

March 26, 2019

The Versailles Town Council and The Johnson Township Board of Trustees held the third and final public hearing on the proposed fire territory on March 26, 2019. The meeting room reached maximum capacity, and several people were not permitted to enter the building. Deputy Marshal Eddie Rodriguez stood at the door, and several people became vocal. Three deputies from the Ripley County Sheriff's department came to assist. Town Council president Steve Mathes was absent, so the meeting was run by Council Vice President Roxanne Meyer. Council member Matt McNew and township board members Marilyn Hunt, Dennis Sanders and Carrie McNew were all in attendance. Roxanne called the meeting to order, and gave an opening statement. She asked for ideas for fundraisers, and asked that any questions be held to the end of the meeting.

Fire Chief Ben Sieverding gave a presentation on the proposed fire territory. Chief Sieverding gave statistics on the VVFD compared to other departments. The VVFD has an ISO rating of 5. Chief Sieverding reported on the aging vehicle fleet, and stressed the importance of funding. Chief Sieverding stated that he was attempting to get the maximum tax levy in place to insure the department's sustainability "long after I am gone". The VVFD has 29 members, and the cost to outfit each member is \$3,920.00. Chief Sieverding reported that in 2018 43.2% of the budget was funded by tax dollars, and gave a breakdown of how much of that money was from the town and the township.

Paige Sansone from Baker Tilly accounting firm (formerly Umbaugh and Associates) gave a presentation explaining the proposed fire territory. Ms. Sansone reiterated that a fire territory can only be formed by two subdivisions that touch borders, and both boards must approve unanimously for it to be voted in. Ms. Sansone gave the five year capital plan, explained the circuit breaker tax, and showed sample tax bills. She explained that the first year of the fire territory establishment would see the highest impact, and the following years will be minimal. She explained LIT and excise tax impact to the taxing units. March 31 is the deadline to adopt the proposed fire territory.

Roxanne Meyer opened the floor for questions

Tom Beatley- 3679 N. Co. Rd. 225 East- "Why is there no increase in local income tax? Are you saying I will not pay more income tax?"

Paige Sansone- "Local income tax is determined by the county. We use very conservative numbers when we put together these figures."

Mr. Beatley- "It is unfair that we in the Northern part of the county pay more than people in town. We are serviced by Delaware, Osgood, Milan, and then Versailles. Is there reimbursement to Delaware if they respond first?"

Chief Sieverding- "No, Delaware is funded by Johnson Township, it will come from the Fire Territory."

Kasserman- 2655 E. Co. Rd. 350 S. "I appreciate everything the fire department does. I just sold my business and would be happy to volunteer my time to help with fundraising. Does the \$20,000 (to pay for the study) come from the fire budget?"

Roxanne Meyer- "No, Johnson Township and the Town of Versailles are splitting the cost."

Ken Kasserman- "Mike Cord offered to sit down with Ben and help come up with some ideas to fund the fire Ken department. Most people have insurance. Ben, I'm not being mean, but bill everyone."

Chief Sieverding: "We do bill insurance, but we don't bill people that don't have adequate insurance. I don't think that is the Christian thing to do."

Ken Kasserman: "I agree, Johnson Township is bearing the brunt. I think we should have brought up different ideas before this. Other departments are living within their means. How many people are not for this? I don't think the board is representative of the people of the township. I think they have already made up their minds."

Roxanne Meyer- "I take exception to that, we have not made up our minds yet."

Ken Kasserman- "So, this is not forever? If you get a new township board and they vote against it, it's gone?"

Roxanne Meyer- "Yes, any year either the town or the township board can dissolve the fire territory."

Ken Kasserman- "That is important to know also."

Andi Richter- lives in the township- "The budget was not put on the website. What else is in the budget, and why aren't we seeing it? When would we know as taxpayers how much the budget is? I thought the fire department was paying the bill for Umbaugh."

Paige Sansone- "I didn't know who covered the cost. The fire department can get funding from other entities. The fire department budget is available. The tax rate will be in the notice of public hearing in the newspaper in the fall, by November 1."

