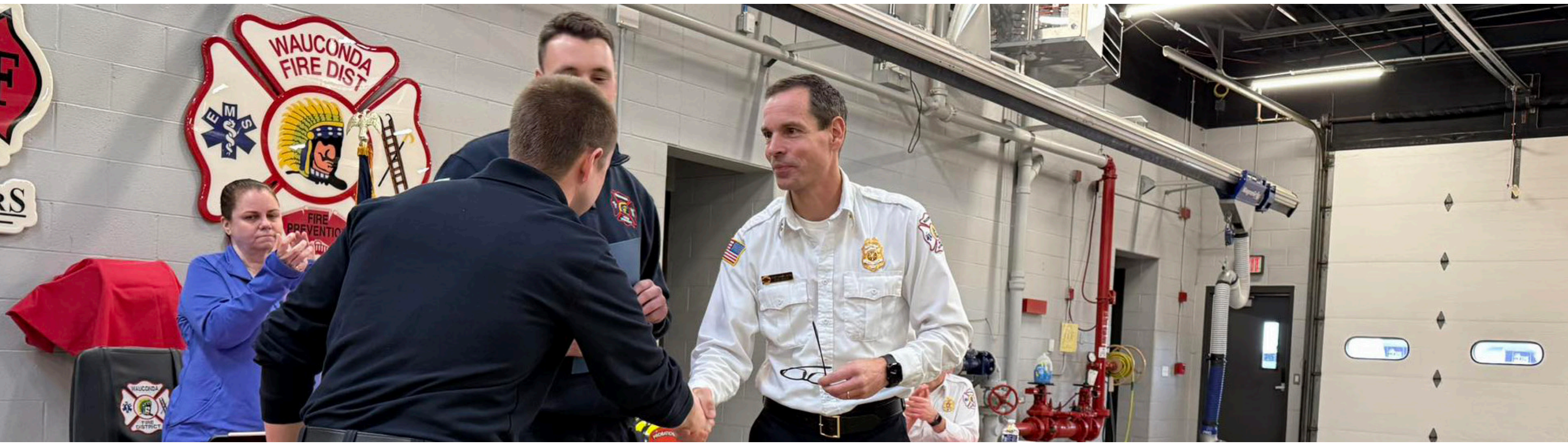
The Fire District prioritizes investing in its people, communication practices, and decision-making systems. Efforts discussed focus on proactively strengthening succession planning, expanding leadership and professional development opportunities for all personnel, and evaluating staffing levels and models to ensure operational stability. The District also values enhancing transparent and engaging internal communication to keep staff informed and involved, using the strategic plan as an active tool to monitor progress. These actions will encourage a positive work culture, positioning the Fire District for long-term success.

INFRASTRUCTURE, TECHNOLOGY, AND OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE

Ensuring the Fire District has the right facilities, equipment, technology, and operational systems to provide safe, efficient, and high-quality services is a top priority. Long-term planning for physical and technological resources, coupled with strategic partnerships, supports the District's ability to meet growing service demands. Efforts include upgrading the training center, maintaining, and improving stations and facilities, and strengthening regional collaborations. Prioritizing these investments helps ensure reliable emergency response, effective service delivery, and a workplace that supports employee satisfaction and morale.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, EDUCATION, AND RISK REDUCTION

The District is committed to transparent communication, meaningful engagement, and accountable decision-making to strengthen organizational alignment and enhance community safety. Community risk reduction and public education remain central, supported by expanded prevention training, enhanced outreach, and strengthened external communication. These efforts not only ensure reliable service and a safer, more resilient community, but also foster public understanding and support for the District's growth and future development.



CONCLUSION

The value of this strategic planning effort will be realized through the active use of this report as a practical guide for District leadership. It captures key discussions from the planning process and provides a foundation for developing implementation plans focused on the District's highest-priority goals.

The District's operating environment will continue to change due to shifts in demographics, community needs, technology, and industry practices. As a result, adaptability will remain essential. This strategic plan is intended to function as a flexible roadmap that can evolve over time. To ensure it remains relevant, the District should periodically review the plan, its goals, and the implementation timeline, whether on a monthly, quarterly, or semi-annual basis, and make adjustments as needed. A full refreshment of the strategic planning process every three years is also recommended.

