



Outlook

Response to Department Head Memo - January 8, 2026

From Newberry, Aron <newberrya@cityoflacrosse.org>

Date Wed 7/8/2026 8:30 AM

To ZZ Dept. Heads Managers <ZZDept.HeadsManagers@cityoflacrosse.org>

Cc ZZ Council Members <council@cityoflacrosse.org>

1 attachment (436 KB)

WCMA 2025 Salary Survey Results.pdf;

To the City of La Crosse Department Heads,

Thank you for the thoughtful and professionally presented memo you submitted to Council in January. The questions you raised were legitimate ones that deserved a direct response.

I recognize that a response did not come before the February vote, and I understand why that was frustrating. That was a reasonable expectation, and I am addressing it now.

Many of the questions you raised in January are answered directly in the latest amended version of the ordinance itself, and I encourage you to read it carefully with that in mind.

I have grouped your concerns into three categories and will address each one in turn.

Before addressing those categories, I want to provide some context on the legislation itself.

The ordinance being submitted is the same charter ordinance that received majority Council support in February 2026, shaped by over an hour of debate and amendments contributed by six Council members. It incorporates the input of the City Attorney, UW-Extension, the Wisconsin City/County Management Association, and municipal management professionals, and was validated through that process prior to the February vote. It is now co-sponsored by Council Member Slezniow.

Governance Structure and Authority

Your questions about reporting structure, the Administrator's individual powers, what remains with the Mayor and Council, and how decision-making authority is delineated in areas of overlap are all answered explicitly in the ordinance.

Section I(f) enumerates eight specific powers and duties of the Administrator. Section I(g) enumerates six specific responsibilities that remain with the Mayor. Section I(h) establishes a single chain of command, defines access and communication rights for elected officials, clarifies how the Council as a body directs the Administrator, and preserves the Mayor's emergency powers. These provisions were drafted specifically in response to the governance questions your memo raised and the input provided by the City Attorney, UW-Extension, and WCMA.

The question of what specific problem this position aims to solve is answered in Section I(a) and in the supporting documentation that will be distributed throughout July. The short answer is this: the 2025 budget cycle produced \$830,000 in departmental overruns with no mid-year mechanism to flag, address, or prevent them. No single position currently has both the authority and the operational expertise to provide that oversight. That is the main problem this position will address.

On the question of whether more cost-effective alternatives exist, that is a fair question and one the Council has and will consider carefully. The supporting documentation will address it directly. Professional administrative oversight is not a luxury; it is a governance standard that 212 Wisconsin municipalities and 341 comparable U.S. communities between 45,000 and 65,000 population have already adopted. La Crosse is the exception to this widely accepted standard.

Selection and Transition

Your questions about who selects the Administrator, how the transition is managed, and how continuity is maintained are addressed in Section VI of the ordinance.

Section VI(b) establishes that the search process includes participation by the Director of Human Resources, the Mayor, and a subcommittee of the Common Council in preliminary screening before finalists come to the full Council for interviews. Human Resources is explicitly part of that process.

Section VI(a) establishes that the office is created effective December 30, 2027, or upon appointment, whichever comes first. The Mayor retains full statutory authority until that date. This is not a mid-election disruption. It is a planned, orderly 2027 transition that gives the city ample time to conduct a professional search.

The question of whether the Mayor's position changes from full-time to part-time is not within the scope of this charter ordinance. That is a separate Council decision that will need to be made.

Fiscal Impact

Your fiscal questions are the ones most directly addressed by the supporting documentation rather than the ordinance itself, and that documentation is still being finalized. A comprehensive funding framework will be distributed as part of the supporting documentation package throughout July and will be available in full before the August 5th public comment hearing.

What I can share now is the WCMA 2025 Salary Survey, which provides statewide compensation benchmarks for municipal administrators. That survey is attached and provides useful market context for understanding the cost of this position in comparable Wisconsin communities.

On timing and fiscal impact, if this legislation passes in August 2026, it requires a 60-day waiting period before it can take effect. A professional search and hiring process of six to nine months would place a start date somewhere between April and July of 2027. That means the fiscal impact to the 2027 operating budget will be approximately half of the full annual cost. The first full year budget impact will not be realized until 2028. This is an important distinction that changes the near-term fiscal picture considerably and gives the city ample time to plan and budget appropriately.

On the interim administrator question raised in your memo, the ordinance establishes that the Mayor retains full statutory authority until the Administrator is appointed and qualified. There will be no interim administrator. The Mayor's office continues uninterrupted through the transition.

The recruitment firm cost of \$30,000 to \$50,000 is a real and anticipated expense that will be addressed in the funding framework when it is distributed.

On the funding question, there is significant fiscal analysis currently underway that will help inform how to budget for this position, and that analysis will be shared through the supporting documentation package before the August 5th meeting. Department heads will have the opportunity to participate in that conversation through the regular budget process, and their expertise and institutional knowledge will be valuable in making this work. In my opinion, this is not a question of whether we can afford a city administrator. La Crosse cannot afford not to have one. The question before us is how we make it work, and we would welcome your help in answering it.

Finally, on the workforce study, the Council approved that study, and it will proceed. But the independent research already gathered from UW-Extension, WCMA, and municipal management professionals provides a more than sufficient basis for this decision. Waiting for an internal study to validate what independent experts have already confirmed is not a reason to delay legislation. The two efforts can proceed in parallel.

What Remains for the Council to Decide

There are questions your memo raised that are not answered in the ordinance itself and that remain as decisions to be made after adoption. The question of what physical space in City Hall will become the office of the City Administrator is one the Council will address through the administrative process that follows adoption. The City has existing administrative space that can reasonably accommodate this position, and the specifics will be determined accordingly. Any additional employment terms will be established through the employment contract.

This governance model works because the Mayor, the Council, and department heads all vest meaningful authority in the Administrator. That is not a sacrifice; it is what makes the position effective enough to recruit top talent, retain them, and allow for the successful administration of this city's work. The ordinance before you is a serious, well-researched, legally compliant response to a real governance gap. I look forward to your continued engagement through the public comment process on August 5th.

Thank you for your professionalism and your service to this city.

Aron Newberry

Council Member, City of La Crosse

Co-sponsored by Council Member Slezniow

ATTACHMENT: 2025 WCMA Salary Survey