

Board says no to filling police post

Written by STEVE OSTERMANN

Wednesday, 21 December 2011 19:57

Trustees continue to spar over need for another officer after 4-3 vote against committee's hiring recommendation

A new officer should not be hired next year to fill a vacant position in the police department, a divided Grafton Village Board decided Monday night.

Although the Public Safety Committee recommended the hiring, a motion to hire an officer to start April 1 failed on a 4-3 vote.

As a result, the police department will continue to operate with 21 full-time officers, one less than included in the 2012 budget adopted by the village this fall.

The decision also paves the way for the transfer of \$87,663 in salary and benefits for the additional officer to the budget's contingency fund to pare spending.

The board vote brought an apparent end to weeks of debate in which trustees sparred over how failing to fill the vacancy would affect police operations and public safety. However, the decision was not made without sparking another heated discussion.

Susan Meinecke, who joined fellow trustees Jim Grant and David Liss in voting for the hiring, criticized dissenting board members for overstepping their authority and ignoring the wishes of Police Chief Charles Wenten, who requested to have the vacancy filled.

"We have a very talented police department and a very qualified chief," Meinecke said. "It's very arrogant of this board to tell the chief how to run his department."

Village President Jim Brunnquell — who was joined by trustees David Antoine, Richard Rieck and Lisa Uribe Harbeck in opposing the hiring — disagreed, saying the decision was based on budgetary concerns rather than politics.

"I've never told him how to run things," Brunnquell responded.

Grant, the chairman of the Public Safety Committee, said another officer needs to be hired because the department has been adversely affected by the vacancy. He said that since the vacancy was created in spring when an officer resigned, shift changes have limited the hours Sgt. David Podewils is available to work as the school liaison officer.

"The important issue is that he needs to spend more time to be proactive with kids," Grant said. "There has been a narcotics problem in the schools, and you've read about it in the paper."

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Grant cited a letter from Grafton School Supt. Jeff Pechura that praised Podewils' work and expressed concern about reducing the officer's time in schools.

Grant said that Wenten, at the Village Board's request, had cut money from the public safety budget to hire a 22nd officer. Due to the vacancy, the police department has paid \$40,000 more in overtime to officers this year than in 2010, Grant added.

"We asked the chief to cut the budget so there would be enough money in there to hire an officer, and now we're telling him he can't," Grant said.

But in voting against the hiring, other board members said they have not received complaints from residents, police officers or dispatchers about an understaffed department.

"I made a promise in spring, and I've stuck to my guns on this," said Rieck, who said 2013 budget cuts could result in more staff reductions, including in the police department.

"I feel that if we don't hire someone now, we can save some jobs in the future."

Uribe Harbeck said she understands the concerns of trustees who support the hiring but believes the police department is operating efficiently with 21 officers. "I don't feel we need the other officer right now," she said.

Brunnquell said transferring money to the contingency fund would help offset the village's loss of \$391,000 in state-shared revenue for 2012 and build reserves in the budget.

"Everyone has a valid position. There's no right and no wrong," Brunnquell said of the debate. "But in terms of the budget, I think we need to position ourselves to look at long-range plans."

Wenten attended Monday's meeting but did not comment during the discussion.

Near the end of Monday's meeting, Grant asked that the money Wenten cut from the budget to fill the vacancy be restored for other police expenditures, including the purchase of a new squad car.

"But it's not a this-for-that," Brunnquell responded. "It's the concept of how we will manage things."

Brunnquell said that, as chairman of the Finance Committee, he would take Grant's request "under advisement."