

**SMITHVILLE BOARD OF ALDERMEN
WORK SESSION**

December 3, 2024 6:30 p.m.

City Hall Council Chambers and Via Videoconference

1. Call to Order

Mayor Boley, present, called the meeting to order at 6:30 p.m. A quorum of the Board was present: Melissa Wilson, Marv Atkins, Leeah Shipley, Kelly Kobylski and Ronald Russell. Dan Hartman was absent.

Staff present: Cynthia Wagner, Gina Pate, Chief Lockridge, Chuck Soules, Rick Welch, Matt Denton and Linda Drummond.

2. Discussion of City Tow Service

Chief Lockridge noted that the staff report was in the packet and gave a brief history of the last two RFP's and contracts. The first contract was in 2015, lasting three years with two one-year extensions. The second RFP was issued in July 2022, following a similar contract process, and is now in its final year. Considerations since 2015 have led to a shift from a rotation to a bidding process.

Chief Lockridge noted that staff had contacted neighboring communities to see how they manage this situation, outlining the findings.

- *Gladstone, Riverside, and Parkville utilize a single vendor system similar to Smithville's, each reporting positive experiences with reduced issues compared to previous rotation systems.*
- *Kearney has a default single-provider setup, as only one tow company operates within city limits.*
- *Excelsior Springs, North Kansas City, Liberty, and Pleasant Valley/Claycomo use some form of tow rotation but rely on their dispatch centers to manage the system, except for Claycomo, which defaults to Pleasant Valley's rotation system. While speaking with these departments staff received several questions about the process of bidding a single vendor system. Most of them cited similar issues as we experienced in the past, and at least two of these departments indicated they are interested in moving to a single vendor system.*

Chief Lockridge noted that staff The three best options moving forward include:

1. *Continue with the Current Practice*
The existing contract has been cost-effective for those whose vehicles are towed. A new RFP could be issued before the current contract expires to maintain this system.
2. *Implement a Tow Rotation*
While a rotation could be explored, other Northland agencies have indicated this is a less favorable option, often increasing costs for consumers. It would likely require a management company or additional demands on the Platte County Dispatch Center, which may be impractical.
3. *Modify the Current Practice with a Shorter Contract Period*
This option retains the RFP process but with shorter contract terms, such as an initial two-year period with a one-year extension option. This would allow more frequent bids, potentially encouraging more local vendors to participate.

Chief Lockridge noted that staff could do more research on the subject or answer questions regarding the proposed options.

Public Comment

Kenny Purdue, 7215 Little Platte Road, said that Smithville is seeing rapid growth in both population and commerce, which is leading to heavier traffic and more accidents. As a result, a single tow provider can no longer respond quickly enough to clear traffic effectively. The speaker suggests that the city should adopt a towing rotation system similar to those in nearby areas like Clay County and Kansas City, which would ensure fast and equitable service.

The proposed rotation system offers 24/7 availability and would improve response times. Towing companies included in the rotation would be required to meet strict city regulations and provide competitive pricing, all monitored by law enforcement and local oversight. This system would help maintain transparency and could improve service without adding costs to the city budget.

Having multiple towing providers, such as GT Tow and Brad's Towing, would foster competition and ensure that the best services are available. He mentioned that previous contracts with a single tow provider have driven some businesses away from Smithville, indicating that a bidding process could be costly and burdensome for the Police Department and City.

As an alternative, he recommended using a digital dispatch platform like AutoReturn, which has already vetted several towing companies, including the top providers in the area. This would be a safer and less costly method than traditional bidding, utilizing the city's existing dispatch center while ensuring effective service.

Mr. Purdue expressed a strong desire to serve Smithville and supports local businesses, emphasizing the importance of providing high-quality services to citizens. They appreciate the city's leadership and urge action towards implementing the proposed towing rotation system for the benefit of the community and police department.

Alderman Atkins asked if AutoReturn was an app or a towing program.

Brad Trigg, CEO/President of Brad's Towing, explained that the AutoReturn system is called Autura that is an app that is used by cities, counties and states. The Platte County Sheriff's Department dispatches for Smithville and they are familiar with it. The app works similar to Uber, by sending requests directly to the closest driver rather than going through dispatch.

Alderman Atkins asked if it was not a guaranteed rotation order.

Mr. Triggs said it was not. The call would go to the closest tow truck in the area of the incident.

Alderman Atkins asked who makes the call for this tow process.

