

Should Grafton have a paid fire department?

Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
Wednesday, 06 June 2012 18:30

Fall referendum expected to decide on plan that calls for full-time chief, per-call pay for responders

Grafton residents can expect to be asked this fall if they are willing to spend at least \$285,000 more next year to upgrade the local fire department, including hiring a full-time chief and paying firefighters and emergency medical responders on a per-call basis.

At the request of Fire Chief John Place, the village's Finance Committee this week continued to review options for placing the question on a binding referendum in the Nov. 6 general election.

The referendum, which would be held in both the village and town, has been proposed in response to concerns about the future of the all-volunteer department.

"The day-to-day operations need to be changed so the department is better able to meet the needs of the Grafton community," said Place, who has met several times with village and town officials to present his case.

"It's very difficult to continue to operate the way we have in the past. We have a community that has continued to grow while the fire department has remained all volunteers."

Village Administrator Darrell Hofland said that adding at least \$285,000 to the department's 2013 operating budget would require a referendum because the expenditure would exceed state-imposed levy limits. State statutes require the vote to be binding, he added.

Place said his department, which has served the village and town since 1896, currently has about 75 members, none of whom are paid for their services. Grafton has the only fully volunteer fire department in the area for a community of its size.

The department's membership level is comparable to 10 years ago, but the number of fire and rescue calls has increased dramatically in recent years due to continued residential and commercial development, Place noted.

"Five or six years ago, we had 500 to 600 calls per year. Last year we had 796," he said.

It's also become increasingly difficult for the department to attract and retain volunteers due to their family and job commitments, according to Place. That challenge is exacerbated by a lack of pay for emergency calls, he added.

A per-call payment system would "give them some additional incentive to respond," Place said.

Another challenge in attracting volunteers is an increase in mandated training.

"Volunteers are being asked to make greater commitments to the department. It now takes a full

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year to become a basic EMT," Place said.

In recognition of the need for organizational changes, department members last year voted in favor of asking the village and town to hire a full-time chief and providing per-call pay.

The village and town currently contract with the department annually to provide fire protection and inspection, emergency medical services, hazardous materials control and public safety education. This year, the village will pay 60%, or \$501,000, of the department's operating budget, with the town paying the other 40%.

In presentations to the village's Public Safety Committee and Grafton Town Board, Place outlined three options for additional spending to reorganize the department:

\$285,165 to hire a full-time chief (\$105,000) and an administrative assistant (\$12,480), provide per-call payments of \$54,000 for firefighters and \$48,000 for emergency medical responders and pay for training (\$13,125). Each per-call payment would be \$20.

\$410,085 to hire a full-time chief and part-time employees who would be on call 12 hours per day.

\$886,605 to hire a full-time chief and additional personnel.

Place recommended the \$285,165 option, which he said would provide a transitional step in preparing the department to meet its long-term needs. His recommendation includes hiring a full-time chief in January 2013 and converting the department from private, nonprofit status to a village department.

A number of other area communities of comparable size, including the City of Port Washington, have hired full-time chiefs, Place noted.

In April, the village's Public Safety Committee voiced support for Place's recommendation, and Village President Jim Brunnquell recommended hiring a full-time chief. Committee Chairman Jim Grant also urged the Village Board to approve organizational changes for the department.

Members of the village's Finance Committee have also backed the proposal.

"There is considerable support for the fire department's request," said Hofland, who added that the Village Board and Town Board are expected to approve placing the referendum question on the Nov. 6 ballot. The wording and date of the referendum are not expected to be finalized until late August, when tax levy limits are provided by the state, he said.

Although the exact impact to taxpayers of adding \$285,165 to the department's operating budget cannot be determined until fall, Hofland estimated the village's share of the cost would result in a \$39 property-tax increase on a \$250,000 house.

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Place said he's optimistic the referendum would be approved by village and town voters. "Hopefully, people understand the challenges we are facing. We need to take steps to help the department prepare for the future, and this is a starting point," he said.

Hofland said the deadline for approving wording of the referendum question for the Nov. 6 ballot is Sept. 17