

Board begins tackling budget shortfall

Written by Steve Ostermann
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Trustees weigh list of proposed changes that include new fees, reduced services and closing senior center, pool

With a state-imposed budget crunch looming, the Grafton Village Board this week began considering fiscal changes ranging from new fees to pared services and personnel cuts.

In a report prepared by the village management team, Village Administrator Darrell Hofland asked the board to explore ways to offset an anticipated shortfall of \$473,455 for the 2012 budget.

That total includes an expected loss of \$254,123 in shared revenue, transportation aid and recycling grant money as part of the state budget-repair bill and increased costs, including contractual commitments to the village's unionized employees.

"I have charged the management team to think outside the box in identifying possible program changes, employee cuts, impact fees and collaboration with other government agencies," Hofland said.

"No items should be considered sacred."

The report includes a master list of more than 50 potential budget changes for every municipal department — police, public works, parks and recreation, inspection, finance, administration, planning and development, library, and water and wastewater utility.

The village is already poised to adopt some of the changes, including fee increases for parking citations, copies of open-records documents and fingerprinting services, as recommended by the Public Safety Committee. The new police-related service fees are expected to generate more than \$20,000 in additional revenue.

The Public Works Board recommended new fees for construction permits, permit violations and delivering wood chips to nonresidents — changes that would generate \$4,600 more in revenue.

However, the report also asks the board to consider a number of changes that would have significantly more impact on the budget shortfall. Among the major cost-savings proposals are:

- \$160,000 by transferring dispatch services to the Ozaukee County Sheriff's Department.
- \$80,000 each by transferring eight hours of daily dispatch service to the county and by combining Grafton and Cedarburg dispatch services.
- \$69,945 by closing the Grafton Family Aquatic Center. In lieu of having the center open, the village could subsidize residents who buy season passes to neighboring pools, the report states.

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- \$60,000 by closing the Grafton Multi-purpose Senior Center. Under this proposal, senior activities would be held in other village-owned buildings.
- \$22,800 by eliminating a part-time dispatcher.

Proposed changes in utility operations, which would not affect the tax-supported village budget but save utility users money, include reducing water-tower maintenance to save \$135,388.

Among possible changes to generate more revenue are removing garbage collection from the general fund and covering the cost through user fees on utility bills. The change would result in a \$395,000 savings, the report states.

Another option calls for removing the cost of lighting streets from the general fund and paying for it through a fee on quarterly utility bills. The change would drop \$350,000 from the tax levy.

Establishing an annual user fee of \$32 for recycling collection could generate \$105,000, enough to cover the cost of curbside service, according to the report.

The Village Board began discussing options Tuesday during the first of at least three committee-of-the-whole meetings in the decision-making process, as recommended by Hofland.

Village President Jim Brunquell said he and other trustees are counting on input from residents during the process, which he said presents “a difficult challenge.”

“What we face is not only a job of cutting costs, but to do that without jeopardizing all the things we have accomplished in the village — things like our downtown development, branding effort and sustainability,” Brunquell said.

“Anybody can cut costs, but we have to do it and still maintain the kind of community we want to have in Grafton.”

Brunquell said he cannot envision most of the major cost-saving proposals being approved by the Village Board but recognizes the need for changes.

“I can’t see us closing the senior center or pool, but it’s important to look at all the options because that is how you think outside the box,” he said. “It’s an exercise to get people to think about what we could do.”

Trustee Richard Rieck said he will support budget changes that have the least negative impact the village’s quality of life.

“I’m going to try to make cuts without hurting people, without costing them their jobs,” he said. “We need to find ways to keep our facilities open and our programs going, even if we have to charge a little more to do it.

“I’d hate to see the pool closed. It’s packed in the summer. If we have to move our activities for

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senior citizens, we have to make sure to find good places to hold them.”

Several village officials said they haven't gotten much feedback from residents on proposed fee increases, program cuts or pared services but expect to as information is disseminated. Besides input at meetings, Hofland said, officials will consider responses in the annual community survey.

“I think it's too early in the process, but I'm sure we will start hearing a lot from people,” Rieck said. “Just about everything will affect them in some way.”

Last fall, the Village Board decided to apply more than \$591,000 of its fund balance in this year's budget — a move that allowed the village to maintain services while holding the line on taxes. But Hofland said the village cannot do the same to cover additional operating expenses or provide property tax relief in the 2012 budget without jeopardizing its credit rating.

Brunnquell said he wasn't surprised by Gov. Scott Walker's budget-repair initiative, which calls for drastic cuts in state aid to counties and municipalities, as well as stripping public employee unions of most of their collective bargaining rights.

“I think the governor was forthcoming in saying what he wanted to accomplish, to get the state out of its fiscal mess,” Brunnquell said.

“For years, we chuckled at the local level about what was happening in Madison as long as we kept getting our shared aids. But the day of reckoning was coming, and now it's here.”

Hofland said he wants ongoing input from the Village Board so the management team can begin fine-tuning the 2012 budget in late June.

The board typically adopts a budget each fall for the following year. The impact of the state budget-repair bill has prompted much-earlier preparation of the 2012 spending package, Hofland noted.