

Fire referendum goes to voters Nov. 6

Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
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Village, town boards agree to ask residents if they should spend \$410,085 more for department upgrades

Voters in the Village and Town of Grafton will decide this fall if they are willing to spend \$410,085 to upgrade their fire department.

At a joint meeting Monday, the village and town boards each unanimously agreed to hold a binding referendum Tuesday, Nov. 6, that will ask residents in each municipality for permission to exceed state-imposed levy limits to pay for increased personnel costs sought by the department.

The board decisions came in response to a request from Grafton Fire Chief John Place on behalf of his all-volunteer department, which he said is struggling to attract and retain members and needs to be upgraded to maintain a high level of service in a fast-growing community.

The proposed funding provide a full-time fire chief (\$105,000), part-time emergency medical technicians to be on call from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. weekdays and per-call payment of \$20 for firefighters and emergency medical responders.

The changes would also convert the department from private, nonprofit status to a village department that would be hired by the town for service.

The referendum will be held in both the village and town because each municipality currently contracts with the department. If approved by voters in both municipalities, the changes would go into effect in January 2013.

The exact impact on taxpayers in each municipality will not be determined until this fall, when the state provides final levy and property valuation figures. However, if the referendum passes, the \$410,085 increase would be divided based on cost sharing percentages currently paid per municipality: 60% by the village and 40% by the town.

For village taxpayers, the increase means the owner of a house assessed at \$250,000 could expect to pay \$55.46 more per year, Village Administrator Darrell Hofland said.

In the town, the owner of a \$250,000 house would pay \$77.08 more annually, Town Chairman Lester Bartel said.

In a brief discussion before the board voted, village and town officials praised the department's long history of volunteer service, said they empathized with the call for upgrades and urged residents to pass the referendum.

"It's unrealistic to expect them to keep going this way for a long, long time," Bartel said of

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department members.

“Sometimes tax increases aren’t bad because sometimes we have to say we need to pool our resources and pay for it. This isn’t a luxury, it’s a necessity.”

Village President Jim Brunnuell concurred.

“Public safety is a basic service of government. Times have changed. We don’t like to see tax increases, but this is a time and an honorable reason to do this,” he said.

In recent presentations to the village and town boards, Place said recruiting volunteers has become increasingly difficult because of their job and family commitments. State-mandated training has also placed greater demands on volunteers.

Place said the number of calls his department receives has grown from 700 per year a decade ago to more than 1,000. Although the department has 75 members, only 40 to 45 are active, he said.

The number of emergency medical calls the department receives has increased to 800 per year, and recent staff changes have left Grafton with only 15 emergency medical technicians, Place said.

The department also performs about 1,200 fire-code inspections annually, he noted.

Place has been meeting with local volunteer groups to discuss the department needs and encourage support of the referendum. Officials said public informational meetings on the vote and proposed changes are expected to be held in the next two months.