



Frontline

Westerville Division of Fire Newsletter

Quarter 4 2015
Special Edition

Station 111
400 W. Main Street

Station 112
727 E. Schrock Road

Station 113
355 N. Spring Road

Emergencies
9-1-1

Non-emergencies
(614) 901-6600

The facts of the future in fire service

A MESSAGE FROM FIRE CHIEF, BRIAN MILLER



Fire Chief Brian Miller

the community, and we're working hard to assure that level of service continues.

The Westerville Division of Fire meets National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standards for response times, with an average response time just under 4 minutes. WFD has been evolving for many years, and the decision points we face ahead suggest ongoing change.

We began to offer a higher level of fire protection when we introduced compressed air foam systems (CAFS) in 2005. For emergency medical services, we were the first department in the state of Ohio to use C-PAP devices to treat patients with respiratory illnesses. We have also deployed a new device on our Medic vehicles which automates the chest compression on patients in cardiac arrest. WFD implemented a basic life support (BLS) squad in 2007 to reduce our use of fire trucks responding to medical emergencies while at the same time providing a better service to residents keeping our advanced life support (ALS) vehicles in service more frequently.



accomplished with our mission in mind, to develop innovative concepts providing cost-effective services that are responsive to the needs of the community.

Now we're facing new-generation needs and service demands

By now, Westerville residents may have heard or read about an impending levy for fire protection and emergency medical services for Westerville and Blendon Township. As Fire Chief, I feel it is important to reach out and explain the need for this levy, expected to be on your ballot Tuesday, March 15, 2016. I am very proud of the high quality service the Fire Division provides to

that we must meet in a fiscally responsible manner. Demand for fire, rescue and EMS services has steadily grown every year for several decades and technology is ever changing. WFD has utilized every available resource to meet changing demands, which has enabled us to keep our promise of carefully managing fiscal resources from the 2010 2.6 mill levy to last a full six years. This was accomplished despite those tax revenues running over \$600,000 less per year than projected by the County.

The facts of our future are these:

Increased Demand For Emergency Medical Services. Demand for EMS continues to steadily rise with a 12% growth in call activity between 2008 and 2014. The Fire Service as a profession is changing, with more need and focus on responsibilities to perform as firefighters, fire inspectors and emergency medical technicians. WFD's ability to respond quickly and start a life-saving assessment,



action and/or transfer is something we want to protect in this community.

Changing Face of Fire Protection. With the construction of new homes and commercial buildings, many prevention strategies are in place, such as fire/smoke alarms and sprinkler systems in some commercial buildings. However, WFD will still be at-the-ready to provide fire protection services when they are needed.

Increased Demand For Fire Inspections. As a result of our population and commercial growth, the increased demand for fire inspection services is important. We want our buildings, structures, restaurants, shopping centers and other community facilities safe for occupancy. In 2014, nearly 2,500 commercial inspections were conducted, which is a number we expect to sharply rise as new business enters the community.

Disaster Preparedness. We live in a time when this is a necessity. Our preparation and training for a variety of disasters, natural or otherwise, is the responsibility of WFD as your public safety agency. In fact, the 2014 citizen survey showed most residents are concerned about this topic and want to know the department is well-prepared.

Facts, continued...

EMS Prevention and Community Paramedicine. Westerville, like the rest of America is aging, resulting in more chronic health and age-related conditions requiring medical attention. Prevention, which is a core function on the fire side of the operation, will now begin to surface as a need and responsibility on the EMS side. This may include programs to reach out to certain vulnerable sub-populations in the community to provide education and technical assistance in health maintenance, including programs for issues such as fall prevention.

Aged Equipment. Purchasing a basic fire pumper is a major investment with engines running anywhere from \$500,000 to \$700,000 and ladder trucks as much as \$1.2 million. As illustrated above, our philosophy is always to refurbish apparatus when possible. However, sometimes that's simply not possible and equipment ages out and becomes obsolete or worse yet, it becomes unsafe for active duty. Within the next six years, it will be critical to replace one engine/rescue and potentially two engines. EMS vehicles will be refurbished or replaced as needed within that cycle's time period.

Our Need to Maintain Service Levels

A 2.8 mill levy request allows us to continue to meet our mission of providing these and more services, as the profession and community continue to evolve.

The 2010 voter approved 2.6-mill operating levy for Fire and EMS operating costs was utilized the entire projected term of six years, as promised. Prior to that, the last fire levy passed in 2002 extended funding by two years beyond its proposed six-year cycle due to prudent fiscal management.

Passage of 2.8 mills assures continuation of current service levels through 2022. This allows the Westerville Division of Fire to maintain required staffing levels in consideration of expected growth in call volume.

This funding would annually cost a homeowner approximately \$98.00 per year for every \$100,000 of market value or \$8.17 per month.

