Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
Wednesday, 18 July 2012 17:39

Department leaders reiterate need for full-time chief, per-call pay in plan they say could cost more than $410,000

Reiterating a pressing need to upgrade their department, Grafton fire officials this week again called for a fall referendum that would ask village and town residents to approve hiring a full-time chief and paying firefighters and emergency medical responders on a per-call basis.

Fire Chief John Place told the Village Board that his all-volunteer department is struggling to attract and retain members while maintaining a high level of service in a growing community.

“Volunteerism is starting to become a thing of the past,” Place said while appearing with Assistant Chief Dean Proefrock at Monday’s board meeting.

“We are facing many difficult challenges as a 100% volunteer organization.”

In spring, Place asked the village’s Finance Committee to review options for holding a Nov. 6 referendum on upgrading the department.

At that time, he suggested the referendum ask residents if they are willing to spent $285,165 more on the department’s operating budget, a cost that would include hiring a chief and providing per-call pay.

The referendum would be held in both the village and town because both municipalities contract with the department. In addition to fire protection and inspection, the department provides emergency medical services, harzardous 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%.

The $285,165 figure was included in one of three options Place presented to the village’s Public Safety Committee and Grafton Town Board.

He said the money would pay for 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.

He also recommended converting the department from private, nonprofit status to a village department.

Other options call for spending $410,085 to hire a full-time chief and part-time employees who would be on call 12 hours per day, and spending $886,605 for a full-time chief and additional personnel.

But on Monday, Place told the board that further review indicated the two least-costly options would not adequately address the department's needs. He said a more viable option would probably cost more than $410,000.

In recent weeks, the department had three emergency medical technicians resign and three others on medical leave, Place said.

"We have 800 EMS calls per year, and we are down to 15 EMTs right now," he said.

Although the department has 75 members, only 40 to 45 are active, according to Place. A decade ago, the department handled about 700 calls per year, but that number is expected to exceed 1,000 this year, he said.

With the state increasing training mandates and volunteers facing growing demands from job and family commitments, the department needs help recruiting and retaining members, Place said.

Place said the department holds appreciation parties and offers a program that gives members length-of-service pay, but a per-call payment system would provide a much-needed incentive, he added.

Although most the state's 900 fire departments are run by volunteers, many of them provide per-call payments and a growing number are hiring full-time chiefs, Place said.

"I don't believe we have a lot of time right now to wait," Place told the board.

Board members said they empathized with the department's dilemma and supported holding the referendum. Place was asked to present an updated recommendation to the Public Safety Committee for further review.

"It's a matter of coming up with the expectation that's reasonable," Village President Jim Brunnquell said. "Let's move forward and get it on a referendum."

Trustee Jim Grant, chairman of the Public Safety Committee, urged Place to hold public informational meetings and contact leaders of other local volunteer groups to spread the word about the department's needs.

"We'll do what we have to do to get the word out," Place responded.

Last month, 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.

The deadline for placing a referendum question on the Nov. 6 ballot is Sept. 17, Hofland said.

Hofland said the exact impact on taxpayers of increasing the department's operating budget by

$285,165 cannot be determined until this fall, when the state provides tax levy limits. However, he estimated the village's share of the cost would result in a $39 property-tax increase on a $250,000 house.