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Village Board adopts spending plan with no tax hike but remains divided over plan to fill vacant officer post

Members of the Grafton Village Board on Monday approved a 2012 budget that calls for a no-hike tax rate, but not before a debate on the hiring of a police officer left them sharply divided.

After considerable discussion, trustees unanimously adopted a budget that requires a $7.13 million levy, up 2.7% from this year.

However, the levy increase will be largely defrayed by a 2% hike in the village's property tax base, which rose by $22.1 million during the past year.

The budget includes funds to fill a vacant police officer position, which is expected to cost $87,000 annually for salary and benefits. That expenditure remains on hold, however, because the board has yet to approve the hiring.

Keeping the funds in the budget sparked a debate between trustees, some of whom said the post didn't have to be filled because the police department is operating well without it. Other board members argued that the officer is needed because the village should have 22 full-time officers, as requested by Police Chief Charles Wenten, instead of the 21 currently on staff.

Trustee Dave Antoine said he would not support the budget with funds to fill the vacancy because other village departments have had to cut spending. He said he understands the challenges faced by police officers working extended hours, but that other people face stressful situations because of tough economic times.

"But no one has the stress of wearing a gun and dealing with the stress of that job," Trustee Jim Grant responded.

Grant said keeping the police force at full strength "is not a campaign issue but a safety issue" for local residents and businesses.

Trustee Susan Meinecke agreed with Grant and said the vacancy should be filled.

"I don't want to wait until something happens and then say we should have done something," Meinecke said. "We need to be proactive."

But Village President Jim Brunnquell said public safety has not become a concern due to the vacant police officer position.

"The chief is doing a great job and says he can run his department with what he has," Brunnquell said.

"We can't do a budget on speculation, but we can do it on facts. Twenty-two officers was approved and we're at 21, but we're not understaffed compared to other communities."

An initial vote on adopting the budget failed by a 4-3 margin, with Brunnquell, Antoine, Richard Rieck and Lisa Uribe Harbeck voting no. However, trustees reconsidered their vote and approved the budget after agreeing that the funds to fill the vacancy would not be spent unless the board decides to hire an officer next year.

Some trustees also voiced concern over hiring an officer who might have to be laid off after several months on the job due to possible budget cuts for 2013.

As approved, the budget calls for a 2012 tax rate of $6.44 per $1,000 of assessed valuation, the same as this year's rate.

In preparing the budget, Village Administrator Darrell Hofland said total expenditures were cut by $884,000, or 3.4%. The reduction includes $117,000 in personnel costs due to employees contributing more for health insurance and pensions, as required under the state budget-repair law.

The cuts were needed because of state-imposed levy limits and the loss of $391,000 in state-shared revenue for 2012.