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Wednesday, 02 January 2013 18:57

Village, town still working on agreement that will pave way for department upgrades approved in referendum

Grafton voters approved a Nov. 6 referendum calling for upgrades to the local fire department, including the hiring of its first full-time fire chief in 2013.

Although the department head is expected to be chosen early this year, that move and other improvements authorized by the referendum remain on hold as village and town officials finalize plans for the changes.

Village Administrator Darrell Hofland said the search for a new chief won't begin until the town completes a review of a proposed intergovernmental agreement that will change the department from private, nonprofit status to a village department the town will hire for fire protection and ambulance service.

Under the current arrangement, the village and town both contract with the department. The agreement is expected to include the addition of town representatives on the village's Public Safety Committee.

"The village wants to give the town adequate time to review the intergovernmental agreement as well as discuss its future role," Hofland said.

"There is no sense of urgency. The village is comfortable with the current set of officers running the department."

The referendum, which was approved by 64% of village voters and 55% of town voters, calls for residents in both municipalities to pay a combined $410,085 annually to upgrade the all-volunteer department.

The money will provide $105,000 for a full-time chief and $305,000 for part-time emergency medical technicians to be on call from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. weekdays, per-call payments of $20 for firefighters and emergency medical responders and training.

Village voters agreed to pay $246,051, or 60% of the total cost, while town voters approved spending $164,034, the other 40%. Those shares are based on proportions of the fire department budget currently paid by each municipality.

Last month, the Village Board approved a job description outlining the duties of the new chief, who will be appointed by the village's Police and Fire Commission. The board will ultimately finalize the hiring following negotiations on salary and benefits.

The starting salary range for the new chief will be $68,703 to $87,068. With benefits, total compensation could be as much as $105,000. The new chief is expected to be given 12 months to become a village resident.

Hofland said Police and Fire Commission met in December to discuss the hiring and other department changes and will do so again this month. However, no timetable for advertising the position, interviewing applicants and choosing a chief has been set, and the village is not yet accepting applications, he added.

Hofland said two commission members have interviewed fire chiefs from other area communities “to gain additional insight as to what qualifications to look for” in filling the position.

The Police and Fire Commission and Public Safety Committee approved the job description for the new chief.

Town officials are expected to review the proposed intergovernmental agreement this month. Plans call for the town to have representatives on the Public Safety Committee, which currently has three members — village trustees Jim Grant, David Liss and Lisa Uribe Harbeck.

Hofland said town representatives could be added to the Police and Fire Commission, but the Village Board decided the Public Safety Committee would be a better option because it oversees safety policies and makes budget recommendations. Under village ordinance, the commission’s authority is limited to personnel matters.

The referendum was requested by Fire Chief John Place on behalf of his 69-member 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 growing community.

Place said the department responded to 1,007 calls in 2011, a 36% increase over the past 10 years, including nearly 800 calls for emergency medical service. The department also performs more than 1,200 fire inspections annually, he said.

“Our department is probably the largest in the state that’s totally volunteer for the number of calls and responses we get,” Place said during a public informational meeting before the Nov. 6 vote.

Passage of the referendum will result in tax increases in both municipalities. The owner of a house assessed at $250,000 in the village will pay $55 more per year. In the town, the owner of a $250,000 house will pay $77 more annually.