The discussions and idea-sharing that occurred during the environmental scan and planning workshops demonstrated the District's commitment to stakeholder input and highlighted a forward-thinking leadership team focused on thoughtful, long-term decision-making.

We wish you continued success in the important work ahead.

Melissa Hen A. Aiston Jeanna Ballard

Melissa Henriksen, **Alli Aiston**, and **Jeanna Ballard**

NIU-CGS Project Coordinators and Facilitators

APPENDIX A
DETAILED STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK OVERVIEW

STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK GATHERING FRAMEWORK

One of the primary techniques used to analyze focus group notes is coding – a process in which analysts identify recurring words, phrases, and concepts that appear throughout stakeholder feedback. This requires multiple reviews of the data. The themes below summarize the NIU-CGS team's coding results, offering a snapshot of the most frequently mentioned topics and highlighting common themes raised by participants. By examining topics that appear across different groups and questions, the analysis reveals shared priorities and concerns that should inform the strategic planning process.

The same discussion questions were asked for each focus group and interviewee and are listed below:

1. **How would you describe the Fire District and the services it offers to a stranger or someone who doesn't live or work in the area?**
2. **If you left and didn't return for 5–10 years, what services or programs do you think you would see the Fire District offering or what do you hope you would see when you return?**
3. **What do you like best about the Fire District? Related to that, what are the strengths or greatest assets of the Fire District?**
4. **Can you identify areas or topics in need of attention or improvement? Related to that, what are the weaknesses or greatest needs for the Fire District?**
5. **What are or should be the top priorities for the Fire District over the next three to five years?**
6. **If you could change or initiate one key item or one goal for the Fire District, what would it be?**

What follows are the key themes and detailed summaries that emerged from the analysis of stakeholder feedback. This analysis provided District leadership with context and insights to support discussion at the strategic planning workshop.

OVERVIEW OF ALL STAKEHOLDER PRIORITY THEMES

Feedback from internal and external stakeholders focused on positioning the District for continued excellence amid growth, workforce transitions, and rising service demands. Maintaining operational reliability through strategic use of technology and data-driven tools is essential to preserving rapid response, life safety, and service quality across the District. At the same time, sustainable fiscal stewardship and long-range infrastructure planning are critical to modernizing aging facilities, supporting future expansion, and ensuring financial resilience. Building organizational capacity through workforce development, succession planning, and a strong culture will enable the District to attract, retain, and prepare the next generation of first responders. Finally, deepening community engagement and partnerships through transparent communication, public education, and regional collaboration will strengthen trust, align services with evolving community needs, and reinforce the District's role as a visible, proactive, and trusted public safety provider.

Key Highlights from All Stakeholder Priority Themes:

OPERATIONAL AND SERVICE EXCELLENCE

Leveraging technology to improve response times, dispatch efficiency, and situational awareness across the District will be key to maintaining high-performing, reliable emergency services. Stakeholders emphasized proactive investment in AI and data-driven systems to enhance both internal operations and public-facing services, while preserving life safety, operational readiness, and strong community trust.

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Strengthening relationships with residents, businesses, and regional partners through consistent communication, public education, and collaborative service delivery was emphasized. Priorities include expanding prevention and safety education, increasing transparency and visibility, enhancing media and outreach strategies, and leveraging partnerships, volunteers, and youth programs to ensure services remain aligned with community needs and expectations.

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- ***Focus groups*** are designed to be a highly interactive approach, allowing for robust and informative conversation with and between participants. In October 2025, three focus groups were conducted in person with some of the Fire District's external stakeholders. The number of participants in each group ranged from 10–13.
  - » *Civic and Intergovernmental Institutions*
  - » *Large and Small Businesses throughout the Fire District's Service Area*
  - » *Cross-Sectional Residents*

An analysis of the feedback resulted in the development of theme areas for workshop participants to consider. Detailed summaries for each focus group theme are provided next.

EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS | FOCUS GROUP THEMES

SERVICE EXCELLENCE, OPERATIONS, AND TECHNOLOGY ADVANCEMENTS

SUSTAINABLE GROWTH, FACILITIES, AND FISCAL STEWARDSHIP

STAFF DEVELOPMENT AND ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND PARTNERSHIPS

OVERALL EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDER FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

Stakeholders' priorities focus on exceptional emergency services delivery, supporting sustainable growth, and strengthening both organizational capacity and community partnerships. Key suggestions include maintaining fast, reliable response times; improving dispatch efficiency; preparing for emerging risks such as EV-related incidents; and leveraging modern technology for routing, communication, and operational performance. Priorities call for the alignment of facilities, equipment, staffing, and long-range fiscal planning with community expansion while increasing transparency and pursuing collaborative funding opportunities. Expanded outreach, public education, youth programs, and intergovernmental cooperation will enhance community involvement and ensure services evolve with local needs.

SERVICE EXCELLENCE, OPERATIONS, AND TECHNOLOGY ADVANCEMENTS

Key comments or suggestions from external stakeholders are provided below:

- Maintain short response times across the District, including remote areas.
- Streamline dispatch and reduce call-processing time.
- Preserve high service levels, life safety, and overall operational reliability.
- Strengthening partnerships with businesses and the broader community.
- Work to ensure development standards support access for emergency services (cul-de-sacs, hydrants).
- Prepare for Electric Vehicle-related risks and necessary public education surrounding this.
- Increase dispatch familiarity with District geography and businesses; streamline questioning when an emergency call comes in.
- Leverage technology to improve internal efficiency and public-facing services.
  - » *Explore AI tools, apps for location sharing, routing, monitoring, and efficiency, etc.*
- Make strategic, proactive investments in technology (account for long lead times).

SUSTAINABLE GROWTH, FACILITIES, AND FISCAL STEWARDSHIP

Key comments or suggestions from external stakeholders are provided below:

- Ensure growth in facilities and equipment keeps pace with District expansion.
- Implement long-range fiscal planning and maintain economic viability.
- Identify efficiencies, cost savings, grants, and innovative funding opportunities.
  - » *E.g., coordinate joint purchasing and financing with regional partners*
  - » *Anticipate impacts from the Lake County comprehensive plan on District finances*
- Balance code requirements with development needs (cost-benefit mindset).
- Accommodate increasing service demands, including those of an aging population.
  - » *New developments, senior housing trends, etc.*
- Increase transparency around material costs, staffing costs, and financial impacts.
  - » *E.g., pensions, cost drivers, etc.*

STAFF DEVELOPMENT AND ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

Key comments or suggestions from external stakeholders are provided below:

- Ensure adequate personnel levels and access to needed resources by strengthening recruitment, retention, and succession planning.
- Strengthen succession planning and institutional knowledge transfer.
- Maintain a culture that is approachable, collaborative, and community-oriented.
- Continue to engage fresh perspectives (e.g., outside-hire Fire Chief).
- Maintain high-level, continuous training programs (e.g., Cadet and Explorer Programs) and expand cross-training within departments and across fire, police, and medical.
  - » *Conduct tabletop exercises for hazards, severe weather, and active threats*
  - » *Expand EMS training to meet rising demand from an aging population*
- Strengthen internal accountability and adherence to chain of command (historic issue before new Chief).

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND PARTNERSHIPS

Key comments or suggestions from external stakeholders are provided below:

- Streamline and increase frequency.
- Develop and train on public relations and media policies for press statements and conferences.
- Enhance collaboration and cooperation with intergovernmental partners through intergovernmental agreements, regional partnerships, and shared services, including potential additional fire stations or shared facilities.
- Increase volunteer opportunities, youth interaction, and career pathway programs (e.g., CERT, Cadet programs, citizen fire academy, non-CERT volunteers).
- Capitalize on strong visibility to expand community involvement and external communications.
  - » *Accept donations (time, resources, and money, etc.)*
  - » *E-newsletters, flyers, seasonal safety tips*
- Expand prevention training (fire, EMS, confined space) and public safety education (CO2 and smoke detectors, climate-related risks).
  - » *Create a liaison role for scenario-based training, home visits, safety checks*
- Conduct community and business surveys to ensure services match evolving needs.

