

Cost of fire referendum to be determined

By BETHANY KRAJELIS - bkrajelis@kcchronicle.com

ST. CHARLES – The price tag on an upcoming referendum seeking faster emergency response times might be finalized next week.

The St. Charles Countryside Fire Protection District board will meet Monday to determine details of an April referendum question that will ask voters whether expanding the district's services is worth an increase in their property taxes.

The increase would fund a new fire station in the 34-square-mile district that includes Campton, St. Charles and Wayne townships. District officials believe an additional station would help decrease emergency response times.

“We highly encourage the public to attend,” said Ed Malek, board president. “This is something they need to understand ... we need their help and support.”

The meeting will take place at 7 p.m. Monday in the training room at the Century Station, 112 N. First Ave. in St. Charles.

Residents in 2004 voted down a similar referendum, but Malek said the district did not educate the public and was asking for two new stations, compared to the one it is seeking this time around.

The district contracts with the city of St. Charles for the use of its equipment, firefighters and fire stations. Tri-City Ambulance provides ambulance service in the district.

St. Charles has three stations and is in the process of replacing its downtown facility, a project tabbed at nearly \$5 million. Malek estimated last month that the district's proposed station may cost about \$2.5 million.

In anticipation for the April referendum question, the district conducted a survey of 600 of the district's 20,000 plus residents. The survey, “How Long Is Too Long,” gauged residents' knowledge of response times and desire for increased public safety.

About 80 percent of the respondents were unaware of the 11-minute average response time, according to survey results. The majority believed five to seven minutes was an acceptable time.

Within five minutes of a fire breaking out, Malek said a house can be engulfed in flames. A person who has not been breathing for five minutes can sustain brain damage, he added.

The district received 1,085 emergency calls in 2007. More than 500 were for emergency medical services, and about 40 were for structural fires.