

Annual town fire report draws heat

Written by Mark Jaeger
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Residents take issue with Newburg fire chief for rising fire protection payments, mutual aid deployments

Newburg Fire Chief Dave Giedel noted last week that fire department activity in the Town of Saukville was up slightly from the previous year, but the annual report sparked some heated comments from the audience during the town's annual meeting last week.

Newburg is the lead agency among the four fire departments that provide fire protection to the town.

In that role, the department collected an annual payment of \$160,000 from the town, and then split that sum with the fire departments from Saukville, Waubeka and Fredonia.

"Mapping out the coverage areas of each department, you can see that every town residents lives within five miles of a fire station. That is very impressive for a rural area," Giedel told town residents.

The effectiveness of that fire protection has been enhanced, he said, with the recent implementation of a regional mutual aid program called MABAS (Mutual Aid Box Alarm System).

Giedel said the program keeps an inventory of all available fire-fighting equipment, and then dispatches pieces as needed without unduly depleting the resources of a single department.

He said the system was put into motion during an April 10 house fire on Lakeland Road, which drew a response from seven fire engines and four tanker trucks. Equipment from as far away as Jackson and Boltonville were involved.

Neighboring departments were called to be on standby while the fire was being fought.

"That doesn't seem to be a very efficient use of equipment," said Highway I resident Tom Ravn. "I see what we are paying going up fairly rapidly every year."

The town's three-year contract with the Newburg department includes a 5% annual increase.

Ravn and other residents asked why the small house fire drew so many vehicles. That line of inquiry drew an immediate challenge from Town Chairman Barb Jobs.

"We have to provide life services. I take offense to the idea that we should respond when a \$1 million house is on fire, but not if it is a smaller house," Jobs said.

Giedel said keeping the department properly equipped is not inexpensive.

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“If you want us to respond to calls with 30-year-old trucks and 500-gallon tankers, you aren’t going to be left with houses standing,” he said.

Geidel said the collective coverage provided by the current fire contract gives the town the best fire-insurance rating possible for a community without fire hydrants.

In the annual report itself, Geidel noted that the department responded to 42 calls last year, compared to 36 calls in 2009.

The latest tally included responding to the scene of 14 auto accidents, five grass fires and a single house fire.

Geidel said the department will be working with the Fredonia Fire Department in identifying properties that have long driveways, so that firefighters responding to fire calls will know how to deploy 1,000-foot lengths of hose when access is restricted.

The initiative is similar to the push to place fire numbers at the entrances to all driveways in the town.

“The fire number program has been very well received,” Jobs said.

The annual building inspection report only confirmed what residents and officials already knew — that the economy has taken a devastating toll on new construction.

Forty-seven building permits were issued in the town last year, adding just \$712,000 to the tax base.

The total included two new homes, the same number as was constructed in 2009.