INTERNAL PERSPECTIVES

Gathering internal perspectives when developing the Fire District's strategic plan is also crucial, ensuring the plan is informed by the insights and experiences of those who understand the organization's unique operations, challenges, and opportunities. This comprehensive input fosters alignment with the community's needs and goals. To collect these internal perspectives, the NIU-CGS team conducted interviews with the Fire District's leadership team and facilitated two in-person focus groups with Battalion Chiefs, Lieutenants, and firefighters and fire medics.

- ***Interviews*** result in highly personalized participation and the in-depth sharing of ideas. The focus of the interview sessions is to gain an initial perspective by building a balanced and informed view of the Fire District from each stakeholder's unique vantage point. Between November 2025 and January 2026, a series of virtual and in-person interviews were conducted with the Fire District Board of Trustees, Fire Commissioners and Chief and Deputy Chiefs.
- ***Focus groups*** were conducted in January 2026 with the Fire District's Battalion and Division Chiefs and with the Lieutenants and firefighters and fire medics.

An analysis of the feedback resulted in the development of theme areas for workshop participants to consider. Detailed summaries are provided next.

INTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS | STAFF FEEDBACK THEMES

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

FACILITIES, INFRASTRUCTURE, AND OPERATIONAL CAPACITY

TRAINING, TECHNOLOGY, AND SAFETY READINESS

COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

OVERALL INTERNAL STAFF FEEDBACK SUMMARY

Staff identified four core priorities shaping the District's future. Addressing workforce development and organizational culture require targeted investment in staffing, succession planning, and workplace climate to support an evolving department with team members at various stages of their career. Aging and space-constrained facilities are limiting operational capacity, underscoring the need for staffing and station studies and long-term infrastructure planning. Maintaining readiness and firefighter safety includes consistent training, modern technology, and continued proactive safety investments. Strengthening communication and community engagement is also essential to building trust, expanding outreach, and ensuring consistent follow-through on District priorities.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Key comments or suggestions from staff are provided below:

- Younger department with some turnover; staffing levels need to grow to prepare for this.
  - » *Overtime and burnout are challenges under current staffing model*
- Focus on recruitment, retention, and phased hiring (hiring a few at a time).
- There is a continued need for succession planning, mentoring, and officer development.
- Support a positive culture shift that balances community engagement with day-to-day responsibilities and focuses on strengthening open communication and meaningful staff involvement.
- Boost morale by investing in professional development and implementing ideas and changes identified through staff input.
- Limited opportunity for upward mobility could impact retention and engagement.
- Strengthen trust and credibility through consistent follow-through on District priorities.

FACILITIES, INFRASTRUCTURE, AND OPERATIONAL CAPACITY

Key comments or suggestions from staff are provided below:

- Conduct station and staffing studies to align resources with call volume and community needs, evaluate the need for a fourth station.
- Renovate or build new station layouts, particularly Station 3, to address limitations, health concerns (workout area in close proximity to truck exhaust, etc.).
- Improve outdated equipment by prioritizing updates to reduce retrofitting. Aging stations and retrofitting challenges make it difficult to accommodate new equipment or modern workflows.
- Improve training facilities (e.g., ability to access water for aquatics training).
- Ensure facility planning is integrated with proactive maintenance programs for vehicles and apparatus.

TRAINING, TECHNOLOGY, AND SAFETY READINESS

Key comments or suggestions from staff are provided below:

- Need/desire for a consistent, structured training program and additional, proactive professional development for staff and officers.
- Continue Cadet Program as a pathway to build future workforce, evaluate class sizes, next steps, etc.
- Consider restructuring shifts (e.g., 24/72) to improve operational readiness.
- Increase and improve use of AI including in work with LakeComm 9-1-1 dispatch and processes.
  - » *E.g., Drone First Responders, AI for transcribing calls, etc.*
- Invest in modern technology and upgrade equipment while implementing proactive maintenance programs to enhance firefighter safety and operational efficiency.
  - » *E.g., vehicles, fire gear, hand tools, body cameras, EMS equipment, everyone has second set of gear*
- Utilize shared services and collaboration with regional partners and departments and districts for technology and equipment where it makes sense.

COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Key comments or suggestions from staff are provided below:

- Need for timely, internal communication to keep staff informed and involved.
- Implementation of the strategic plan depends on consistent follow-through and its regular incorporation into operational and budgeting decisions, ensuring all staff are informed and engaged.
- Consider new ideas from staff, help them feel heard and seeing ideas in action can improve morale and buy-in.
- Educating and training Board members to better understand District operations.
- Remain involved in events beyond Wauconda.
  - » *Attendance and engagement in Board meetings across District communities, community events*
- Enhance public education opportunities by considering a dedicated civilian or teacher role or risk education specialist.
- Stronger engagement on social media and other communication channels to raise awareness of services and employment opportunities.

INTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS | LEADERSHIP INTERVIEW THEMES*

WORKFORCE SUSTAINABILITY AND FINANCIAL PLANNING

FACILITY AND APPARATUS MODERNIZATION

OPERATIONAL PERFORMANCE AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

OVERALL LEADERSHIP INTERVIEW SUMMARY

Interview participants described the Fire District's personnel, strong response performance, and improving organizational steadiness as key strengths that support dependable service to the community. Leaders also noted several pressing challenges, including aging stations, the condition of major apparatus, staffing needs, and a limited applicant pipeline. Financial considerations related to rising costs, future capital needs, and overtime demands were raised as important factors in long term sustainability. Participants further emphasized the importance of rebuilding organizational identity, accountability, and shared ownership following recent retirements and leadership transitions. Some participants referenced the importance of maintaining clear communication and coordination across the District as it navigates facility planning, workforce needs, and continued organizational development, including the need to strengthen internal communication flow from leadership to line staff and improve external communications with the community.

WORKFORCE SUSTAINABILITY AND FINANCIAL PLANNING

Staffing levels, recruitment challenges, and financial strains emerged as consistent themes across the interviews. Participants described a shrinking applicant pool, hiring constraints, and increased reliance on overtime to sustain operations, noting that these conditions affect both workforce management and financial planning. Leaders also highlighted broader fiscal considerations, including rising operating costs and anticipated capital investments. Several interviewees suggested that adjusting hiring practices—such as creating entry pathways for candidates who are not yet paramedics—could help expand the recruitment pipeline. At the same time, they emphasized the importance of clearer career pathways, succession planning, and well-defined roles, supported by leadership practices that foster cohesion, shared ownership, and employee engagement, particularly within a multi-generational workforce. Participants further stressed the need to align workforce planning with long-term financial strategies to support consistent service delivery and organizational stability, including evaluating the long-term cost and staffing implications of maintaining a combination department model versus transitioning to an all full-time structure.

FACILITY AND APPARATUS MODERNIZATION

Participants consistently noted that the age and condition of the District's facilities and apparatus present ongoing challenges. Station 3's limitations as a converted residence and Station 1's limited footprint (e.g., landlocked) were frequently cited as areas requiring long term attention, and leaders observed that increasing call volumes contribute to wear on vehicles and equipment. Interviewees referenced the need for a structured approach to capital planning to guide station updates, apparatus replacement, and opportunities to enhance operational efficiency and training capacity as future facilities are considered, including the potential development of a District owned training facility. Participants also referenced the need for a formal facilities needs and space assessment and identified future funding considerations, including the possibility of a referendum, to support facility upgrades and long-term capital improvements.

OPERATIONAL PERFORMANCE AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Interview participants highlighted the District's strong service performance, employee commitment, and responsiveness as central strengths Leaders described workplace interactions as generally positive and observed that communication and alignment across the organization have become steadier as the District adapts to recent changes. Several referenced past periods of internal strain but indicated that the overall environment has moved toward greater clarity and consistency. At the same time, participants noted ongoing cultural challenges related to accountability, pride of ownership, and the need to establish a clear and shared organizational identity following recent retirements and workforce transitions. Participants emphasized the importance of maintaining a professional culture that supports the delivery of reliable, high quality service to the community, while continuing to adapt to evolving organizational needs, including expectations for engagement, responsibility, and participation in organizational improvement efforts.

