

Air packs ordered for fire department

Written by MARK JAEGER

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Village Board decides to spend \$115,000 for long-awaited equipment after grant bids fall short

For years, the Fredonia Fire Department has been stymied in its quest to get new self-contained air tanks and masks.

The obstacle — their staggering cost.

The impasse was resolved last week, when the Fredonia Village Board unanimously approved spending \$115,000 on the equipment that can mean the difference between life and death for firefighters battling a choking fire.

Fire Chief Brian Schommer said the money will be sufficient to purchase 19 air packs, 48 oxygen cylinders and 32 face pieces.

The purchase from Bendlin Fire Equipment Co. of Butler will also include modified equipment for a rapid-intervention system, which can be used when a firefighter becomes incapacitated during a fire and needs to be rescued.

An integrated warning system is built into the air packs that indicate when a firefighter has failed to move in a specified period of time, triggering a response from the intervention team.

Schommer explained that the department's current air packs are decades old and outdated according to national firefighting standards.

"All of our air packs are obsolete, with the standard for air tank capacity increased from 30 minutes to 45 minutes," he said.

"In addition, a lot of our air packs are 20 years old and our repair guy is having an increasingly difficult time finding parts."

Schommer said the fire department could see the problem coming years ago, and began applying for national firefighting grants four or five years ago.

Each application, including this year's grant, was denied. Officials suspect the department was ruled out because of the average wealth in Ozaukee County.

Officials felt the department was also caught in a Catch 22 dilemma, where grants were not being approved for departments that had other funding possibilities — which essentially prevented village trustees from setting money aside for the purchase.

Citing the mounting safety concerns involved, village officials agreed with Schommer that the purchase could be put off no longer.

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The \$115,000 will be taken from the 2015 contingency fund, an account which was padded in anticipation of having to buy the air packs.

Despite the high cost, Schommer said he is convinced the department is getting a good price on the equipment.

“I can tell you, I experienced a bit of sticker shock when we started adding up everything we needed. The list price came to over \$150,000, closer to \$160,000. Our salesperson did a great job of bringing the price down as much as he could,” the chief said.

Although the price quote was good for 30 days, Schommer said the vendor knows the money won't be available until January.

Schommer said it will take six to eight weeks before the equipment is delivered.

Considering the ordeal that accompanied the purchase, Trustee Fritz Buchholtz asked if the department should consider buying higher-capacity tanks.

“If the standard has already been increased from 30-minute to 45-minute tanks, would it make sense if we purchased 60-minute tanks and be ahead of the game?” Buchholtz asked.

Schommer said the 45-minute tanks are the highest capacity available, but inevitably that will change.

“In another year or two they will come up with new latest and greatest rules, but for now we are good,” he said.

Schommer said the existing equipment has little trade-in value, but could be used by some fire departments looking to salvage replacement parts.