

Exploring Weston's budget: Funding for the fire department

Written by Patricia Gay

Wednesday, 14 March 2012 11:41

The Weston Volunteer Fire Department is the hot place to be. With 55 certified firefighters on hand, the department is so popular there is a waiting list to join.

The town has been well served by the department for more than 80 years, where every member is an unpaid volunteer, and is highly trained. Members come from all walks of life, and include carpenters, lawyers, students, and stockbrokers.

Funding for the department comes in two forms: personal gifts and contributions, and through the town's operating and capital budgets.

There are two firehouses in town, one on Norfield Road in the town hall complex and the other on Lyons Plain Road. The town owns the Norfield firehouse, while the Lyons Plain station is owned solely by the fire department.

Operating budget

The town historically contributes about \$200,000 in its operating budget for things such as electricity and heat, secretarial services, property liability insurance, training, office supplies, telecommunications, vehicle repairs, fuel, and equipment.

For the upcoming 2012-13 budget the selectmen are proposing \$217,787 for the department, a 2.6% increase from the current fiscal year.

Last month, on its own initiative, the selectmen approved a supplemental appropriation of \$68,365 for the replacement of self-contained breathing apparatuses and harnesses (oxygen tanks).

Capital budget

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The town also contributes to the fire department through its capital budget, for fire engines and equipment.

Since 1999-2000, the town has spent \$2,991,156 on capital items for the fire department, an average of \$249,250 a year.

Capital allocations include \$154,000 in 2000-02 to replace a pumper; \$175,000 in 2001-03 to replace Pumper #5; \$135,000 in 2003-04 for self-contained breathing apparatus, and \$125,000 to fund the replacement of Engine #1. In 2004-05 an additional \$255,000 was allocated for the replacement of Engine #1, and \$40,000 was allocated for a pick-up truck.

The town replaced Engine #3 for \$500,000 in 2006-08.

The town replaced Engine #4 for \$425,000 in 2008-10.

The town also spent \$77,000 in 2010-11 for portable radios, and \$45,000 in 2011-12 for police, fire and digital radios.

In 2008, a town meeting approved the allocation of \$900,000 for the construction of a new firehouse on Lyons Plain Road. The allocation was paid in \$300,000 installments over the course of three years.

Insurance/tax abatement

Although members of the fire department are not paid salaries, the town does pay health insurance benefits for qualified members. Members also get a property tax abatement.

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“The town pays about \$700,000 a year for health insurance for firefighters. That includes some life members and EMTs,” said Tom Landry, town administrator.

Firefighters also get a property tax abatement of about \$1,000 a year from the state, which costs around \$73,000 annually, Mr. Landry said.

WVFD pride

Fire Chief John Pokorny said he is proud of Weston’s fire department and how well it operates. “We have between 12 and 15 certified firefighters in town each day available for fire calls, and we have plenty at night. So we’re in very good shape,” he said.

But things weren’t always so rosy. In the early 1980s, Chief Pokorny said there was a shortage of volunteers, which is why the town started providing health insurance — as a way to attract members. The strategy worked and now there is a waiting list to get into the department.

Through private funding and donations, the department pays for equipment such as thermal imaging cameras, which cost around \$15,000 each, jaws of life rescue equipment, and fire hoses and nozzles. Although the town contributed \$900,000 for the Lyons Plain firehouse, the rest — about \$900,000 — came from the fire department, and a \$100,000 contribution came from Weston EMS.

“We’re very lucky in Weston. We have a huge corps and a great fire department filled with smart people who are willing to do the necessary training. People from other towns have problems with their departments and they ask me all the time how we do it. I’m very proud of our volunteers,” Chief Pokorny said.