

Fire Department makes its case for second station

Written by KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM
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Tour of cramped quarters leaves aldermen sold on need for more space but wary of potential costs

The Port Washington Fire Department began its campaign to sell the idea of a new fire station Tuesday when it hosted aldermen for a dinner and tour of the firehouse.

And after a tour of the fire station, which holds 17 vehicles packed almost door-to-door, aldermen said they understand the need for a second facility.

“Is it old? Yes. Is it cramped? Definitely,” Ald. Dan Becker said. “But it’s all going to come down to money.”



That sentiment was shared by Ald. Paul Neumyer, who noted that the need for a new firehouse has to be balanced with other priorities.

“Everything in our city is aging — our sewer lines, our roads, our buildings,” he said. “They do need more room, but it always comes down to how do we fund it. We’re well aware of the need. Now we need to figure out where we’re going with our budget.”

The city also needs to find out if Ozaukee County is interested in building a shared facility, he said.

“If we could do something with the county on Highway LL, I think that would be ideal for both of us,” Ald. Kevin Rudser said.

Police and Fire Commission Chairman Rick Nelson said the city will meet with Ozaukee County officials on July 7 to discuss a shared facility, perhaps on county land.

There are three main properties under consideration, he said. They are the former Highway LL ramp north of Highway 33, a portion of the property just north of the Justice Center — both county owned — and the former Flaherty auto dealership on Highway 32, which is privately owned.

“At first blush, it’s probably not very practical, but it’s worth looking at,” Nelson said of the Flaherty property.

The former ramp land, he said, is ideally located, but the county is concerned about giving that up because of its commercial value. And much of the Justice Center land is currently used for soccer fields, although there is a question whether a new firehouse would take up any of that

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property.

A new firehouse would need about five acres of land, Nelson said.

The centerpiece of Tuesday's meeting was a tour of the fire station.

"Times have really changed," Fire Chief Mark Mitchell said as he talked of the need for additional space for the fire and ambulance services and the dive team.

When the station opened in 1968, he said, firefighters rode to calls on the outside of the trucks. That's changed, and so has the size and number of vehicles used by the department — equipment that's stored so close together it can be difficult to open the door of one truck without striking the side of another.

The fire station was also built exclusively for firemen, Mitchell said, but today 16 members of the department are women, and the station lacks facilities for them.

Paramedics weren't envisioned then, either, and while department members have fashioned a tiny sleeping area for them, it's inadequate for the future, he said.

The current building is also inefficient, lacks storage space and training areas, and a new building could not only address these needs but also provide additional room for general city storage.

And with an increasing amount of rail traffic through the city, a new fire station could also help decrease response times and ensure easy access to all areas of the city in an emergency, he added.

There was talk of building a second station in the 1990s, Mitchell said, but the city instead opted to construct an addition to the existing firehouse.

"This was probably too small when they moved in," he said.

Officials stressed that they are not considering abandoning the current firehouse, but augmenting it with a second station.

"We really need to have a nice facility for everyone," Nelson said. "The intention would be to create a facility that we hope could meet some of Ozaukee County's needs, too."

A shared facility might be the best, he said, noting the county is looking at additional space for its emergency government operations. The sheriff's department is also looking for additional storage space.

Nelson said the new firehouse might also be able to house an indoor firing range for the police department.

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The fire department is currently looking into the cost of a study that would look at everything from the department's needs to the design and cost of a new facility, Mitchell said.

Image information: PORT WASHINGTON Fire Chief Mark Mitchell (left) pointed out the close quarters in the firehouse to Ald. Dave Larson Tuesday while other officials looked on.

Photo by Sam Arendt