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Second levy info session takes place

Patrick Rhonemus The Gazette

WESTFIELD CENTER - Several residents attended the second levy information session for the upcoming fire district operating levy that will be placed on the November general election ballot.

Monday's info session was held to allow voters the chance to learn more about the levy so they can make an informed decision in November.

The proposed levy is a five-year, 2.5-mill operating levy. Westfield Township Trustee Michael Schmidt said the trustees and fire chiefs determined the need for the additional funding based on the operating budget review and the capital spending plan.

"By using these numbers as a guide, we determined the dollar figure required to run the district at current operating levels for the next several years," he said. "Then projected operating cost increases in future capital spending."

If passed, Township Fiscal Officer Melissa Kurtz said the levy would generate about \$522,700 per year for the next five years.

"That total comes from what we will receive in property taxes from our township homeowners, in the amount of \$310,000," she said.

The remaining \$212,700 is paid by Westfield Center, through its general fund for fire and EMS service.

Kurtz said each homeowner in Westfield Township, unincorporated, would pay an additional property tax cost of \$87.50 per year based on a home valued at \$100,000.

"The fire chief and the trustees project that this new levy will fund the district adequately for the next five years or longer, barring any unexpected crisis," she said. "The hope is that by adjusting the budget, monitoring and replacing the apparatuses needed in today's economy, while it is hard to project what the future might bring, we will continue to work hard within our budget to be responsible and will not need to be requesting money in the near future."

Kurtz said that as of June, the district's capital reserve funds are \$67,872.

Trustee Craig Horner said the trustees and fire district want to keep what they currently have while preparing for the future.

"We need to retain our dedicated fire staff that we have," he said.

Horner said they want to provide the service that residents deserve and expect. He said Westfield Township is an aging area, with 55 percent of adults older than 55. The department has not missed

a call in over a year. He said he wants to continue serving those in the community as well as possible.

Westfield Fire Chief Jeff Hall said since last year the district has obtained \$46,647 in grants. However, they have lost access to some grants because of the grants requiring a monetary match, something the district cannot do. He said the district has sold equipment that the department doesn't need to generate more funds. Hall said his goal is to downsize the equipment to better match the district's needs.

Hall said if the levy does not pass, the district will ask voters for support again in the future, which may be at a higher millage. He said there may be additional cuts that are being considered, including reducing on-duty staffing to 12 hours a day, instead of the current 24-hour coverage. This could cause longer response times, asking for more mutual aid, and loss of revenue.

The goal of the levy is not for full-time staffing. Hall said there have been rumors going around that the district is a full-time fire department. He said every position in the district is part time, except the fire chief. He thanked the part-time firefighters for their service to the department and community.

"When time is of the essence, these folks are the ones that do the job," he said. "I just want to try to get them the safest equipment to be able to perform their jobs."

Trustee Kent Patterson said that trustees are going to do everything they can to operate the fire district in a manner that is fiscally responsible.

Though residents of Westfield Center do not vote on the township's levy, Village Council members Greg Oakes and Rick Robbs, as well as Mayor Tom Horwedel, attended the meeting to voice their support.

"We came for a reason because we do support this," Horwedel said. "We know that you need the money, we know that you have a new good chief, and even though it is going to cost us \$212,000 a year, we are hoping you pass it."

For more information on the levy and to see the presentation from Monday's levy work session, visit tinyurl.com/bdHz7d7j.

"When I retire, I want to leave the F&R district better than it was when I became chief," Hall said. "Right now, we are one significant incident away from breaking the bank."

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