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Village, town officials will discuss plan asking voters to spend $410,000 to hire full-time chief, pay responders

Village and Town of Grafton officials will meet next week to consider a resolution authorizing a fall referendum to upgrade the local fire department, a move that could cost taxpayers as much as $410,000.

A joint meeting of the village and town boards will be held at 5 p.m. Monday, Aug. 20, at Village Hall to decide whether to hold a Nov. 6 referendum asking residents of both communities if they are willing to spend money to hire a full-time fire chief and pay firefighters and emergency medical responders on a per-call basis.

The referendum has been requested by Grafton Fire Chief John Place on behalf of his all-volunteer department, which he said is struggling to attract and retain members while maintaining a high level of service. In presentations to village and town officials, Place has urged upgrading the department to meet the needs of a fast-growing community.

The referendum would be held in both the village and town because both municipalities contract with the department. Besides fire protection, the department provides emergency medical services, hazardous materials control and public safety education.

Several options — ranging from spending increases of $285,165 to $886,605 — have been discussed for the referendum question. However, the village's Finance Committee last week recommended a $410,085 option that would provide a full-time chief ($105,000), part-time staff members to be on call from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily and per-call payment of $20 for firefighters and emergency medical responders.

The plan also calls for the department to be converted from private, nonprofit status to a village department. The town would then hire the department for services.

In addition to selecting a cost option, the boards are expected to finalize referendum wording and pass a joint resolution authorizing the vote, Village Administrator Darrell Hofland said.

The referendum is required because the cost increase would exceed state-imposed levy limits. State statutes also require the vote to be binding.

If approved by voters in both municipalities, the changes would go into effect in January 2013.

The village currently pays 60%, or $246,051, of the department's operating budget, with the town paying the other 40%, or $164,034. Hofland said plans call for those percentages to remain the same if changes approved by the referendum are enacted.

In a recent presentation to the Village Board, Place said his department lags behind many of the state's other fire departments, a growing number of which are hiring full-time chiefs and

providing per-call payments.

“I don’t believe we have a lot of time right now to wait,” Place said.

Village and town officials have said they empathize with the department’s problems and support holding the referendum. However, they also noted that the cost impact on local voters may become a pivotal factor in whether the referendum passes.

Adding $410,085 to the department’s operating budget would mean tax-levy increases of $244,395 for village residents and $162,930 for town residents, Hofland said.

The exact impact on taxpayers in each municipality cannot be finalized until this fall, when the state provides final tax levy figures, Hofland said. However, he estimated that for village taxpayers, the owner of a house assessed at $250,000 could expect to pay $55.46 more per year.

Place and other fire officials have been meeting with other local volunteer groups discuss their department’s needs. Pending an agreement to hold a fall referendum, public informational meetings may also be held.

Hofland said that because of the shared-services nature of fire protection in the village and town, approval of the referendum by both municipalities is necessary for the upgrades to be made.

“It’s critical for village and town residents to support the Grafton Fire Department and vote yes,” he said.

The deadline is Sept. 17 for approving referendum wording for the question to appear on the ballot in the Nov. 6 general election.