

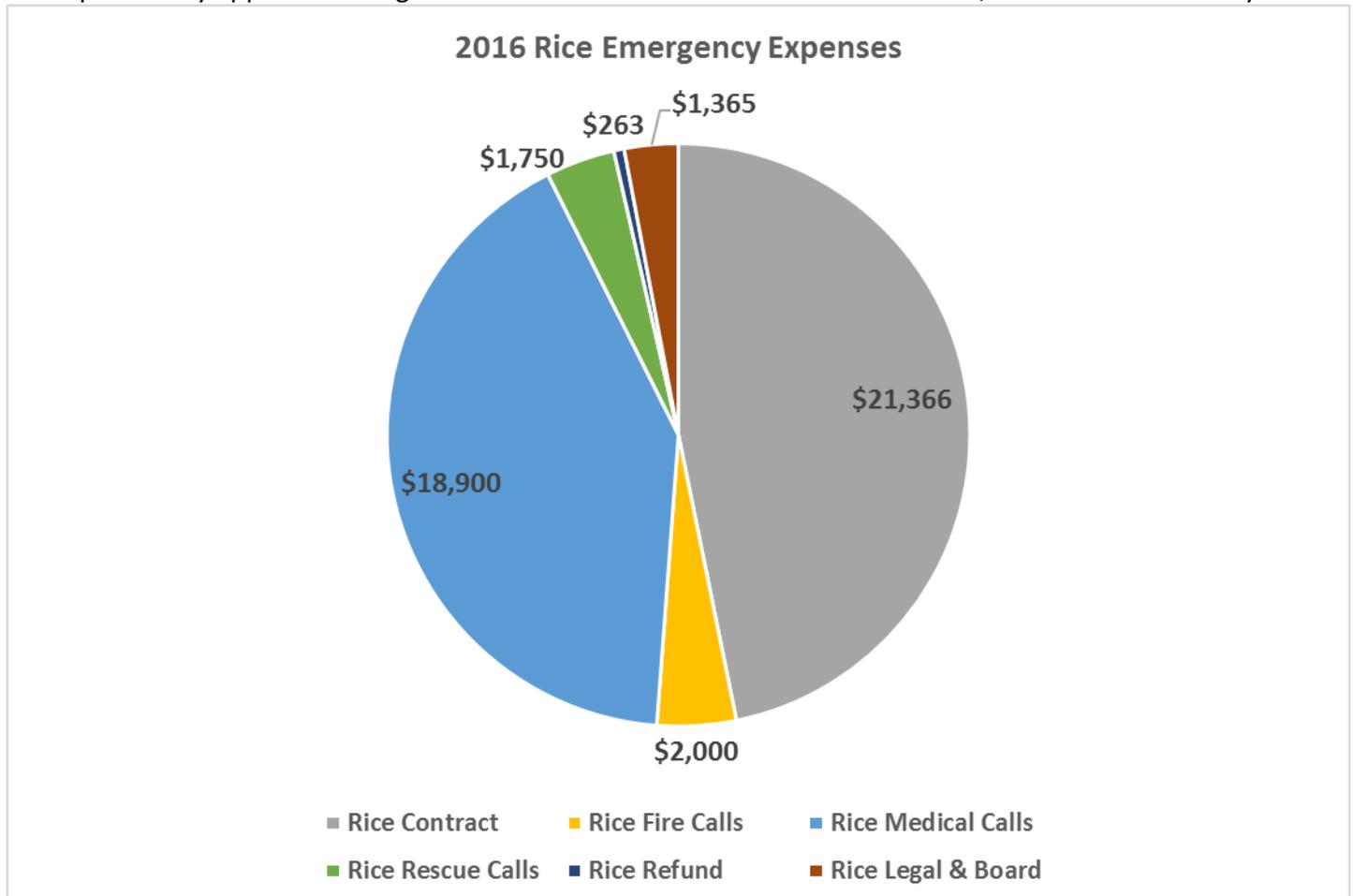
## Questions to Consider on Options for Providing Emergency Services in Watab Township

