

# State legislation may affect decision to dissolve St. Charles fire district

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Residents of the St. Charles Countryside Fire Protection District may want to follow the motions of Gov. Pat Quinn's pen before deciding if they want to dissolve the district.

State lawmakers sent Quinn a proposed new law Friday that will affect the ability of district residents to find new fire protection if their current district becomes extinct.

District trustees must decide by August if they want to put a referendum question on November ballots. A citizens' advisory board and the district's attorney, Ken Shepro, are working on a recommendation about what sort of question the trustees should put on the ballot.

Among the options is an advisory question asking residents if the district should dissolve. That's become an option after recent statements by city of St. Charles officials that the district isn't paying its fair share of the cost of fire protection services.

Up to now, the assumption, while awaiting legal clarity, has been if the district dissolves, the state fire marshal would step in and assign district residents fire protection services from another nearby municipality. However, state law cited by the fire marshal's office in an interview appears to make that impossible.

The law currently says the fire marshal can only step in if the residents of a dissolved district live in a county with a population fewer than 500,000 people. In other words, if the district dissolved today, residents would be on their own to petition or contract with another organization for fire protection. That may soon change.

On Friday, Fire Marshal spokesman Louis Pukelis said that may soon change thanks to a proposed new law, SB3722.

The law change would allow the fire marshal to assign residents of a dissolved fire protection district new coverage regardless of population. However, the municipality providing the new coverage can charge whatever it wants and must also pass a local ordinance accepting the fire marshal's assignment. If the municipality doesn't vote to accept the assignment, then the fire marshal must find another municipality willing to provide fire protection to the residents.

Shepro could not be immediately reached for comment Friday.