

Road concerns linger with budget

Written by MARK JAEGER

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Restricted spending keeps town levy in check, but residents say deferred projects will cost community

Town of Saukville officials continued their austerity push with the 2013 budget, but not all town residents at Monday's budget hearing liked what they saw.

Specifically, objections were raised to how the recent series of tight budgets have played havoc with town roads.

Jeff Opitz, who operates a dairy farm on Shady Lane Road, noted that the town spent only about \$6,000 of the \$35,000 allocated for roads this year.

"You have 40 miles of road and if you aren't budgeting to repair one mile a year, eventually you are going to end up borrowing for it. This can't go on," Opitz said.

He tried to figure out how much cash balance the town had available that could be applied to deferred road work, but said the budget documents failed to show the cash on hand.

"The problem is that amount changes from week to week as the bills come in," Town Chairman Barb Jobs said.

"All I can tell you is if we are lucky this winter, we will end the year in the black."

Jobs said the town put off scheduled work on Blueberry Road this year after an engineering estimated the project would cost much more than the town had available.

Noting that road reconstruction costs about \$100,000 a mile, she said the town has tried to do a major road project every other year.

Sensing a sentiment to increase the amount the town allocates for roadwork, Jobs said the decision was in the hands of the electors at the budget hearing.

"If you want to raise the levy by \$100,000, you can make that decision tonight. The state says that is not something the board can do without the voters approving it," she said.

Jobs said making such an adjustment to the tax levy beyond state-established levy limits would affect future state aids.

"If we raise the tax rate now, we'll get dinged for a year but then that money will be available for future budgets," Opitz said.

"We know \$35,000 a year is a silly number if you have to maintain 40 miles of roads. Eventually you are going to end up with dirt roads," said David Brunnquell, who lives on Highway W.

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Jobs agreed that the town roads have been a victim of the recent tight budget.

“We all know this approach is unsustainable,” she said.

Supr. Kate Smallish said the budget pinch is a sign of the times.

“We have to hope times change and the economy improves. Maybe someday we will be able to raise our taxes,” Smallish said.

Several residents suggested the town save money by turning to private contractors for snow plowing, but Jobs doubted a contractor could handle that challenge.

Noting how dependent people have become on the county keeping roads cleared in the winter, she said, “I don’t want to get those calls” if a contractor fails to open roads soon after a snowfall.

Despite the rumblings, residents backed the proposed tax levy of \$401,156 without any additional money for road work.

The levy increase amounted to .003%.

Spending is projected at \$545,556, a decrease of about \$6,000.

After the Town Board unanimously approved the budget following the hearing, the 2013 tax rate was set at \$1.97 per \$1,000 of assessed valuation.

That represents an increase of three cents per \$1,000, and was attributed to the town’s reduced tax base.

For the owner a home valued at \$200,000, the new rate means town taxes will raise by \$6 — to \$394.