

What are the different ways fire protection is provided by townships? How is the cost of fire protection funded by a township and at what meeting is the extent of that cost approved? What challenges are faced by rural fire departments in providing fire protection?

15-116 Riley Donkers ~ Richland Township ~ Rice County

It is a blustery Tuesday in March as I trudge into the town hall for the annual township meeting. Being a high school junior, I wonder, 'why am I here?' I am here by choice; by attending the meeting I will get extra credit for my Government Class. The meeting appears to be a social outing for some and a business meeting to others, where they can voice their opinions on the three major budget items of fire protection, roads and bridges, and the general levy items.

Minnesota townships function independently with a set of elected officials that manage the township budget. Fire protection appears to be a hot topic and I learn that the township can elect to have their own fire protection, but by far the most common way to provide coverage for the township is to contract with the local municipality. Our township contracts services and has tried to negotiate prices with the provider to ensure that the budget is being spent wisely. The board provided the annual review history of expenditures and looked at the anticipated increases in the cost of services. The tension quickly mounts as the township officials give their report on the current contract; they are finding that the costs are rising very rapidly for fire protection.

There are three main challenges that rural fire departments are facing: the rising cost of equipment, lack of volunteer staff, and increased training requirements. The cost for the specialized equipment is at a record high at a time when a high percentage of fire departments are looking to upgrade to more modern equipment. Finding volunteers to staff the departments is becoming more difficult as fewer young people are staying in rural Minnesota. Combine that with the increasing median age of rural Minnesotans and we have a deficit in eligible firefighters. Volunteer are required to complete training programs, but as rural EMT become costly to maintain the volunteers are also required to be Emergency Medical Technicians along with other Homeland Security trainings. I learn it is now considered the norm to have firefighters trained in hazardous materials incidents, how to respond to suicide bomb attacks, and other items beyond the typical fire training.

As budget items continue to rise, many township officials have had to make choices to best serve and protect their citizens. At time difficult decisions have been made to place some road and bridge projects on hold and closing the bridges for safety reasons, or reducing the amount of snow plowing as the township must first provide fire protection to their township.

I made the right choice to attend the meeting and I also got a chance to meet some of my neighbors and enjoyed milk and donuts after the meeting. I have learned that townships have to work within a budget, that they may need to prioritize projects, and that democracy is still alive in rural Minnesota!