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Use of donations, residency requirement are among issues cited

The chairman of the Village of Belgium Tree Board resigned Tuesday following a disagreement with the Village Board about how much money he could spend on beautification projects and how many Tree Board members could be nonresidents.

There are now two vacancies on the Tree Board.

Rich Howells, a retired aircraft mechanic with the 440th Air Force Reserves, said he planted numerous trees, spearheaded efforts to become a Tree City USA and redesigned and maintained the median strips on the I-43 interchange at Highway D in the year he's been chairman.

"This is not a rash decision," Howells said. "A lot of it was personal. The way things were unfolding, I told them I wasn't able to effectively run the Tree Board as chairman. When I got on the board, I had a great vision for the Village of Belgium to upgrade the aesthetics with trees, bushes and flowers."

No one disagreed with the job Howells did — often digging in the dirt to accomplish his goals — but trustees said he must stick to the budget that was approved in November and couldn't spend an additional $1,800 that was donated to the village 10 years ago for trees, shrubs and flowers. Howells was told he had $1,536 left in his budget to complete the landscaping at Village Hall and other projects.

Howells told the board a former village employee, who wished to be anonymous and donated his salary 10 years ago to the fund, recently asked him to spend the money on the flower beds outside Village Hall. Howells said he upgraded the $600 project to $1,600.

Howells also received donations from friends of Sandy St. Peter, a Tree Board member who died last year, to plant two trees in her memory and $500 from Woodmen of America to plant trees.

Trustee Eric Wilkowski brought the Tree Board budget to the board after reaching an impasse with Howells about the donations.

"I believe any money donated should be used to offset the budget, not be added on top of it," Wilkowski said. "Rich disagrees. It's a philosophical difference."

Trustee Vickie Boehnlien said she believes the 10-year-old donation was already spent.

"Once he donated that to the village, it became part of the Tree Board's budget. If any money was spent in the last 10 years, as far as I'm concerned, that money was spent," she said.

Trustee Clem Gottsacker, a former Tree Board member along with his wife Joan, was the only one to support Howells on both issues.

“I’m more concerned about why we didn’t know about the account,” Joan Gottsacker said. “We had only a $600 budget (when she was on the board), and there were times we were asked to give some of it back. We definitely did not know about the account. I wonder how many other accounts like that exist?”

Clerk Lila Mueller and Treasurer Jamie Cecil said this is the only one. Mueller said the account has been listed in the budget every year.

Howells also asked the board to change its policy regarding residency for the Tree Board. A Town of Belgium resident has requested to be on the board, he said.

He said usually only three people show up at Tree Board meetings and two are alternates. He and Ruth Sells do the majority of the planting and maintenance, Howells said.

“We don’t have people beating down the door to be on the board,” he said. “If someone wants to help, we should let them. It’s antiquated to insist they be residents.”

Village Attorney Gerry Antoine said it’s not antiquated to believe people who spend taxpayers’ money should be taxpayers.

The board agreed to allow some nonresident members on the Tree Board, but said the Tree Board and Park and Recreation Department should work together to determine the number.