### Why is Watab Township considering a Watab Fire Department?

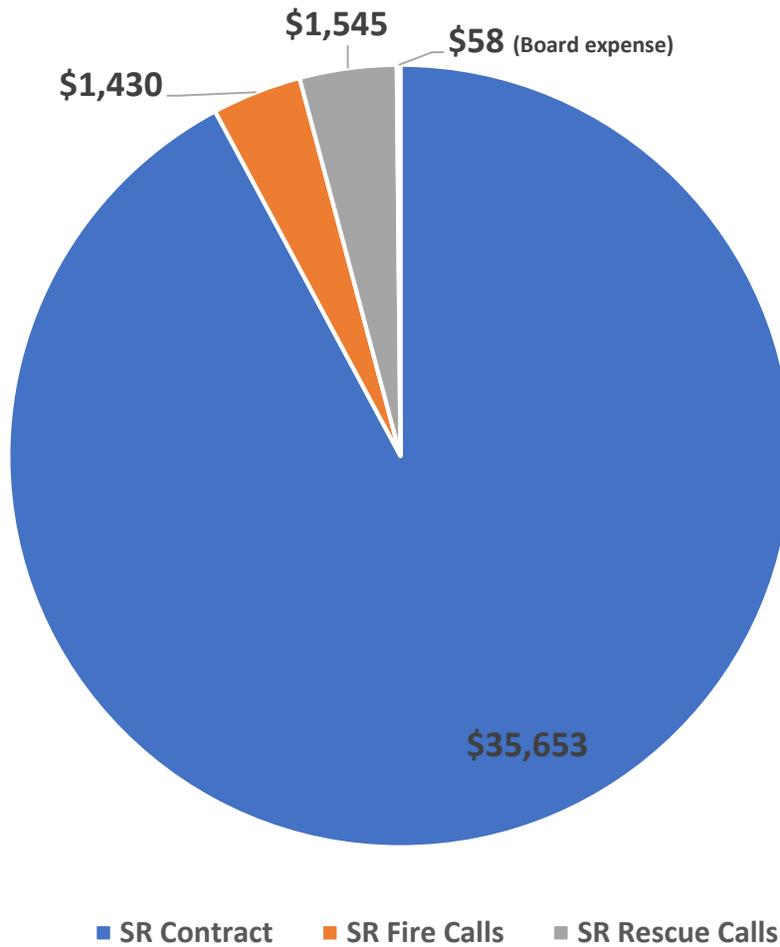
At the March 2017 Annual Town Meeting, the voters unanimously approved a motion to have the town board appoint a citizen's committee to explore the township's options in terms of providing fire and emergency services. The town board formed a committee comprised of the board and township residents. Those who have served over the past months are Committee Chairman Todd Waytashek, Supervisor Lloyd Erdmann, Board Chair Craig Gondeck, Treasurer Maureen Graber, Clerk Pat Spence, Jason Krueger, Ed Kacures, John Olson, Bob Raveling, and Dick Raveling. Since May, the committee has been engaged in researching and studying the potential options and related costs.

### What is the history?

Watab residents have been well-served with excellent emergency service by both fire departments. While the City of Sauk Rapids relationship with Watab has been professional, Watab's relationship with the City of Rice in negotiating fire contracts has been contentious for decades. In 2014, we asked Rice to drop the medical service, so that the northern third of the township would be served in the same way as the southern two-thirds. The number of ambulances and response times have improved greatly over the time that Watab Township has had a contract with Rice. Our residents voted to have medical calls dropped, but the City of Rice refused to consider this for our township. These calls add significant costs (see the chart below). 85% of the calls are not reimbursed by those getting the service leaving the township taxpayers to pay for them. We also have incurred growing legal and board costs as we try to find solutions. Over the years, the board has attempted many approaches to get these costs for service from Rice reimbursed, and we have been stymied.