Andi Richter- "I can't believe the ambulance service was taken out of the budget."

Chief Sieverding- "It was for EMS services, not ambulance. The county spoke to Steve and agreed to take the cost of EMS services out of the budget. We were trying to be forward thinking."

Attorney Larry Eaton handed the budget to Andi Richter.

Bob Brewington-Rt. 2, Milan- "You started looking at the wrong time. You should have asked for ideas before all of this. It sounds like the town doesn't get any increase, but they get more coverage."

Roxanne Meyer- "It depends, I suppose, residents of Versailles typically own a small piece of property."

Bob Brewington- "There needs to be a fair and equitable amount."

Roxanne Meyer- "We don't have control over what pieces of property are taxed at what rate. When we were first approached about this, there weren't any other options for stable funding. Your concerns have been taken seriously. I can't foresee the future, and I can't say who will be on the town or township board. I am still waiting for ideas."

Kim Jahnigan-1792 N U.S. 421 Osgood, IN- "So my taxes will raise, but my house will be covered by Osgood fire department?"

Chief Sieverding- "Yes, god forbid that ever happens."

Kathy Gray- "How dare you Ben. I take offense to that. My brother was killed in a fire and you know it. That was the most insensitive thing for you to say."

Kim Jahnigan- "How many first responders are there? What can they do? Can they ride in the ambulance?"

Chief Sieverding-“Most of them can, yes. Most of them are trained EMTs. If you call 911, they will call Osgood fire department to get to you first.”

Kim Jahnigan-“I’m thinking of fire, you do a lot of EMS runs compared to fighting fires, right?”

Chief Sieverding-“We answer the calls that we are dispatched for.”

Richard Stevens-“There is a certain level of care each EMT and paramedic can legally do.”

Kim Jahnigan- “I was told that Rick Pollard would do a fundraiser but Ben refused because there was alcohol there.”

Chief Sieverding-“That is not true. After the last meeting Rick spoke with me about a fundraiser and I told him that we would like to do that.”

Sandy Corfman-1162 Summerset # 27 Versailles IN-“Thank you to the fire department for helping with my husband. I live in a senior community, and if the taxes go up, we will all have to move because we can’t afford the increase passed down to the renters.”

Roxanne Meyer-“What kind of increase are you expecting?”

Sandy Corfman-“I heard it could be as much as 13%. I am on a fixed income.”

Roxanne Meyer- “That is not correct. I believe, Barney, we had a discussion about this.”

Barney Adams-“We pay around \$55,000 in taxes on apartments and duplexes.”

Roxanne Meyer-“How many units do you have?”

Barney Adams-“About 43 units.”

Roxanne Meyer-“The increase will be nowhere near 13%.”

Jeanette Brewington-Johnson Township-“You should budget for 10 years. Now you’re asking for \$200,000. I heard a lot of grant people will not consider giving money if you don’t have fundraisers.”

Roxanne Meyer-“They have done fundraisers.”

Chief Sieverding-“The \$200,000 budget is the maximum levy. We are trying to establish a levy for 20 years to come from now. We are not going to collect that full amount. The maximum town of Versailles levy is 5.3%, the maximum Johnson Township levy is 8%. That is what she has to show the state, the maximum budget. The budget we submit will be nowhere near \$200,000.

Roxanne Meyer-“Ben will continue to apply to the Tyson Fund. If there is a financial need, the Tyson Fund will fund it. The Township has benefited from the Tyson Fund for many years.”

Chief Sieverding-“We will continue to go after grants. The budget we submit will not be astronomical.”

Andrew Richter-Fern Drive, Versailles IN-“Is there any approach to the community to get funding for EMS runs?”

Chief Sieverding-“We still have to fund a fire department. It is an all hazard response unit.”

Andrew Richter-“We are upset that the community hasn’t had to provide more funding for EMS runs. Less than 40 runs are for fire.”

Chief Sieverding-“It would still cost the same amount of money, we are providing more services.”

