

The Truth - Local News

Mason/Porter (Mich.) townships: Fire chief says tax increase critical

Service may be scaled back if millage denied

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Truth Regional Reporter

If the millage request sought by Southeast Public Safety Authority flatlines in the Aug. 7 election, like it did in 2006, Porter Township Fire and EMS will change.

"If we don't get additional funding, we will be forced to face scaling back our service," Mike Holdeman, Porter fire chief, said.

"The first thing we will have to do is remove a vehicle from service -- a fire truck or ambulance. Second, we will have to lay off our paid staff and rely solely on volunteers. We have had a difficult time getting volunteers who are available during the day, as most have full-time jobs," Holdeman said.

"We can continue this way for a while before we will have to lose service altogether," he said.

The authority, a "special purpose government entity" formed in 2004 to provide and oversee fire protection and emergency medical services for Mason and Porter townships, now has no millage funding. The authority is funded by Mason and Porter townships' general funds.

Voters will be asked to approve 2 mills, the equivalent of \$2 for every \$1,000 of taxable valuation. In 2006, the authority asked for 2.25 mills, but voters turned it down by a total count (both townships) of 516 no to 267 yes.

"Our funding comes from the townships. We get a portion of property tax money, as well as a portion of the township's revenue sharing. Our funding problems are partially due to the state's revenue sharing cuts," Holdeman said. This year's Porter Fire and EMS budget is \$209,000 to cover the southern two-thirds of Porter Township and all of Mason Township. The authority negotiates a contract with Newberg Township for fire and EMS coverage for the northern one-third of Porter Township.

Income has declined drastically while operating expenses have increased, including fuel, insurance and equipment, and demands for the service have increased with the increase in residential growth, Holdeman said.

In 2006, Porter Fire and EMS combined made 490 runs to serve a combined population of just more than 6,300. Porter Fire has three part-time staff and 21 volunteers who answer calls 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

"I think the reason the millage failed last year was that few people had accurate information and most people honestly don't believe they are in danger of losing EMS service," Holdeman said.

"They may even lose their fire service. People don't realize we need more money to continue to operate," he said. The authority will require approximately \$1 million in apparatus within three years to be in compliance with federal regulations, according to authority documents.

"If residents lose their fire service, it will end up costing them more than the cost of the millage," Holdeman said, noting homeowner insurance premiums could increase between \$150 and \$500.

If the millage request is approved, Holdeman sees possibilities.

"We would have the finances to update equipment and services. We could add full-time EMTs and upgrade the ambulance service to limited advance life support. I would also like to install a storm siren," he said.

If the millage passes, Porter Township will retain the portion of the funds now going to the fire and ambulance service. "This means the township will have more funds to do things like repair roads," Holdeman said.

Additional Information:

The details

What: Southeast Public Safety Authority requests 2 mills in the Aug. 7 election.

Community meeting: Noon to 3 p.m. Aug. 4 at Porter Fire Station, 69401 Baldwin Prairie Road, Union.

Information: Call (269) 641-7100. Soon available online at <http://www.ptfd.org>, the Web site will include election information and a millage calculator to determine what you'd pay if the millage is approved. Two mills is figured as \$2 for every \$1,000 of taxable valuation you have.