## 2016 Sauk Rapids Emergency Services Expenses



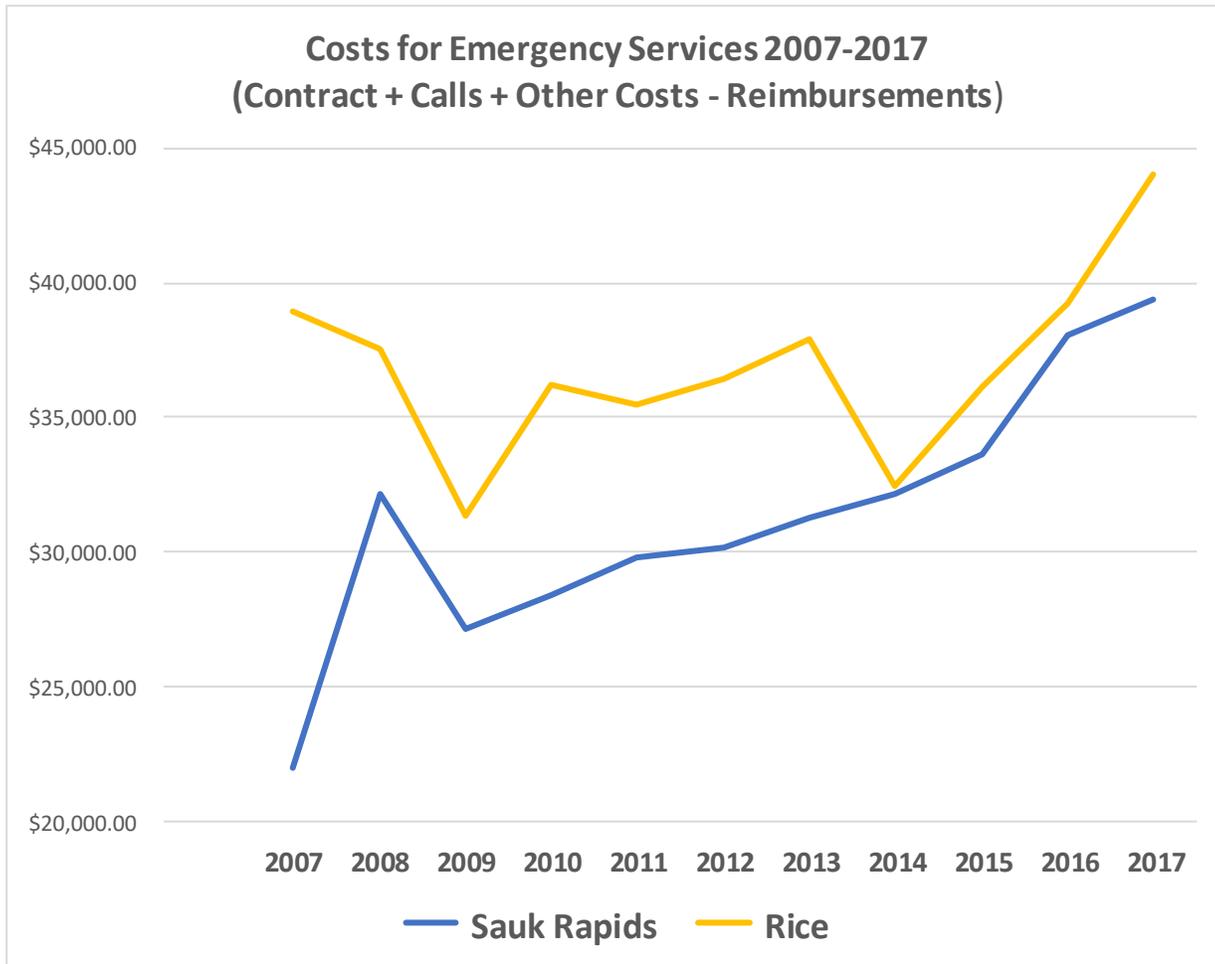
### What is the current situation?