**Note: Interviews were conducted with members of the Fire District Board of Trustees and Fire Commissioners, as well as the Fire Chief and Deputy Chiefs.*

APPENDIX B
SURRENDER OR LEAD EXERCISE RESPONSES

The **bolded and underlined** sections are key phrases that each group provided in response to the Surrender or Lead exercise's open-ended questions and prompts during the leadership workshop.

GROUP #1:

1. We want to **grow**, but **be fiscally responsible**.
2. The two most important things to focus on are **people (invest in people, training, equipment, etc.)** and **public (people we serve understand culture, more support)** because **they provide the culture we believe in**.
3. If it weren't for **financial constraints**, we would **grow the department**.
4. We need to finally **look at a referendum and outside sources (grants, business supplement, nursing home, etc. to offset costs)**.
5. **Financial stability** will have the biggest impact on the District in the coming 2–3 years.

GROUP #2:

1. We want to **inspire growth** but **culture and finances hold us back**.
2. The two most important thing to focus on are **personal development** and **transparency through communication** because **we need to change culture and perception (keep the emphasis on people and next leaders)**.
3. If it weren't for **poor preparation (lack of budget, lack of mentorship, lack of capital improvements)**, we would **be much more successful and resilient**.
4. We need to finally **put the past behind us**.
5. **Leadership development** will have the biggest impact on the District in the coming 2–3 years.

GROUP #3:

1. We want to **grow our department**, but **prioritization and finances are challenges**.
2. The two most important things to focus on are **planning** and **accountability**, because **without them we are back at square one (revolving door)**.
3. If it weren't for **immediate past**, we would **be able to move forward faster**.
4. We need to finally **have a vision to successfully plan our future (growth) to be proactive not reactive**.
5. **The road map to 2030 (strategic plan)** will have the biggest impact on the District in the coming 2–3 years.

APPENDIX C
STRATEGIC PRIORITY AREA, GOAL, AND STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK ALIGNMENT

WORKFORCE AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Fire District prioritizes investing in its people, communication practices, and decision-making systems. Efforts will focus on proactively strengthening succession planning, expanding leadership and professional development opportunities for all personnel, and evaluating staffing levels and models to ensure operational stability. The District also values enhancing transparent and engaging internal communication to keep staff informed and involved, using the strategic plan as an active tool to monitor progress. These actions will encourage a positive work culture, positioning the Fire District for long-term success.

Workforce and Organizational Development-aligning strategic goals:

- Advance workforce sustainability while fostering a culture of engagement, development, and shared accountability.
  - » *Strengthen succession planning, leadership pathways with upward mobility, and mentoring opportunities*
  - » *Increase leadership and professional development opportunities (including part-time employees)*
  - » *Evaluate the current staffing model (combination vs. full-time, shift schedules, etc.)*
  - » *Explore implementing recruitment initiatives and reviewing current hiring practices*
- Evaluate staffing needs across the District to help align resources with call volume, community needs, and employee well-being and satisfaction.
  - » *Work with District leadership to identify and prioritize areas of need, costs, etc.*
  - » *Conduct a staffing study as needed*
- Strengthen internal communication through consistent updates, transparency and engagement opportunities to keep all staff informed and involved.
- Develop and update operational policies that support budget priorities and use clear, reliable data to inform planning decisions, measure performance, and guide how resources are used.
- Use the strategic plan as an active, working tool by clearly communicating it to all staff, regularly tracking progress, and holding the organization accountable for implementation to maintain momentum, transparency, and engagement.
- Continue to build a strong internal culture focused on teamwork, accountability, resiliency, and shared direction.
  - » *Improve internal communication and operational practices to support proactive planning and effective service delivery*
- Position the District to proactively address current and evolving service demands, future growth, and demographic changes by implementing recommendations from the staffing evaluation.
  - » *Maintain high performance standards while supporting employee well-being, fiscal responsibility, and community expectations*
  - » *Appropriate staffing levels, station coverage, and specialty capabilities*
- Evaluate current training models and improve efficiency.
  - » *Review current training program and get feedback on areas of improvement*
  - » *Coordinate policy review and training needs*
  - » *Evaluate probationary programs to identify redundancies*

