

St. Charles Countryside FPD struggles economically

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Firefighter Steve Dries loads a hose after a training exercise in St. Charles. The St. Charles Fire Department is paid by St. Charles Countryside Fire Protection District to provide emergency services. (Sandy Bressner – sbressner@kcchronicle.com)

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ST. CHARLES – The St. Charles Countryside Fire Protection District is in a difficult position.

Faced with costs that are outpacing revenues, officials with the district know something must be done. They are trying to develop questions seeking direction from their constituents but believe the results would be obvious, said Robert Handley, Board of Trustee treasurer.

Would they pay more taxes? Would they want to dissolve the district? No, he said to both questions.

“It’s kind of a tough situation,” Handley said. “I don’t want to pay more taxes, and, by the same token, I don’t want to wait 15 minutes for a fire truck. It’s hard to determine where to go.”

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The St. Charles Countryside Fire Protection District is among 824 such districts throughout the state. They began forming in the early 1900s to better serve the unincorporated areas and small towns in Illinois.

The district here serves more than 20,000 residents in 50 square miles of rural area surrounding the City of St. Charles in Kane and DuPage counties. It covers St. Charles, Campton and Wayne townships.

Without a fire station of its own, the organization is what Handley called a paper district. It has a part-time administrator, accountant and lawyer. It pays the St. Charles Fire Department to provide emergency services.

Although representatives from both organizations spoke kindly of the district and department’s relationship, each noted some downsides.

Handley said the district is concerned about the amount of time it can take the fire department to respond, especially since the city’s population and traffic congestion has increased.

According to the district, the average response time in 2009 was 7.5 minutes. About 435 calls were responded to in less time, and 624 calls were responded to in more time.

“We have a lot of ground to cover,” Handley said.

“To make matters worse, we don’t have any water supply.”

The district and city are negotiating a new contract. Paying the city for fire and emergency medical services is becoming increasingly more expensive, Handley said. With a tax rate of 18 cents per \$100 of assessed valuation, he said, the district is limited in what it can pay the city.

“St. Charles has increased costs, and they’re looking for us to pay more money,” Handley said. “They know how much we have. They see where it goes. They get almost all of it.”

According to district documents, expenses are increasing by about 13 percent whereas revenues are increasing by about 2 percent each year. For fiscal year 2009-2010, the district allotted about \$1.8 million – or about 82 percent of its expenses – for contractual services. Its total proceeds were listed at \$2.1 million.

St. Charles Fire Chief Patrick Mullen said the district’s bill does not pay an amount equivalent to what it costs the city to provide the service. The district accounts for about 20 percent of the department’s total service demand, he said.

Mullen said he understands the district’s revenues are fixed but noted the department also has its own financial problems.

“If we’re struggling with our own issues to sustain our services, we can’t afford to be giving someone a break, the burden of which is borne by the taxpayers,” Mullen said.

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Voters last year defeated the district’s referendum that would have nearly doubled its tax rate and enabled the district to build a fire station on land it bought several years ago.

“It’s clear the constituents don’t want us to spend any more money,” Handley said.

And so, in discussions since, the trustees have considered asking the voters what the district should do.

Its Citizens Advisory Board is working with the district’s attorney on possible advisory referendum questions for the upcoming November election. The results could lead to a binding referendum next spring, officials have said.

During the May trustee meeting, officials said a referendum question could ask voters whether they want the district to dissolve. That’s an action Handley said the trustees would rather not do.

“It’s not our intent to dissolve the district,” he said.

“We just want to be able to pay our fair share and provide the best service we can provide with what we have. We are a pretty frugal organization.”

Cheri Breneman is the administrator of the Illinois Association of Fire Protection Districts. She said the dissolution of districts is rare; consolidation and annexation are more common.

When asked what happens to residents in a district that dissolves, she turned to the association’s Handbook for Trustees as reference. It outlines the guidelines dictated in the state’s Fire Protection District Act. According to the handbook, the state fire marshal may, under certain circumstances, assign property to a district if it is not in one.

Handley said he believes voters wouldn’t want the district to dissolve because the response times could worsen and because the tax rates for each of the neighboring districts is at least three times more.

Elburn & Countryside Fire Protection District’s is about 62 cents, South Elgin & Countryside Fire Protection District’s is about 56 cents and West Chicago Fire Protection District’s is about 65 cents.

However, comparing those districts with St. Charles Countryside on tax rate alone is unfair because they are not paper districts. They have their own fire stations, equipment and staff.

The St. Charles Countryside district has until August to decide on – if any – a referendum question for the November ballot.

Response calls

Number of emergency response calls the St. Charles Fire Department handled for the St. Charles Countryside Fire Protection District in 2009.

- 704 emergency medical service
- 131 false alarms
- 98 good intent
- 55 hazardous condition
- 38 service calls
- 26 fire