Mr. Triggs explained that the officer will contact dispatch to order a non-preference tow service, dispatch enters the information into the system and the program will send the incident and location to the closest truck.

Alderman Atkins asked if it would only be the tow companies that we would specify.

Mr. Triggs said it would only be the tow services we list on the contract. He noted that the contract would be with Autura.

Alderman Atkins asked if Autura's pricing was similar to the bidding.

Mr. Triggs explained that the Kansas City Police Department and Platte County Sheriff's Department have almost the same price. The fee is \$265 for the hook fee (impound or accident), there is no mileage fee unless the vehicle is towed outside of the Kansas City metro area. The storage fee varies, Platte County's is \$45 a day and Kansas City is \$35 a day. There are also fees for winching, cleanup and labor that are charged in 15 minute increments. Autura makes their money by charging the tow companies monthly per tow. He said he believes that Autura charges Platte County \$28.50 per call and Kansas City \$22 per call and there is no charge to the cities.

Alderman Russell noted that two main points stood out to him. Gladstone, Riverside, and Parkville utilize a single vendor and report fewer issues compared to other systems. Also, Excelsior Springs, North Kansas City, Liberty, Pleasant Valley, and Claycomo use a tow rotation. Many of those cities expressed an interest in switching to a single vendor system based on their experiences. He said that it seems that our current setup is working well, but there is always room for improvement. Alderman Russell asked if other cities asked about our process.

Chief Lockridge said that was correct, some of those cities using the tow rotation asked for a copy of our RFP and the process that we have done for this in the past and he has provided it to them.

Alderman Atkins asked if the cities are using the same program or are they using their own type of rotation system.

Chief Lockridge said that he did not ask what type of rotation system those cities were using, but they also have their own dispatch centers.

Alderman Wilson asked if when using Autura, vehicles will be towed to the tow company's lot or is there a storage lot that would be used.

Mr. Triggs explained the vehicles are towed to that tow companies' lot.

Mayor Boley noted that our current RFP requires local storage in case the police need to do an investigation.

Alderman Wilson asked if she understood correctly that the city puts into the contract with Autura the list of tow companies to be used.

Mr. Triggs explained that Autura and the city would have a contract, the tow companies would also have a contract with Autura. The city and Autura would come to an agreement as to the tow companies listed in the contract.

Alderman Wilson noted that she just wanted to make sure that if we were to do this we would not have a lot of tow companies responding and vehicles being towed down south.

Alderman Atkins asked if the city would negotiate the prices with Autura.

Mr. Triggs explained that the city would negotiate for city vehicles to get the best deal. He said he believed Kansas City pays \$90 for their vehicles and Platte County pays around \$100. But customer vehicles are \$265.

Mr. Purdue said that they have found that the City of Liberty has the most straightforward tow rotation. It is an algorithm for their dispatchers. If the Police Department orders a tow and then cancels it, it reverts to the original provider. Currently, they work with five providers. Autura does it based off the proximity of the driver to the accident with it is ordered.

Alderman Russell asked how the Autura program keeps track of the tow trucks locations. Does it use GPS tracking or something similar.

Mr. Triggs explained that the drivers have an app on their phones that they have to log into and turn their location on. Once they receive a call the driver can accept the call or reject it. The app is GPS location based. If a driver or tow company rejects calls they can either be suspended or fined after so many rejections. He explained that once the driver accepts the call, it directs them to the location of the incident.

Alderman Russell asked if there was a cost to the city to be able to use this app.

Mr. Triggs said he did not believe so, other than the cost of towing city vehicles. Autura bills the tow companies for every dispatch.

Alderman Wilson asked City staff if we chose to move forward with this, would we have to do an RFP to see if there are other companies that offer the same services.

Cynthia explained that we would have to look at some type of competition and what other services would be available and evaluate that based on our purchasing policy.

Alderman Shipley asked Chief Lockridge if there was a specific reason why the cities using the rotation system are wanting to move to working with a single company rather than the rotation.

Chief Lockridge explained that a majority of them referred back to same reasons that we listed in the staff report.

Alderman Russell noted that we have a good process now, but it might be beneficial to look at this program. He added that staff should poll other communities that use this program about any issues they have with it. He asked when the current contract us up.

Chief Lockridge noted that it runs through FY2025.

Cynthia added that there is language in the contract that outlines the notification timeline and that is why we are having the discussions now.

