

Board wants more input on budget options

Written by Steve Ostermann
Wednesday, 27 April 2011 18:01

Challenge of resolving financial crunch prompts village trustees to ask department heads for new ideas

Wrestling with ways to offset a pending budget crunch for 2012, the Grafton Village Board on Tuesday sent a master list of potential cost cuts and fee increases back to department heads for further review.

Meeting as a committee of the whole, the board spent two hours discussing ways to make a \$473,000 adjustment in next year's budget. That total is needed, Village Administrator Darrell Hofland said, because the village is expected to lose \$223,212 in state aid and needs additional money to replenish a fund balance the board tapped last year to provide tax relief.

A standing-room-only crowd attended the meeting, during which the board continued to review cost-saving proposals on a list that include paring staff for park, recreation, senior-center, inspection and library programs.

At a similar meeting last week, the board reviewed potential budget changes for the police and public works departments.

"We're being very proactive here," said Village President Jim Brunnquell, who noted that the goal of the review process is to create a revised spending package that will allow the village to meet its financial obligations without sacrificing residents' quality of life.

The master list contains more than 50 potential budget changes covering every municipal department, some of which were recommended by the village's management team in consultation with department heads.

The most significant change recommended is the establishment of an annual recycling user fee of \$32 per property, which is expected to generate \$105,000 more in revenue. The fee would also offset a loss of state recycling grant money expected when the state budget-repair bill becomes law.

The list also contains a number of larger cost-savings options, including \$160,000 by transferring dispatch services to the Ozaukee County Sheriff's Department; \$69,945 by closing the Grafton Family Aquatic Center; and \$60,000 by closing the Grafton Senior Center and holding senior activities in other village-owned buildings.

The board tabled the dispatch plan pending further discussion by the Public Safety Committee. Neither of the proposed closings of the centers was recommended by the management teams.

Even so, the inclusion of facility closings and program cuts on the list sparked protests from audience members.

One resident said the library and other municipal facilities provide vital services and residents

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should be willing to pay more to maintain the current level of programs.

“Are our fees consistent with those in other areas?” she asked. “I’d hate to see our services being lost just because we failed to move into the 21st century.”

The board concurred with recommendations that will trim costs in several departments, including \$13,000 by eliminating a part-time assistant in the inspection office; \$12,200 in computer support costs by buying a new software program; and \$11,363 in part-time seasonal costs for parks maintenance.

However, other recommendations — including eliminating a part-time assistant at the senior center to save \$5,824 — were pulled from the list at the request of one or more board members.

“A big draw to Grafton is its parks, recreation and senior center,” Trustee Lisa Uribe Harbeck said. “I think parks and recreation are forgotten a lot, and I don’t want to see that happen.”

Hofland said an unknown area of potential cost savings could be reducing health insurance costs for village employees by dropping the state plan for another carrier. That change could be made for unionized employees once the current contract ends, he noted.

“If we leave the state plan, we are not eligible to get back in for three years,” Hofland asked. “Would it be worth the risk to leave?”

Hofland said the village’s wellness program, which has trimmed employees’ sick days, could also help secure insurance savings through a new carrier.

After completing a review of all departments on the master list, the board had earmarked \$309,000 in possible budget changes — well above the \$223,212 shortfall from state aid cuts, but still \$160,000 shy of the \$473,000 requested by the management team.

Replenishing the fund balance, Hofland said, is essential to ensure the village maintains a strong credit rating. The village is further restricted by a state-imposed levy limit that prohibits a tax increase to offset aid shortfalls.

Trustee Jim Grant suggested each department be asked to reconsider ways to cut 8% in operating costs, the amount needed to achieve the goal.

“We’re fortunate. We have time on our side (in preparing the 2012 budget),” Grant said. “Try cutting it to 92% and show me it doesn’t work.”

However, Hofland and Brunnquell said making across-the-board cuts was not a practical approach.

“You can’t cut 8% of a person or 8% of a lawn,” Brunnquell said. “These are the items (on the list) that will get us to that point. This is the input that came from all department heads.”

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Although the immediate focus of the budget changes is 2012 spending, the changes being considered are part of a larger process in which the state is calling for “right-size local governments,” Hofland said.

“The staff is looking at long-term costs, not one-time fixes,” he said.

Brunnquell said department heads will be asked to return in a month with additional recommendations at a third informational meeting on budget changes. Eventually, the changes will be incorporated into a 2012 budget package that goes to the Village Board for approval.

Although the village typically adopts its annual budget in the fall, discussion of the spending plan was started earlier this year due to the significant impact of state-imposed changes, Brunnquell noted.