Workforce and Organizational Development-aligning stakeholder feedback:

- Ensure adequate personnel levels and access to needed resources by strengthening recruitment, retention, and succession planning.
- Strengthen succession planning and institutional knowledge transfer.
- Maintain a culture that is approachable, collaborative, and community-oriented.
- Continue to engage fresh perspectives (e.g., outside-hire Fire Chief).
- Maintain high-level, continuous training programs (e.g., Cadet and Explorer Programs) and expand cross-training within departments and across fire, police, and medical.
  - » *Conduct tabletop exercises for hazards, severe weather, and active threats*
  - » *Expand EMS training to meet rising demand from an aging population*
- Strengthen internal accountability and adherence to chain of command (historic issue before new Chief).
- Younger department with some turnover; staffing levels need to grow to prepare for this.
  - » *Overtime and burnout are challenges under current staffing model*
- Focus on recruitment, retention, and phased hiring (hiring a few at a time).
- There is a continued need for succession planning, mentoring, and officer development.
- Support a positive culture shift that balances community engagement with day-to-day responsibilities and focuses on strengthening open communication and meaningful staff involvement.
- Boost morale by investing in professional development and implementing ideas and changes identified through staff input.
- Limited opportunity for upward mobility could impact retention and engagement.
- Strengthen trust and credibility through consistent follow-through on District priorities.

INFRASTRUCTURE, TECHNOLOGY, AND OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE

Ensuring the Fire District has the right facilities, equipment, technology, and operational systems to provide safe, efficient, and high-quality services is a top priority. Long-term planning for physical and technological resources, coupled with strategic partnerships, supports the District's ability to meet growing service demands. This includes upgrading the training center, maintaining, and improving stations and facilities, and strengthening regional collaborations. Prioritizing these investments helps ensure reliable emergency response, effective service delivery, and a workplace that supports employee satisfaction and morale.

Infrastructure, Technology, and Operational Excellence-aligning strategic goals:

- Evaluate and develop a comprehensive long-term facilities plan that aligns fire station infrastructure, apparatus storage, training space, and administrative needs with projected service demands, response time standards, community growth, and financial capacity.
  - » *Determine the future of Station 3 and identify facility gaps and priorities*
- Implement strategic, proactive investments in technology, enhancing internal efficiency while strengthening the quality and accessibility of services.
  - » *Explore AI tools, apps for location sharing, routing, monitoring, and efficiency, etc.*
  - » *Enhance data use in decision making*
  - » *Utilize shared services and collaboration with regional partners where it makes sense to reduce costs, improve services, increase efficiency, etc.*
- Pursue regional partnerships to strengthen training capacity, staffing support, shared purchasing, and operational efficiency.
- Implement and maintain a vehicle and equipment program to ensure reliable, safe, and up-to-date apparatus and tools.
- Implement the long-term facilities plan that guides decisions on station renovations or upgrades and/or replacement based on service needs, community growth, and the assessment of facility priorities.
- Invest in training center upgrades and maintenance to improve training readiness, professional capability across staff levels.

