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# Village trustees await Public Safety Committee input after sparring over need to fill vacant position

Does the Grafton Police Department need another officer to provide adequate full-time protection in the village?

The Village Board remained divided on the question Monday when it considered but failed to adopt a resolution that would have transferred money to fill a vacant officer position from the public safety budget to a contingency fund.

The resolution, proposed by Village President Jim Brunnquell, called for reconsideration of the board's Nov. 7 approval of the 2012 municipal budget and a supporting tax levy. The budget includes funds to cover salary and benefits for the vacant post and give the police department 22 full-time officers.

The additional officer would receive $87,663 annually in salary and benefits.

However, Brunnquell and several other board members have publicly questioned the need to fill the vacancy, contending the department is operating well with 21 officers and that there have not been any complaints about police protection.

Brunnquell and trustees David Antoine, Richard Rieck and Lisa Uribe Harbeck — four of the seven board members — said money earmarked for the officer should be placed in the contingency fund to pare spending and maintain the adopted levy total in the 2012 budget.

Objecting to the plan, Trustee Susan Meinecke said the 22nd officer is needed because the police department is understaffed and public safety has been jeopardized.

"I've got a real problem with cutting the public safety budget while other items that have no direct impact on the daily lives of residents are left intact," Meinecke said.

"It doesn't make sense. It seems punitive toward the police department."

Meinecke reiterated her opposition to removing funds for the officer in a letter she wrote to the board. In it, she states the board established a policy of having 22 police officers and directed Police Chief Charles Wenten to cut the public safety budget to fill the position, which has been vacant since spring due to a resignation.

Meinecke stated that the police department is facing unnecessary hardships with one less staff member, including: excessive shift changes for officers; requiring captains to cover patrol shifts; limiting the hours the school liaison officer, drug unit officer and investigator have to do their regular jobs; and doubling overtime hours.

The City of Cedarburg, a community of Grafton's size, has only 19 full-time police officers. However, Meinecke said the village needs 22 officers because its police have to handle more traffic stops, complaints and arrests.

Trustee Jim Grant, chairman of the Public Safety Committee, echoed Meinecke's concerns.

"We passed a budget with money in there for a police officer. Unless we're getting some huge investment of interest in those funds, there's no reason not to use it," he said.

Grant questioned if the board would be firing a police officer to save money if the resignation had not resulted in a vacancy.

But Uribe Harbeck said she would not support hiring another officer because the department has been operating efficiently with current staffing.

"I haven't heard one complaint from residents, police officers, dispatchers or anyone else," she said.

Uribe Harbeck said police officers are expected to handle shift changes as part of their job description. Although other unionized village workers have had to make concessions in insurance and retirement benefits, police officers have not, she added.

Brunnquell said he suggested the board consider transferring money for the officer to the contingency fund in response to the village's loss of $391,000 in state-shared revenue for 2012 and to build reserve funds.

"It's a policy issue, and it's up to the board to discuss it," Brunnquell said.

Even if the money remains in the public safety budget, it cannot be spent unless the board approves the hiring of a new officer, Brunnquell noted.

Grant contended the Public Safety Committee should first be allowed to discuss the need for a 22nd officer and make a recommendation to the Village Board before a final decision is made.

Brunnquell agreed, saying he was willing to wait until the committee considered a possible hiring. As a result, the board defeated the resolution authorizing the transfer of money for the officer by a 4-3 vote.

Antoine, Uribe Harbeck and Rieck voted in favor, but Brunnquell and David Liss joined Meinecke and Grant in opposition.

Wenten attended Monday's meeting but made no comment in the debate other than to thank the board for its discussion.

The Public Safety Committee's next meeting will be at 6 p.m. Tuesday, Dec. 13, at the police station, 1981 Washington St.