Danny Meisberger-Harvest Ridge Versailles IN-“I think they should put the fire department back the way it was. The Town owned the trucks, paid for the building and the utilities. What was wrong with the fire department being in town?”

Roxanne Meyer-“Sue (Meisberger), I believe you were on the town council when the fire department parted ways with the town, maybe you can speak to that?”

Sue Meisberger- Harvest Ridge Versailles IN-“It was a total mess and I don’t want to talk about it.”

Roxanne Meyer-“It was totally out of our control, but it may be something we are forced to look into in the future.”

Steve Gemmer-Milan- “When you raise your rates, people are going to move out and it will affect my business. You have to look at the whole picture. Indiana has one of the highest tax rates in the country. Why can’t you float a bond to fund the fire department? Every other department has more fundraisers than Versailles, and they raise more money. What is considered an incident? When you pull a truck out of the driveway, is that an incident? Did Delaware ask for extra money? This is a public meeting and every person has to be let in.”

Roxanne Meyer-“Might I suggest that those of you that don’t live in or own property in the town or township give up your seat?”

Steve Gemmer-“The town should own the fire department.”

Roxanne Meyer-“Would you supply some information on fundraisers?”

Attorney Larry Eaton-“The fire department can not float a bond. Even if you could, the Town does not have the money to float a bond.”

Marilyn Gray-Johnson Township board-“I have a few ideas on fundraisers. A gun safe raffle, a gun raffle, a generator raffle, these are suggestions from people that have contacted me. Maybe the town and the township can send a letter to ask for donations, or get businesses to sponsor the cost of paper, envelopes, etc. and get volunteers to stuff envelopes.”

Roxanne Meyer-“Can you start generating a list of people to help?”

Marilyn Gray-“Sure.”

Tom Beatley (sp?)-“Randy Frye is for the fire department.”

Ginger Bradford-Versailles-“He will be here Saturday for a meeting.”

Tom Beatley-“I heard Delaware made like, \$6,000 on their last fish fry.”

Delaware VFD member-“That is not true, we made around \$3,000.”

Chief Sieverding-“In 1.5 months, we go on as many runs as Friendship VFD does in one year. The average age of a Firefighter in Friendship is 54 years old. The average on VVFD is 26 years old. Think about the time these guys give up volunteering, and think of the time they spend away from their families. Fundraising is a good supplement, but can not sustain a department.”

Roxanne Meyer-“I would not expect those guys to spend more time away from their families. I’m in, I’ll help with fundraising.”

Attorney Larry Eaton-“I see a lot of very successful business people here tonight, and I understand to make money you have to save money. Compare the cost of equipment today from 30 years ago. I understand why you’re here, but go back and look at the value of this fire department. I’m very concerned about the morale of the department if we don’t come up with a safe and financially sound department. I know this town board is constantly worried about finances. I don’t think this is an unreasonable request.

Robert Wood-Versailles IGA-I support the fire department. This community is upset. What happens if you postpone this for 1 year? Would it cost another \$20,000?”

Roxanne Meyer-“If it is voted down, it’s a moot point. We would have to go back and get new numbers for the study if it is postponed a year.”

Paige Sansone-Umbaugh-“The DLGF requires updated numbers. It wouldn’t cost \$20,000 because we already have the model, but I can’t give you a solid number.”

Robert Wood-“Can we postpone for one year? I am willing to help with fundraisers. Also, the Tyson fund gave the VVFD money to pave their parking lot, but they could have asked for \$30,000 in operating money.”

Roxanne Meyer- “That is not true, it is not traditional to give money for operating. If a group wanted to do a fundraiser, would you be willing to sell supplies at cost?”

Robert Wood-“Yes.”

Thomas Gray- 3789 E. Co. Rd. 300 N-“A lot of people are arguing about why the department doesn’t need money. We need to talk about ways to get that money. I think we need to look toward a different route.”

