

Hiram Twp. residents, trustee question village fire district plan

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Ravenna Record-Courier USA TODAY NETWORK

Hiram Village has proposed a joint fire district with the township, but one trustee calls the proposal “a slap in the face to the township.”

The village’s proposal was posted May 20 on its website and Facebook. Fire Chief Anthony Marotta referred questions to Mayor Anne Haynam, who declined comment, stating that it is too early in negotiations.

But residents are raising questions about the proposal, including how it would be funded, how the money would be use, and why a representative of Hiram College would have a seat on its board of directors. “I think it’s a slap in the face to the township,” Trustee Jack Groselle said. He added that the village would put in “10% of the money and have total control.”

Trustees previously gave the village 120 days notice that they intend to end their contract with the village for joint fire protection. The pact will end in July if an agreement is not reached sooner. “We’ve been trying to negotiate in good faith, and this isn’t good faith,” he said.

What’s in the proposal?

The “outline provided by the Village of Hiram for consideration by our residents and those in Hiram Township & their Trustees” proposes a five-member governing board to oversee all decisions. That board would consist of one village council member, one township trustee, one resident each from the village and township, and a fifth member from Hiram College.

One comment on social media asked if the college would contribute financially in exchange for a seat on the board.

Between existing levies and fire and EMS billing, Hiram Village is expected to receive \$539,252 to operate the fire department. Groselle said the majority of those funds come from township residents.

Over the past four years, the department has spent an average of \$444,025 annually. However, the proposal says, “based on the Village’s perspective that onsite coverage has been unacceptably low and that we need more personnel to increase coverage and reduce overtime dependence,” a proposed budget of \$609,000 would leave the department \$70,000 short each year.

The proposal suggests “more diligent grant writing,” and dipping into a “pooled balance” of \$741,200 of unappropriated funds.

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Trustee Jack Groselle

“They are not required to be used for capital. Thus these funds could be used for any fire/EMS-related need,” the proposal states.

Groselle said the pooled balance is meant to be set aside for equipment needs, such as a new fire truck, and the proposal would have those funds gone within a decade.

How does a fire district work?

For Hiram Village and Hiram Township to form a joint fire district, all that is needed is a vote from both the Village Council and the township’s Board of Trustees, Groselle said. Garrettsville, Freedom and Nelson have a joint fire district. Mantua, Mantua Township and Shalersville also have a joint fire and EMS district serving its communities.

Groselle said while he’s not opposed to a joint district for his neighboring communities, he thinks Hiram is too small to make a fire district work.

A fire district, he said, would require an attorney, fiscal officer and an auditor to review finances annually. If board members are paid, that’s more money that would be spent on administration, he added.

“I don’t want a fire district because that’s money to get fire trucks and squads out in the community,” he said.

How are negotiations going?

Groselle said the village and township haven’t been able to work out an agreement for the entities to stay together as one fire department.

However, the township’s newest trustee, Dan Ellenberger, is scheduled to meet with Village Council President Chris Perme.

“I have very little hope it gets anywhere, but you never know,” he said.

Groselle said he has seen seven mayors over the years, and there has been no conflict between the village and township until now.

The two governments recently had a joint meeting, and Groselle said someone said “change is hard.”

“I don’t want change to be expensive,” he said. “I don’t want change to mean we have less services. Change may not be as good as people think.”