Infrastructure, Technology, and Operational Excellence-aligning stakeholder feedback:

- Maintain short response times across the District, including remote areas.
- Streamline dispatch and reduce call-processing time.
- Preserve high service levels, life safety, and overall operational reliability.
- Strengthening partnerships with businesses and the broader community.
- Work to ensure development standards support access for emergency services (cul-de-sacs, hydrants).
- Prepare for Electric Vehicle-related risks and necessary public education surrounding this.
- Increase dispatch familiarity with District geography and businesses; streamline questioning when an emergency call comes in.
- Leverage technology to improve internal efficiency and public-facing services.
  - *Explore AI tools, apps for location sharing, routing, monitoring, and efficiency, etc.*
- Make strategic, proactive investments in technology (account for long lead times).
- Ensure growth in facilities and equipment keeps pace with District expansion.
- Implement long-range fiscal planning and maintain economic viability.
- Identify efficiencies, cost savings, grants, and innovative funding opportunities.
  - *E.g., coordinate joint purchasing and financing with regional partners*
  - *Anticipate impacts from the Lake County comprehensive plan on District finances*
- Balance code requirements with development needs (cost-benefit mindset).
- Accommodate increasing service demands, including those of an aging population.
  - *New developments, senior housing trends, etc.*
- Increase transparency around material costs, staffing costs, and financial impacts.
  - *E.g., pensions, cost drivers, etc.*
- Conduct station and staffing studies to align resources with call volume and community needs, evaluate the need for a fourth station.
- Renovate or build new station layouts, particularly Station 3, to address limitations, health concerns (workout area in close proximity to truck exhaust, etc.).
- Improve outdated equipment by prioritizing updates to reduce retrofitting. Aging stations and retrofitting challenges make it difficult to accommodate new equipment or modern workflows.
- Improve training facilities (e.g., ability to access water for aquatics training).
- Ensure facility planning is integrated with proactive maintenance programs for vehicles and apparatus.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, EDUCATION, AND RISK REDUCTION

The District prioritizes transparent communication, meaningful engagement, and accountable decision-making to strengthen organizational alignment and enhance community safety. Community risk reduction and public education remain central, supported by expanded prevention training, enhanced outreach, and strengthened external communication. These efforts not only ensure reliable service and a safer, more resilient community, but also foster public understanding and support for the District's growth and future development.

Community Engagement, Education, and Risk Reduction-aligning strategic goals:

- Expand community risk reduction and public education initiatives.
  - » *Enhance prevention training programs*
  - » *Explore staffing options for initiatives and public engagement*
- Ensure the Fire District's long-term financial stability and ability to deliver high-quality, reliable emergency services through responsible fiscal planning, sustainable revenue strategies, and transparent public engagement and education on District growth needs.
  - » *Support referendum planning and success by proactively educating and communicating with the public about the referendum's purpose, financial implications, and service impacts through coordinated, consistent outreach efforts*
  - » *Enhance the District's social media presence and external communication by distributing e-newsletters, flyers, and seasonal safety messaging – share the wins, positive messages, events, "meet your EMS"*

Community Engagement, Education, and Risk Reduction-aligning stakeholder feedback:

- Need for timely, internal communication to keep staff informed and involved.
- Implementation of the strategic plan depends on consistent follow-through and its regular incorporation into operational and budgeting decisions, ensuring all staff are informed and engaged.
- Consider new ideas from staff, help them feel heard and seeing ideas in action can improve morale and buy-in.
- Educating and training Board members to better understand District operations.
- Remain involved in events beyond Wauconda.
    - » *Attendance and engagement in Board meetings across District communities, community events*
- Enhance public education opportunities by considering a dedicated civilian/teacher role or risk education specialist.
- Stronger engagement on social media and other communication channels to raise awareness of services and employment opportunities.
- Streamline and increase frequency.
- Develop and train on public relations and media policies for press statements and conferences.
- Enhance collaboration and cooperation with intergovernmental partners through intergovernmental agreements, regional partnerships, and shared services, including potential additional fire stations or shared facilities.
- Increase volunteer opportunities, youth interaction, and career pathway programs (e.g., CERT, Cadet programs, citizen fire academy, non-CERT volunteers).
- Capitalize on strong visibility to expand community involvement and external communications.
    - » *Accept donations (time, resources, and money, etc.)*
    - » *E-newsletters, flyers, seasonal safety tips*
- Expand prevention training (fire, EMS, confined space) and public safety education (CO_2 and smoke detectors, climate-related risks).
    - » *Create a liaison role for scenario-based training, home visits, safety checks*
- Conduct community and business surveys to ensure services match evolving needs.