Chief Lockridge explained that the RFP would have to be posted in March at the latest.

Mayor Boley noted that if the Board wants to look at something new, staff needs direction now.

Alderman Atkins said that he likes the idea of taking a look at the program and talking to the communities that are using it. He would like staff to talk to Autura about the cost since based on what our customers are paying now there is a big difference. He noted that we will need to see if it would be in the best interest of our customers to change.

Mayor Boley noted that if we put this out for bid we will not know what the bid will come back as it may come back at \$200 since the \$100 was bid three years ago.

Mr. Triggs said that he has noticed whenever there is a single contract they seem to always bid the lowest and sometimes that is not always the best. Glad Rents tows for Gladstone and Riverside Police Departments and they only charge \$45 and have for years. He added that there is no one in the whole city that will do it for that. Other cities go off what the tow companies have to charge, which is more because their equipment costs have gone up over \$40,000 just in the last year.

Alderman Wilson suggested that staff look into Autura and gather information on it to see if that is the direction to go. She noted that if we choose to go another direction, she would lean toward option three with a shorter contract period because of how technology is advancing within that profession.

Alderman Russell said that only thing about that is staff and Board time to keep having to review it every year and a half. He added that in his opinion if something is not working, we review it a lot and if it is we do not.

Alderman Wilson noted that option three is a two-year contract with a one-year extension so it would not be every year.

Alderman Kobylski noted that she would like staff to look into Autura since Platte County is already using it.

Chief Lockridge asked the Board what answers they would like from Autura.

Alderman Wilson said she would like more information from them.

Chief Lockridge asked if it was related to pricing.

Alderman Kobylski asked for more information on if it would be easier and more beneficial for our officers.

Alderman Wilson noted that we also need to know if there are other companies out there like Autura from the City's standpoint for the RFP.

Cynthia noted that staff would have to do the additional work to research to see if there are other companies out there.

Mayor Boley asked Chief Lockridge how long they have to wait on a tow truck.

Chief Lockridge explained that it is generally running around 10-12 minutes. Chief noted that he spoke with a representative from AutoReturn earlier this year and that was one of the questions he asked Chief. He explained that response time was one of the things that they advertise on their website. When they found out what our wait time was they did not think they could make much of an impact on it. Chief added that he got a similar response when they asked about pricing.

Mayor Boley noted that there is a difference in wait time when a tow company is covering four counties with rural areas and a smaller city located on a main highway.

Cynthia noted as staff researches the different app possibilities, our RFP outlines for housing vehicles in Smithville only. We want to make sure it could be outlined or required in the RFP or set on an app. Cynthia added that this is an important element for our customer service so people will not have to go somewhere else to get their vehicle.

Alderman Wilson asked if an individual could request their own tow company.

Chief Lockridge explained that they always have that option. The only time when they do not is if their tow company is 45 minutes away and we have the highway blocked.

Alderman Russell noted that after staff does the research for Autura and come back with they cannot compete with the wait time of 10-12 minutes his preference is to continue as is. He said that it might be something we need to look into in the future.

Alderman Wilson said from a local business standpoint she would like to see it being shared by all local businesses or at least have the opportunity to look into it.

Alderman Kobylski noted that she agreed but if we do not go that route we should look at going with option three.

Mayor Boley asked the Board for their questions they would like staff to find answers for on the app.

Alderman Wilson said for more information on it to bring back so they can have all the information to be able to weigh both options.

Mayor Boley asked staff to do a little more research to gather more information, see if there are other companies that offer this and what dispatch thinks it would take to integrate it. Staff could then come back to the January 21 work session with that information. But if it would not be a benefit for the City we put out the RFP.

Mr. Triggs said it was discouraging to hear not to change anything from a tow company that wants to do business in Smithville. He said why would they bid on it if they knew they were not going to get the bid.

Mayor Boley noted that competitive bid process is competitive bid process, win or lose the bid. It does not mean the same person gets the bid.

Alderman Kobylski said her vote is not to keep it to this. She wants to open it up to other tow companies and to the shorter time frame. She said she wants it to stay fair for the bidding process if we do not go with something like Autura.

3. Adjourn

Alderman Wilson moved to adjourn. Alderman Kobylski seconded the motion.

Ayes – 5, Noes – 0, motion carries. Mayor Boley declared the Work Session adjourned at 7:01 p.m.

Linda Drummond, City Clerk

Damien Boley, Mayor