

Shifting fire protection charge to utility bill draws citizen protest

The payoff for the penny-pinching ways of Village of Saukville officials became apparent last week, when the Village Board approved a 2010 budget that will result in village taxes dropping 31 cents per \$1,000 of equalized value.

The bad news, village officials learned, is that the overall tax rate will rise 37 cents per \$1,000.

The tax rate was approved at \$17.50 per \$1,000 of property value, including a state school credit of \$1.56 per \$1,000. Last year's net rate was \$17.13 per \$1,000.

The most significant increase in the rate came from the Port Washington-Saukville School District, which boosted the rate by 56 cents per \$1,000 of valuation.

Portions of the village are in two other school districts, resulting in three different net tax rates.

Owners of village homes in the Grafton School District will see their equalized tax rate jump 96 cents, to \$19.02 per \$1,000. Last year's net rate was \$18.12 per \$1,000.

The school district added \$1.15 to the new tax rate.

Homeowners in the Northern Ozaukee School District will see a 74 cent drop in their net tax rate, to \$17.64 per \$1,000 of equalized value.

The school district share of that tax rate dropped 55 cents from last year.

The final numbers on local tax bills will be adjusted by State Lottery and First Dollar credits, which are calculated by school district.

Those combined credits are: Port Washington-Saukville School District, \$135.30; Grafton School District, \$158.64; Northern Ozaukee School District, \$137.40.

Village officials noted they have limited control over the tax bill's overall bottom

Cost-cutting means lower village tax rate

Written by Mark Jaegar

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line during last week's public hearing on the budget, but they pointed to several measures taken to hold village taxes in check.

Among the moves was a negotiated contract with the village's two unions offering no pay increases for the coming year. That freeze was also implemented for all management employees.

Another personnel move, reducing Community Development Director Brian Biernat's job to 30 hours a week, caught the attention of South Claremont Road resident Brian Peschel during the hearing.

"I commend the board for thinking outside the box. Who among us is getting a raise this year? It may not be great news for Brian, but it makes sense for the village," Peschel said.

Still, he criticized the board's decision to take the charge for fire protection off the tax levy, only to pass it along to residents on their quarterly water bill. The move will result in the average homeowner paying \$112 more in utility charges.

The fire protection charge covers the cost of maintaining fire hydrants and supply lines.

"It looks great that the budget is dropping, the levy is down, but you are adding user fees. My property taxes are going down \$93, but I won't be able to claim the charge as a deduction on my income tax," Peschel said.

"It sounds great, but fees are going up more than the property taxes are going down."

Village Administrator Dawn Wagner said the transfer of the fire protection charge kept the village from having to cut services to meet the board's no-increase tax directive.

Village President Barb Dickmann said the move was one way for the village to stay within the state-imposed levy limits.

"I wouldn't say anyone on this board is a proponent of raising fees. We just needed to find a way to make it all work," Dickmann said.

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She characterized the board's budget sessions as "sobering."

Trustee Bob Hamann, who is chairman of the Utility Committee, said the fire-protection charge wasn't moved without careful consideration.

"I argued with myself over this, but I had to support it when Barb (Dickmann) asked us to find any other way to make the budget work," Hamann said.

The budget is under the state's levy limit requirement and meets the Expenditure Restraint Program.

The village's operating and capital budget of \$3.4 million represents a 6% decrease from last year.

The village's tax levy of \$2,451,081 is down 5.8%.

For the owner of a home valued at \$200,000, the village's share of the tax bill will drop \$62.