

Higher fire taxes likely due to failed deal

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KEY LARGO — Upon learning the county is refusing to help buy new emergency vehicles, the local fire district has gotten out the scissors and trimmed its budget. Despite this cost-cutting, the district is still proposing to raise its property tax rate, which is up for public comment this week.

Agenda paperwork for the Key Largo Fire-Rescue and Emergency Medical Services District hearing reveals that the proposed millage, or property tax rate, for fiscal year 2016-17 is about \$91 for every \$100,000 of assessed property value. The tax rate for 2015-16 was \$82.23 per \$100,000.

The district cannot tax more than \$100 per \$100,000 of assessed property value without first getting the rate approved by voters in a referendum. This is known as the “one-mill

cap.”

The proposed increase would mean that for every \$100,000 in assessed value, Key Largo property owners would have to pay about \$8.57 more in taxes this year.

Bob Thomas, a member of the district’s five-commissioner board, had been hopeful that the county would chip in \$150,000 toward the vehicle replacement fund after a meeting in March to discuss an interlocal financial agreement. Thomas and district accountant Peter Rosasco met with County Administrator Roman Gastesi as well as Kevin Madok, county senior director of strategic planning, and Cynthia Hall, assistant county attorney.

“What we took away from that meeting is they [Monroe County] do want a five-year ILA,” Thomas said at a March fire district board

meeting. “It’s not breaking the bank, it’s nothing that they’re concerned about.”

The county seemed prepared at the time to give the fire district as much as \$300,000 or \$350,000 a year for capital improvements such as fire trucks and fire hydrants, Thomas told the Free Press last week.

A three-year interlocal agreement, or ILA, was in its last year in 2015-16, during which the county gave the fire district money that Key Largo residents pay into the county’s 1-cent sales tax. The money from the 1-cent sales tax can only be used for capital improvements, so the fire district has used the ILA money in the past for fire hydrants and two ambulances.

However, in an August meeting with the same participants, Gastesi informed Thomas that the county had decided to give the district only \$150,000 for fire hydrants.

“The reason this meeting came about, we in Key Largo feel that we pay into the 1-cent sales tax, so we deserve to get a portion of that back,” Thomas said last week. “[Monroe County Commissioner] Sylvia Murphy feels we’ve gotten enough back through purchases of Rowell’s Marina, stuff like that.”

Gastesi presented Thomas with paperwork showing that the Key Largo community has benefitted from \$50 million in projects that the county has paid for from the 1-cent sales tax over the years.

The district’s consulting accountant, Jennifer Johnson of Bishop, Rosasco & Co., told the Free Press in an email that the county’s decision not to help with vehicle purchases definitely has affected the proposed tax rate. She said the proposed rate was going to be reduced to \$87 per \$100,000 of assessed property value,

“however, since the District was unsuccessful in renegotiating the ILA with Monroe County for \$150,000 for equipment we had to increase the proposed millage back up to [\$90.80],” she wrote.

Johnson said the board tried to trim the budget all they could. “There isn’t much to cut,” she said.

At the last meeting \$7,000 was removed from the fire department’s budget for repairs and maintenance of buildings, and \$10,870 was removed from its capital outlay for buildings and grounds.

“The fire [department] still needs to purchase the new engine whether or not the County contributes to the purchase or not,” she said.

Meanwhile, fire district board Chairman Tony Allen said the larger budget for next year was unavoidable.

“The majority of the budget raise was capital

improvements done for safety purposes,” he said. “Big time, expensive things.”

The costly items included an instrument to cut open cars to extract crash victims as well as the engine-replacement fund. Fire department staffers had been hoping to buy updated SCBAs, a type of breathing apparatus, to the tune of \$260,000, but they have to put that off for a year due to being turned down for a grant unrelated to the county.

“We don’t want to be put in a position where we have to ask the district voters to increase the one-mill rate as mandated by the state,” Thomas said. “As costs go up, if the county won’t help us, that’s our only other avenue.”

Budget paperwork can be found online at klfrem.org. The hearing will begin at 6 p.m. Wednesday, Sept. 7, at Station 24 on East Drive.

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