

March 13, 2019

The Versailles Town Council and The Johnson Township Board of Trustees held the second of three public hearings on the proposed fire territory on March 13, 2019. Town Council president Steve Mathes called the meeting to order at 7 p.m. Steve asked that those in attendance listen to the presentation, and hold all questions until the end.

Fire Chief Ben Sieverding gave an updated presentation on the Versailles Volunteer Fire Department. Chief Sieverding presented the incidents and response numbers for VVFD and Delaware Volunteer Fire Department, and a breakdown of those calls. Chief Sieverding explained the importance of maintaining a good ISO rating, and expressed concern for the department's aging fleet of vehicles. Chief Sieverding presented the expenditures, and the tax revenues for the years 2008-2018. In the past ten years, the VVFD has raised \$579,939.55. Chief Sieverding's presentation can be viewed on the Town's website townofversailles.com.

Paige Sansone from Baker Tilly accounting firm (formerly Umbaugh and Associates) gave a presentation explaining the proposed fire territory. Ms. Sansone explained that the deadline to adopt the fire territory is March 31, 2019. The maximum tax impact rate is now 5.3% for the Town of Versailles, and 8% for Johnson Township, due to the reduction in the budget. The rate can be reduced, but can never exceed the maximum. The final hearing will be March 26, at 7 p.m. The two boards can vote immediately following the meeting, or they can table the vote up until March 31. Town Council President Steve Mathes will be out of town for the March 26 Meeting, so the Versailles Town Council will vote on March 31, at 1 p.m. at the Versailles Town Hall. The Johnson Township Board of Trustees has not yet determined the time and place of their vote. Ms. Sansone's presentation can be viewed on the Town's website at townofversailles.com.

Versailles Town Council Vice-President Roxanne Meyer presented the property tax rates for 25 towns and townships with similar population to the Town of Versailles and Johnson Township- 12 with higher population, and 12 with lower population. Of those 25 towns, Versailles ranks currently at the 3rd lowest tax rate, and would fall to 4th lowest with the maximum proposed rate increase. Of the 25 townships, Johnson is currently the 7th lowest, and would drop to 10th lowest with the maximum proposed rate increase.

Versailles Town Council President Steve Mathes opened the floor for questions.

Q: Why did the rate decrease from the previous meeting?

A: The budget was decreased due to the removal of funding for ambulance service which Ripley County is responsible for.

Q: What has the fire department done since the last meeting to raise funds?

A: Chief Sieverding: "We are working on a FEMA grant, and we have collected donations from calendar distributions."

Q: Is it true that you gave those calendars to friends and family instead of distributing them?

A: Chief Sieverding: "That is absolutely untrue."

Q: What about charging a flat tax rate, or charging membership fees?

A: A flat tax rate can not legally be charged, nor can a forced membership fee.

Q: What is the final bill for Umbaugh/Baker Tilly's services? Isn't that public record?

A: The agreement is that the services will not exceed \$20,000, and it will be billed at the end of this engagement. The cost will be billed to the VVFD, and shared equally by the Town of Versailles and Johnson Township. If the fire department chooses to ask for services beyond this engagement, a separate bill will be sent. However, this particular engagement cannot exceed \$20,000.

Q: The township has no representation. All of the township board members live in town.

A: Anyone that lives in Johnson Township is eligible to run for the board. The three board members are representatives of Johnson Township.

Comment: "The County needs to pitch in more money for EMS runs, and show more support."

Chief Sieverding: "The fire department is all emergency, we come when we are called."

Q: Are you creating an executive board?

A: Yes.

Q: Why does the proposed fire territory only include Johnson Township and The Town of Versailles?

A: Two neighboring communities have to mutually agree to enter into a fire territory.

Q: Is everyone in Johnson Township covered by the VVFD?

A: No, the Northern part of the township is serviced by Delaware VFD.

Q: Why isn't a cell phone sufficient for each firefighter? Why do they need pagers?

A: Chief Sieverding: "Cell phones don't always work, there are places with dead zones where a call can not be placed or received."

Q: Why was a petition brought up? It seems like everyone is against this.

A: Steve Mathes: "Nobody is trying to hide anything, we need to be proactive to ensure fire services down the road."

Comment: "So the tax rate can't raise, but they can raise the value of your property to collect more tax."

Q: Is there any way this could have been advertised online? Some people don't get the paper, and weren't aware of the meetings.

A: It was advertised according to the State statute.

Q: Why do you have to vote by March 31, what is the rush?

A: The State statute requires that the proposed fire territory be adopted by March 31, 2019.

Q: What is the benefit for agricultural land owners?

A: Chief Sieverding: "I suggest taking it up with your State legislators."

Statement: "I believe you're asking the people of Johnson Township to fund the brunt of the funding without any increased benefits."

Q: If this passes, can it be rescinded?

A: Yes, if either body decides they are no longer in favor of the fire territory, it will be dissolved.

Q: Why is the tax rate in Johnson Township so low compared to other communities?

A: The levy was set in the 1970's. If that year the money wasn't needed, the levy was set low.

Q: How can 6 people be responsible for all of the citizens, and why can't this be addressed by the whole community?

A: Paige Sandstone: "The statute does not allow the issue to be put on the ballot or petition for a fire territory."

Steve Mathes: "This is not falling on deaf ears, we are listening to feedback."

Q: Have you learned what a budget audit is?

A: Steve Mathes: "The budget is right here on this table for anyone to view."

Q: Why does the township pay a higher rate?

A: The impact is higher to the township because the tax rate is higher.

Comment: "You need to look further down the road and have consideration of the community. Just bear in mind the elderly."

Q: Are all of the board members in attendance?

A: All three Versailles Town Council members, and two of the Johnson Township board members are present. The exception is Dennis Sanders, who is hospitalized.

Q: What if there is a tie vote?

A: There cannot be a tie. If the majority of either board votes against the proposed fire territory, it will not go forward.

Q: How will we know when the vote takes place?

A: If the vote does not take place immediately following the final meeting on March 26, the date and time of the vote has to be announced.

Q: How many of the Johnson Township board members were elected last fall?

A: All three board members were re-elected last fall, they were all unopposed.

Q: Is the only change to the presentation since the last meeting the lowering of the maximum rate?

A: Yes, as well as additional information presented by Chief Sieverding regarding the budget.

Q: So, there are no immediate plans to hire a full time staff?

A: Chief Sieverding: "There are no plans right now to hire a full-time staff. I can't speak for 20 years from now.

Q: At the previous meeting you spoke of a maximum 19% increase. Why isn't it that now?

A: Paige Sansone: "The proposed budget went down, so the tax payer impact was reduced."

Q: If the two boards vote to approve the fire territory, then change members, can it be approved, then dissolved, then reinstated?

A: If the fire territory is implemented, then dissolved, the two boards can vote to establish a brand-new fire territory, but the process would start all over.

Q: Why was the parking lot paved at the new fire house, but the department can't afford gloves or insurance?

A: Steve Mathes: "Grants are specific to the project. You can't ask for money for one thing and use it for another."

Q: Was there a majority vote by the department to pave the parking lot?

A: Chief Sieverding: "Yes."

Q: How many miles are on the trucks?

A: Chief Sieverding: "The rescue truck has around 100,000 miles, and the newer engine has around 65,000 miles.

With no further questions or comments, Town Council President Steve Mathes adjourned the meeting.