

Fire referendum draws public support

Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
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Most speakers at meeting say they back spending money to upgrade department, but others balk at plan

Should residents in the Village and Town of Grafton spend \$410,085 to upgrade their fire department?

The question drew a favorable response from most people who spoke at a public informational meeting Oct. 18, but it also sparked protests from others concerned about increased taxes and proposed changes in the department.

The focal point of the two-hour meeting at John Long Middle School, which was attended by about 75 people, was a Tuesday, Nov. 6, referendum that will ask voters in both municipalities for permission to exceed state-imposed levy limits to pay for increased personnel costs sought by the department.

The referendum will ask village residents to spend \$246,051, or 60% of the proposed cost, and town residents to pay \$164,034, the other 40%.

As requested by the department, the funds would provide \$105,000 for a full-time fire chief and \$305,085 for part-time emergency medical technicians to be on call from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. weekdays, per-call payment of \$20 for firefighters and emergency medical responders, and training.

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

In a presentation at the meeting, Fire Chief John Place said his all-volunteer department is struggling to attract and retain members and needs to be upgraded to maintain a high level of service in a growing community.

“Our department is probably the largest in the state that’s totally volunteer for the number of calls and responses we get,” Place told the audience.

“We wouldn’t be asking for this if it wasn’t needed. It’s not a want, it’s a need.”

Place said the village and town have had moderate growth in residential and commercial development, but an aging population has led to continued growth in service calls. In 2011, he said, the department responded to 1,007 calls, an increase of 36% during the past 10 years.

Nearly 800 of the calls were for emergency medical service, which Place said “is the biggest part of our responses and taxes our members the most.”

The department also performs more than 1,200 fire inspections annually, he said.

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During the last two months, the 69-member department lost 10 of its 29 EMTs due to family and job commitments, Place said. In response, the department hired SEEK, a local employment agency, to provide more than a dozen part-time EMTs who have been on call at the fire station in rotating shifts.

Place said the move has cut response time for rescue calls, underscoring a critical need that would be met if the referendum passes. Hiring a full-time chief is also crucial to coordinate 24-hour fire and EMS service, oversee inspections, training and spending and assist on calls — duties Place said he doesn't have the time to do with his regular job responsibilities.

"I have sleepless nights thinking about what we're going to do to handle situations," Place said.

"We've had instances where we haven't had enough people come in to respond to calls. We've had to call for mutual aid to get a (fire) rig out the door."

If the referendum passes, the owner of a house assessed at \$250,000 in the village would pay \$55.46 more per year. In the town, the owner of a \$250,000 house would pay \$77.08 more annually.

Several audience members praised the department and urged a yes vote on the referendum.

"A lot of people don't appreciate what we have," Village Trustee Jim Grant said. "This (referendum) is for the safety of the community and businesses. This is a no-brainer."

Another village resident said department members "do a great job and deserve our support."

"For a buck a week, I'll take it. I'm in," he said.

Not every audience member agreed.

One woman said she understands the department needs but opposes any tax increase.

"There are other things in the budget to cut," she said. "Maybe we need to consolidate with other area departments."

Former Grafton Town Chairman Neal Rosenberg also voiced opposition to the referendum because he believes it would mean the town will no longer have any input into department operations.

"I can't believe the Grafton Town Board voted to give our fire department away. That's wrong," Rosenberg said.

"The town would still pay 40% of the money. I don't have a problem with staffing and faster response times, but I do have a problem not having a part of the fire department."

However, current Town Chairman Lester Bartel refuted Rosenberg's claim, saying the

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department has operated as an independent company for more than a century.

“You can’t give away something you don’t own,” Bartel said. “We’ve been hiring them for service for years.”

Added Bartel: “We have to be realistic. This has been coming for a long time. We shouldn’t be worried about how much we are being asked to pay for it, but how much we haven’t paid for years.

“Help us help them, or we’re going to be facing a very big problem down the road.”

Village Administrator Darrell Hofland said officials agreed the village would be well suited to take over operation of the department because it can provide more services, including payroll, bill payments, support staff, budgeting, facility maintenance and equipment repairs.

Although the meeting didn’t provide a clear consensus on the fate of the referendum, Village President Jim Brunquell said afterward that he’s optimistic voters will approve the question.

“I haven’t heard from anybody saying it’s a bad idea. The ones I’ve talked to say they understand the need and appreciate what the department means to the community,” Brunquell said.

Hofland said that if the referendum passes, village and town officials are expected to meet to discuss how the town might be given input into department operations. State statutes would not allow a town representative on the village’s Police and Fire Commission, but representation on the Public Safety Committee is possible, he said.

If the referendum fails in either or both of the municipalities, Hofland said, the department will receive the same funding in the 2013 budget that it received this year.