

Firefighters want paid department

Written by Steve Ostermann
Wednesday, 11 May 2011 15:02

GFD vote shows strong support for replacing volunteer service with municipal operation overseen by full-time chief

Grafton firefighters have voted in favor of replacing the 115-year-old volunteer service with a municipally operated department that would have paid on-call members and a full-time chief.

Fire Chief John Place said Tuesday that “an overwhelming majority” of several dozen department members who attended a special meeting April 21 supported the plan.

“We met to discuss issues and concerns, and determined that there should be changes in how the department operates,” Place said.

“It’s getting harder and harder to find volunteers. That’s been an ongoing problem. We’ve got a large staff, but fewer and fewer are available on evenings and weekends, and there’s a lot more for everyone to do.”

The department has traditionally been hired by the Village and Town of Grafton to provide services, with contracts renewed annually.

This year, the village will pay the department \$498,476 for fire protection and inspection, emergency medical services, hazardous materials control and public safety education. The town will pay \$195,479.

Place said his department has 84 members, but only 60 to 65 are available for active duty. He believes having a paid on-call incentive would bolster recruitment efforts.

“It’s a dedicated staff, but most of them don’t live in the village anymore,” he said. “We operate as a private corporation, unlike a lot of communities that have full-time chiefs and paid firefighters.”

Burgeoning commercial and residential development in the village during the past 10 years has placed increasing demand on department services, Place noted.

“We’re growing faster than just about every other community, but we still have an all-volunteer staff,” he said. “Grafton is no different in size than Port Washington, but they have a full-time chief.”

Place said the department’s plan would require voter approval on a referendum before it could be implemented in the village or town. Before then, the proposal would require review by each municipality — a step that hasn’t been taken, he added.

“We’ve only started discussing it informally,” Place said.

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Grafton Village Administrator Darrell Hofland declined to comment on the department vote, noting “the village has not received an official notice of a possible organizational change.”

In a prepared statement, Hofland said the village “recognizes the need and the responsibility of the Grafton Volunteer Fire Department to evaluate not only the level of services it provides but how best to provide these critical services.”

Grafton Town Chairman Lester Bartel said he isn’t surprised by the department’s vote.

“I’ve been kind of expecting this for quite some time,” Bartel said.

“Our fire department has provided outstanding firefighting and rescue service for many years, but asking volunteers to do it forever is just not reasonable. Times have changed, and it’s something we need to talk about.”

Bartel said town officials would take a careful look at department needs and the financial impact before determining the feasibility of the plan.

“I don’t believe the added cost would be excessive, but we have to look at everything,” he said.

“I have complete confidence that John and the rest of his department have the best interest of the community at heart and will present their case fairly.”

Place, a 24-year department member who has served as chief since December 2009, said he recognizes the difficult financial challenges being faced by the village and town — and how spending constraints could make the changes difficult to implement.

“The timing for this is not the greatest with the budget problems, and we know that,” he said. “But it’s also a public safety issue that affects every resident and business and needs to be looked at seriously.”

Even if a referendum would fail, the department is not going to disband, Place said.

“We’re not going anywhere, but we’re trying to plan for the future,” he said. “We just feel it’s time for a change.”