

## Fire department in pricey predicament

Written by MARK JAEGER

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### **Replacing contained breathing equipment will cost \$110,000; repeated attempts at grants stymied**

The Fredonia Fire Department is finding itself in a financial pinch in its need to replace costly breathing masks and oxygen tanks.

Fire Chief Brian Schommer told the Village of Fredonia Public Safety Committee last week the department needs to replace 20 self-contained breathing apparatus units, at a cost of \$4,300 each, because of changing government regulations.

Twenty back-up air bottles, at \$825 each, are also needed, as well as eight spare masks.

Schommer said updating the equipment needed by firefighters to enter smoke-filled buildings will cost \$109,000.

“Approximately five years ago, we became aware that our SCBAs were not in compliance with National Fire Protection Agency requirements,” he said.

“We are dictated these standards, and we have no choice but to follow them.”

The current SCBAs are 20 years old, he said, and replacement parts are no longer available. The air tanks also have a 30-minute capacity, while current regulations require 45-minute capacities.

For the past four years, the department has applied for grants to cover the cost — and it has been turned down each of those years. The Waubeka Fire Department got a grant for the same equipment about five years ago.

Schommer said the department was told in the most recent grant rejection that it failed to demonstrate financial need in securing the money for the breathing equipment.

“The problem is, if we reapply for the grant, which will be opening in September or October, we won’t hear whether we get the money until next year,” Schommer said.

He said there is a risk the results of the next grant cycle won’t be known until the 2015 village budget is complete.

Making matters worse, Schommer said the chances of getting a grant are worsened if money is included in the budget for the needed equipment.

Although the department could phase in the new breathing equipment over several years, Schommer said that approach would mean pieces would not be interchangeable —

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complicating matters when responding to an emergency.

While saying the safety of firefighters is a top concern, Trustee Scott Ehaney, chairman of the committee, said village officials are also in a financial bind.

“You’ve been through the budgeting process. You know we don’t have an extra \$100,000,” Ehaney said.

Still, he told Schommer the best approach might be to ask for the full amount in the 2014 budget, and let the Finance Committee look for a solution.

“As a safety issue, we may be looking at something we have to budget for over three or four years,” Trustee Fritz Buchholtz said.