

St. Charles rural fire district weighs options  
By James Fuller | Daily Herald Staff

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The St. Charles Countryside Fire Protection District is poised for an all-or-nothing tax increase request to preserve its very existence, but officials from the city of St. Charles said Tuesday it doesn't have to be that way.

The district serving rural areas outside St. Charles has been served by the St. Charles Fire Department for more than 40 years. Recently, the money district residents pay the city for the fire protection hasn't kept pace with the city's increasing costs to provide it.

St. Charles Mayor Don DeWitte recently called on the district to pay its fair share. The district must decide by August if it wants to place a referendum on the November ballot.

The district is considering an advisory question about whether residents want the district to dissolve, or a binding question that would ask taxpayers for more money.

In reality, district Treasurer Bob Handley said those are really the same question.

"If we don't get more money, we don't have any alternative but to dissolve," Handley said. "What the city wants us to pay is more than we take in."

The district pays St. Charles about \$1.6 million a year for fire protection. But there are ongoing differences between the district and the city about what paying a fair share really means.

More than 20 percent of the city's calls for fire protection come from residents in the district. The \$1.6 million the district pays the city covers less than 18 percent of the city's fire protection costs. But Handley said the financial gap does not reflect the service gap.

"What we pay probably isn't good enough, but on the other hand, we don't get the same kind of service that the city has," Handley said. "It's no fault of the city, but we don't have water and they have to travel long distances to respond to calls."

Handley pointed to the recent fire in Campton Hills that saw a home burn to the ground despite the efforts of firefighters.

"It was, we're here, but we've got one (water) tanker that lasts two minutes," Handley said. "Then they have to find a way to ferry more water in. The city looks at this as a black and white issue, but we've got some arguments."

If voters choose to dissolve the district, then it's possible the state fire marshal could choose to have the various residents of the district absorbed by other entities that provide fire protection. Some residents would be soaked up by St. Charles, others would go to Bartlett, West Chicago, Elburn or elsewhere depending on where they live.

Both Handley and St. Charles Fire Chief Patrick Mullen said the irony in that solution is that every entity that provides fire protection around the district already charges a higher tax rate for that fire protection.

In other words, if district residents vote to dissolve the district because they don't want their taxes to go up, they may very well end up paying more money anyway.

That choice would also trigger some changes in St. Charles. Mullen said the city would probably look at measures such as eliminating the equipment and staffing it uses for rural firefighting rather than simply lay off 20 percent of its firefighters.

But Mullen said it doesn't have to be that way. If district residents don't want to dissolve the district, but also don't want to pay more money, they just have to become comfortable with receiving less fire protection than they do now.

"The district could exist with some level of service below what is provided to them now," Mullen said. "If their ability to meet our cost increase isn't there, then that difference must be made up somewhere."

Fire: Residents might get fire protection from surrounding towns