Written by MARK JAEGER
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Town chairman says it may be time to look closer at consolidation

Fredonia Town Chairman Richard Mueller hinted last month that it may be time to begin looking into consolidating the Waubeka and Fredonia fire departments.

Mueller's comments were made during the town's annual meeting, which drew about a dozen residents.

"I may be sticking my neck out a little on this, but looking at what is happening with the fire department, maybe it is time to create a committee to see what we can put together with the village," he said.

"This isn't anything that is going to happen in a month or two, but it is something maybe we should start talking about."

Waubeka Fire Chief Keith Johnson was caught off guard by Mueller's comments.

"It came completely out of nowhere," said Johnson, who was in the audience at the town meeting.

A 35-year veteran with the department, Johnson was named chief earlier this year after Pete Wagner stepped down. Wagner had been chief for 10 years.

Johnson said the department is in the process of preparing a response to Mueller's comments, but stressed that the department operates independently of the town.

Mueller's suggestion was spurred by facts included in the Waubeka Fire Department's annual report, which was also presented at the meeting.

The report noted the department has 39 active members, including 29 firefighters and 10 who serve strictly as emergency medical technicians.

"As time progresses, our veteran firefighters are getting older and are looking to retire," the report noted.

"But the number of veterans that want to retire by far outweighs the number of younger members wanting to join. This is becoming a problem, and, if not corrected, could lead to calling

on more mutual aid and relying on other agencies to assist us."

Mueller said keeping the department staffed is a challenge that can no longer be ignored.

"The department is getting older and there just aren't the young people moving into the town to replace them," he said.

The annual report noted the Waubeka department handled 84 calls last year, including 27 fire calls and 57 emergency medical service calls.

Department members logged 3,750 hours for training, meetings, calls and fire inspections.

In the Fredonia Fire Department's annual report, Fire Chief Brian Schommer told Village of Fredonia officials that the department is in a strong position, though the amount of activity was down last year.

The department responded to 37 fire calls last year, a decrease of four from 2010.

Similarly, the number of EMT calls dropped 27 from 2010, to 64. There were 196 ambulance calls, a decrease of 28 from the previous year.

Schommer said one area where the numbers are increasing is the department's membership. There are 38 active members, which includes 18 firefighters, nine EMTs, six firefighter/EMTs and five ambulance drivers.

"This is as strong a roster as I have seen in my 17 years as chief," Schommer said.

Image Information: THE WAUBEKA FIRE DEPARTMENT marked a formal changing of the guard during a recent awards banquet. Photo by Sam Arendt