The township has been divided into two fire districts since 2015 for assessing the costs for each fire department on the property owners in the sections of the township they serve. This was the result of a ballot question in the 2014 Annual Election. The northern third of the township (roughly those living north of 95<sup>th</sup> Street NW) are served by the Rice Fire Department and the southern two-thirds is served by the Sauk Rapids Fire Department.

Sauk Rapids provides fire and rescue services at a contract cost of \$39,218 and a charge for unpaid calls of \$365 for the first hour of each call. They provide the billing and only turn over unpaid bills to the township. Medical services are provided by Gold Cross ambulance service.

Rice provides fire, rescue, medical, and other services at a contract cost of \$22,096 and a charge for calls at \$350 for the first hour of each call. In 2016, the township paid out \$21,113 for calls, so the total expense was \$43,209. Rice Fire Department's service also includes assists to the sheriff, Gold Cross Ambulance, highway patrol, and cancelled calls. The township does all the billing. The cost of calls is almost equal to the contract costs for Rice.

The township's costs are on the rise, and the Town Board has no control over the them. See the chart below.



#### What are the township's options?

- Continue the current contractual arrangements with Sauk Rapids and Rice with the township having no input, control, or ownership.
- Approach the City of Sauk Rapids to see if they would consider establishing a sub-station to serve the entire township. The township would need to provide the building, equipment, and some personnel.
- Form a Watab Volunteer Fire Department, which would give the township control over costs, more local service, and pride of ownership as a community organization.

#### What affect would these options have on residents' property taxes?

- If we continue with the current contracts, those residents served by Rice will continue to pay nearly triple the property tax for emergency services as those in the Sauk Rapids area. The township fire levy for 2018 is \$99,000. Although the future is uncertain, the committee reasonably expects the future costs will rise for both areas.
- In the past, the City of Sauk Rapids declined our request to serve the entire township due to response times to the northern third of the township. The committee has not yet formally asked the City of Sauk Rapids to consider a sub-station option, because it is premature to approach them until we have input from the township residents. We would bond to pay for the building over a ten to fifteen-year period. We would expect our annual operating costs to be lower than they are currently.

- The committee has visited three other township fire departments in central Minnesota: Chain of Lakes near Richmond, Baldwin Township near Zimmerman, and Palmer Township near Clear Lake. In addition to the visits and meeting with their administration, the committee obtained the startup and operating budgets for each of them. The committee believes that forming a volunteer fire department for Watab Township might be a feasible solution in reducing and controlling operating budget costs. Again, we would need to incur debt to pay for the building over a ten-year period. We would expect our annual operating costs to be lower.

### **Will property insurance rates for home owners change?**

Fire protection is a very small part in the determination of your property insurance cost. The insurance companies use a variety of different factors in setting their rates. The committee's best assessment was that most of the residents would benefit from having the fire hall closer to their property.

**Where would the fire hall be located?** The committee believes our town hall property is the best site. The committee considered possible alternate locations, but those would result in higher startup costs without significantly addressing concerns about response times.

**What would the fire hall contain?** Besides our emergency services equipment such as a pumper truck, tankers, and grass fire rig, our sheriff and Gold Cross Ambulance have also expressed interest in using the location as a base. We would look to find low cost, used equipment and have been assured by the State Fire Marshall's Office and the departments that we visited that it is readily available. We are considering building it as a storm shelter.

### **How many firefighters would we need?**

The committee is recommending about twenty firefighters including a fire chief to provide a day and night shift. This number is based on our population of 3,222 people and the area to be served as the committee compared the data to the other fire departments that we visited.

### **How can you help?**

The committee is seeking your input on the options. You are invited to attend an informational meeting on Tuesday, November 14, 2017 at 9:00 a.m. or 7:00 p.m. More specifics will be provided by the committee on potential startup costs and the operating budget.

The committee also needs to know if there are volunteer fire fighters in the township. This includes those who are already trained or those willing to be get training that the township would provide. Contact any of the committee members with your interest. If we proceed to start a Watab Department, the first step would be to advertise and take applications for a Fire Chief.