

Voters say yes to fire referendum

Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
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Village, town residents approve spending plan that gives department \$410,085 more annually to hire personnel

A referendum asking Grafton residents to spend \$410,085 annually to upgrade their all-volunteer fire department was overwhelmingly approved by voters in the village and town Tuesday.

The referendum, which asked residents in each municipality for permission to exceed state-imposed levy limits, was approved by 64% of village voters (4,170 to 2,297) and 55% of town voters (1,498 to 1,204).

The money will provide \$105,000 for a full-time fire chief and \$305,085 for part-time emergency medical technicians to be on call from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. weekdays, per-call payment of \$20 for firefighters and emergency medical responders, and training.

The vote also changes the department from private, nonprofit status to a village department that will be hired by the town for service.

"It's going to position us to provide a higher level of service," said Grafton Fire Chief John Place, whose department requested the referendum in response to problems attracting and retaining members.

"To have somebody there day to day to handle phone calls, help out with fire and rescue calls and manage things is going to be a really big plus."

Village voters agreed to spend \$246,051, or 60% of the total cost increase, while town voters approved spending \$164,034, the other 40%. Those shares are based on proportions of the department budget currently paid by each municipality.

Passage of the referendum will mean property tax increases in each municipality. In the village, the owner of a home assessed at \$250,000 will pay \$55.46 more in taxes annually. A town resident owning a \$250,000 home will pay \$77.08 more per year.

Department officials said the changes — which will go into effect Jan. 1, 2013 — were needed to maintain a high level of service, including shortening response times to emergency calls. Grafton has one of the few all-volunteer fire departments for a community of its size in Wisconsin.

The department reported responding to 1,007 calls in 2011, an increase of 35% from 10 years ago. Nearly 800 of those calls were for emergency medical services.

The department also performs more than 1,200 fire code-building inspections annually. Officials said that number has continued to grow during the past decade because of increased development.

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Place said he was hopeful but uncertain the referendum would pass in both communities.

“I was not sure. I didn’t have any big negative feedback, but you never know,” he said.

“For the most part, what I was getting was that people were supportive once you explained things to them.”