Kathy Searcey-Summerset Drive Versailles IN-“I want to thank the department. I lost my son in law, the chief of the Rising Sun Fire Department to a tragic accident. I still don’t want to see this go through for the farmers, the renters, those on a fixed income. Something needs to be done to help, we need to come together and help out.”

Maureen Sheets, CPA-“I support the department. There are other ways to raise money. I’d be happy to volunteer. I would be happy to help with billing to file with the insurance companies.”

Chief Sieverding-“We do bill the insurance companies, if they have coverage. There are some legal things that keep us from billing those without insurance.”

Gary Byard-Versailles-“I had a chimney fire years ago, and I was told back then if I didn’t have insurance I would have to pay. How did it come to Ben having no boss with no meeting at the high school or somewhere else? I am for some type of charge per person, we need to come up with something.”

Ken Kasserman-“What bothers me is that you didn’t ask businesses and retired people for help. I wish that something would have happened sooner. If we had done something prior, before we spent \$20,000.

Holly Perfner-Johnson Township-“What if we did something in the Spring to help raise money for the fire department?”

Dave Koger-3351 W. US 50 Holton, Johnson Township-“If this passes, can the state adjust the rate?”

Paige Sansone-“All of the information is sent to the DLGF and they can modify and lower the rate, but can never raise it. The State can not adopt a tax rate higher than this process adopts.”

Josh Yatsko-Johnson Township-“Do you think you will have the money to pay for all of your expenses? What about forming an exploratory committee over the next six months, to discuss how to come up with funding. Maybe we will find that we do need the fire territory. This gives everyone a chance to breathe and generate ideas.”

Steven Stultzfus-Johnson Township-“I lived in Trenton, a town 1/10th this size. I got a bill for \$20 at the beginning of the year. I didn’t have to pay it, but if we used the fire service, we were billed \$500.”

Karen Sieverding-Tanglewood Rd, Versailles IN-“Out of the 1473 households in the town and township, maybe 10% of the people are here saying they do not support this. Possibly 90% that do support it aren’t here. I am asking the board to remember the 90% that are not here. It’s usually the people that have a complaint that talk the loudest. I am on record saying I support the Fire department.”

Jeff Bloemker-“I support the fire department, I don’t like stuffing it down our throats in the last month. There is not a person in this room against funding the fire department. New Marion is hurting, all of the departments struggle with funding.”

Roxanne Meyer-“I will speak for the Versailles Town Council, not the Johnson Township Board. We have talked about this for about a year now. We did make the decision in December to go forward with it, and asked the township if they were interested. It was recorded in the newspaper, and in the town meeting minutes. Maybe there should be a monthly township board meeting.”

Helen Hasmer- “If it hadn’t of been for Barney, I wouldn’t have known anything was going on.”

Roxanne Meyer-“The town board has chatted about it, it has been made public. We had to make the decision by March 31. The Town Board decided in December to fund the study.”

Matt McNew-Versailles Town Council-“I am amazed that our local newspaper stays afloat. It’s amazing because nobody ever receives a paper.”

Andi Richter-“I am not against the fire department. It is my responsibility to do due diligence that if you are asking for more money, I need to know why. This seems very rushed, it seems very pushed.”

Sandy Korfman-“I would like to volunteer my time.”

John Gardner-“I have a son on the VVFD, and I am here to support my son.”

Elam Beiler-“I would like to thank the fire department. This will affect the businesses and farmers more than individuals. The farmers are struggling, if you want to keep Versailles a growing town, you need to reconsider.”

The meeting officially closed at 9:22. The Johnson Township Board then met to cast their votes.

Dennis Sanders: Vote to table until Sunday when the Town Board votes.

Carrie McNew: Vote to strike down the proposed fire territory.

Marilyn Gray: Vote to strike down the proposed fire territory.

The Johnson Township Board voted by majority not to pass the resolution creating a fire territory between the Town of Versailles and Johnson Township.

Sign in sheets are available for viewing at the Versailles Town Hall. Additional sign in sheets were distributed outside the building, but were not submitted to the Versailles Town Council.