Passage of this levy is considered vital to the overall operation of the Fire Division. On behalf of the men and women of the Westerville Fire Division, you have our commitment to excellent service with the same sound financial management that has already extended existing funding.

Questions and Answers



What is the 2.8 mill property tax issue Westerville and Blendon Township is proposing? The Westerville Division of Fire, which provides fire protection and emergency medical service (EMS) to the residents and businesses of Westerville and Blendon Township, is funded by a series of dedicated, voter-approved property tax levies. Due to state law, the rate of these levies is reduced over time so that the revenues generated by the levy do not increase as the value of properties increase. Therefore, as the cost of delivering these services increases (personnel, supplies, materials, equipment, etc.), we must periodically seek an increase in the approved tax levy rates to cover the cost of inflation.

When was the last funding request? Voters in the City and Township last approved funding for Fire and EMS in May 2010 when they approved a 2.6 mill levy.

What is the duration of the proposed levy? The requested 2.8 mill levy is proposed as a new permanent or "continuing" levy under Ohio law. All Fire/EMS levies approved by Westerville voters since 1977 have been permanent levies, with the exception of one. In 2002, voters approved a 0.2 mill bond issue for 20 years to fund construction of Station 112 on Schrock Rd. It expires in 2022 when the debt issued to construct this facility is paid off.

If this funding request is approved, how long can we expect it last before new funds are requested? The City and Township have tried to make Fire/EMS levies last at least six years. That was the commitment in 2010 when voters approved the 2.6 mill levy. Prior to that, in 2002, voters approved a 3.4 mill operating levy that was promised to last for six years. However, a new funding request was not made until 2010 (two years longer than promised).

If approved, when would the tax begin? With voter approval, it would be payable with the first property tax bill in 2017.

How much am I currently paying for this service? What will this increase cost me? Property owners are paying approximately \$350 per year for Fire and EMS services for every \$100,000 of home market value. If voters approve this levy request, they will pay an additional \$98 per year, or \$8.17 per month, for every \$100,000 of home value.

Won't the state cover some of this tax increase with the Homestead Exemption and Rollback? No. Up until this year, the state of Ohio would provide qualifying homeowners a reduction of up to 12.5% of the property tax bill and would remit that amount to local taxing jurisdictions from the state's General Fund to make up the difference. As of the most recent state budget bill passed in 2015, this no longer applies to new tax levies going forward. Furthermore, the elimination of the tangible personal property tax by the Ohio General Assembly has eliminated this value (mostly attributed to business equipment) from the tax rolls, increasing the burden on residential property owners.

How has local tax support for this service increased over time? In 2002, voters approved a 3.4 mill levy for Fire and EMS that enabled the Fire Division to reach recommended staffing levels. In the 12 years that followed (2003-2015), tax revenues grew by an annual average rate of 2.275%. After adjusting for inflation during this period, the Fire Division's level of tax support is slightly less today than it was in 2003. A significant part of this impact is attributable to the state's elimination of tangible personal property taxes on business and industry. The last year this tax was in effect was 2011. At its peak in 2007, it generated \$864,078, nearly the equivalent of 1 mill in property taxes.

Are there any projected building, equipment or staff additions anticipated within the proposed levy? There are no major additions planned within the next six years. The focus will be on maintaining current facilities (some of which are now 30 years old), replacing current, aging equipment and apparatus, and maintaining staffing levels. In the past six years, funds projected by the 2010 levy did not completely materialize due to an unanticipated drop in property values and increased delinquencies. This caused a reduction annually of between \$600,000 - \$700,000 in projected levy income and resulted in the deferral of certain capital projects and the reduction by attrition of four full-time positions. No projects are planned during this levy cycle to require the issuance of debt.

Why is this funding request necessary? In addition to the impact of inflation in operations, the overall response activity is steadily growing. This is due to a steady increase in calls for rescue and EMS. For example, in 2014, the Fire Division responded to 562 more EMS calls than they did in 2008: an increase of 12%. Also, the Division now operates with three fewer full-time firefighter/paramedics than authorized due to the elimination of tangible personal property taxes, a reduction in anticipated property tax revenues due to delinquencies and a slight drop in assessed value.

What will happen if the 2.8 mill levy does not pass? If the tax issue fails, steadily increasing costs of providing Fire and EMS service will continue to erode the value of the fixed revenues currently received. This will ultimately necessitate a reduction in services: fewer firefighters/paramedics and older, less reliable equipment. Facility maintenance will decline and fire stations will deteriorate without needed repairs and improvements.

You can find more information and links to your respective County's Board of Elections at www.westerville.org/vote. Inquiries may also be directed to Fire Chief Brian Miller at (614) 901-6606 or via e-mail at brian.miller@westerville.org.

