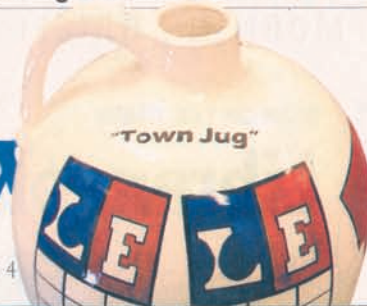


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PUBLIC SAFETY

Residents: Emergency response times too long

BY DAVID GIALANELLA
Staff Writer

Steve Catlin, a member of the St. Charles and Countryside Fire Protection District's Citizen Advisory Council, recently got a firsthand test of emergency response times in the north end of the district.

Catlin was at a Saturday morning meeting months ago when his wife called to tell him the couple's St. Charles Township home smelled like gas. He rushed home and found that, sure enough, it did, he said.

"I called 911 immediately," said Catlin, 63, of Ferson Woods Drive. "Everything got resolved, but I was a little surprised about how long it took

them to get here. I never thought of myself as being that far away from the station."

Catlin's not alone in thinking response times aren't what they should be, according to resident survey results recently released by the district.

More than 80 percent of the 600 respondents were unaware that the average response time in the district is 11 minutes. Nearly 83 percent said nothing less than seven minutes would be acceptable. The district reported response times upward of 13 minutes in the far north, where Catlin lives.

Officials said they had an inkling that residents wanted better.

"There was a sense that the

response time was longer than it needed to be," said SCCFPD Board President Ed Malek in a recent telephone interview. "We were concerned that residents didn't know. We wanted to find out what their expectations were. It reenforced something we expected — we need to get apparatuses (fire stations) closer to their homes."

By contract, emergency personnel from the City of St. Charles handle calls for the entire 34-square-mile district, serving St. Charles, Campton and Wayne townships, along with areas in some nearby villages and a portion of DuPage County. The City of St. Charles is not a part of the district.

The fire stations currently

are located in downtown, and on the east and west sides of the city.

Moving the east-side and west-side stations further north would be one way to balance out response times, but such measures haven't been discussed yet, Malek said. Adding fire stations is another option.

"God knows nobody wants their taxes to go up, but if it's needed, we'll seriously consider a referendum in the near future," he said.

Malek added that it's important that residents employ better fire prevention practices. For instance, many survey respondents reported having only one smoke detector or none at all, while many cannot

operate a fire extinguisher.

Distance between fire stations and homes is not the only issue in the district, according to St. Charles Assistant Fire Chief Joe Schelstreet. There are no fire hydrants — and thus there is no access to a sustained water supply — in the rural areas.

The department has only one tanker truck, and that amount of water does not go far when firefighters are trying to control a house fire, he said. Other area departments can be called to respond with more tankers, but that takes even longer than the initial response, he said.

"Timing is everything in this business," Schelstreet said.