

Source: Homer Horizon

Homer fire closes on land for Station Four, training center

Chief shares specifics of referendum question

by Jennie Korb

November 26, 2007

In the next step of its long-term plan to build a training center and fourth fire station to serve the southeast quadrant of its jurisdiction, the Homer Township Fire Protection District closed Nov. 15 on a five-acre parcel of land east of Cedar Road on Chicago-Bloomington Road.

Fire Chief Michael Schofield said the planning for this new site goes back almost five years, and involved meetings with former New Lenox Mayor Mike Smith because the land falls within New Lenox's future planning area.

The district purchased the property from the Andersons, a sixth-generation Homer farming family, for under \$500,000; it's just a mile from Route 6 and only 1.25 miles from the proposed new Silver Cross Hospital, Schofield said.

"It's in a great place, but more importantly, it's in a place where we can serve our existing residents better. We're not building this fire station to protect the mall. Obviously we're building it to protect our existing residents," he said.

The plans are to build, equip and staff the new station and training center to open it within the next three to four years, but that timing is contingent on the passage of a quarter-percent property tax increase referendum on the February ballot, Schofield said.

The Homer Township Fire Protection District had originally planned to seek a tax rate freeze, but state statute doesn't allow that. Instead, they're asking for the smallest tax rate increase possible, which is a quarter of a penny, he said.

This increase would result in an additional \$6.80 paid to the fire district for every \$100,000 of assessed home valuation, meaning the owner of a \$500,000 home in Homer Glen would pay an additional \$34 per year to the district if the tax rate increase were approved. Schofield said this amount will be offset the following year due to the retirement of the district's 1993 bond issue.

"If we can maintain the rate where we're at over the next five years, with the anticipated growth, we feel that we're going to be able to hire and build new stations with the money coming in from new developments and new residents," Schofield said.

He pointed out that the district has been strategic in its long-term plans, which are outlined in a thick document available for viewing by the public.

"We run this organization like a business, and we have a business plan," Schofield said. "The referendum is not a knee-jerk reaction--it's something that's been studied, and it's part of a plan."

These plans include the referendum in 1993 to build Station Two on Bell Road, and a 10-cent increase granted by the taxpayers in 2002 that allowed the district to hire 26 full-time firefighter/paramedics. Back in 1993, the firefighters decided on their own to take a pay cut in order to man Station Two 24 hours a day, Schofield said, adding that the Homer Township Fire District has been a full-time career fire department since September of this year.

It was fine to be a paid on-call part-time department when they were smaller and weren't getting as many

calls, but "with that part-time program, you lose consistency," he said.

And the Homer Fire District, which already serves 23 square miles, will continue to grow; 60 percent of its service area is currently undeveloped, Schofield said.

"We've decided to invest in our own people, and our own people have a commitment to this organization--they have a commitment to their community, because this is their bread and butter," he said.

The district has gradually increased staffing, and has gradually gone to the taxpayers for increases based on information planning and long-term budget projections. The .0204 rate increase the district is requesting would bring in about \$90,000 in the first year; the largest increase will come in the fourth and fifth year if the equalized assessed valuation in the area expands as they predict it will, Schofield said.

"It doesn't sound like much, but over four or five years, it's going to help us out a great deal," Schofield said, adding that the total budget for Homer Fire is about \$4 million.

In addition to strategic planning, the district also has continued to try to find alternate sources of funding to save taxpayers money, including grants.

"I feel that you can't go to the taxpayer and ask them to solve your problems if you have not attempted to solve your own problems," Schofield said.

A grant allowed the district to build Station Three on 151st Street, and a federal grant for \$350,000 allowed the district to purchase new equipment. This year the district has applied for more than \$1 million in grants, including a \$948,825 grant called the SAFER Act, which would subsidize the hiring of nine new firefighters. The district will find out in 2008 whether it received that grant, Schofield said.

The district also recoups expenses by charging residents an ambulance fee. Lt. Troy Essenburg said many residents have questioned this practice, but the money collected, which ranges from \$600 to \$1,000 depending on services provided, goes right back into the district's EMS program. This allows the district to pay cash for new and replacement equipment and vehicles, rather than taking out interest-bearing loans, he said.

In addition, the district has worked on creating intergovernmental agreements with other departments to share equipment and responses, and is working with District 33C to share a new maintenance building near Schilling School and Station Two on Cedar Road.

Schofield said the district will be putting up a sign on the newly purchased property on Chicago-Bloomington Road "relatively soon." It will not only proclaim it as the future site of Homer Township Station Four, but also reference the old Town of Hadley, which is what the area was originally called. The motto for the station will be "protecting the gateway to the south suburbs," given its proximity to I-355 and I-80, Schofield said.

The training center could be used not just by the Homer Fire District, but also by surrounding departments, including Orland Park, New Lenox, Northwest Homer and Lockport.

Schofield said he has asked the Homer Glen Public Safety Committee to host an evening where the Homer Township Fire Protection District and the Northwest Homer Fire District can share their referendum plans with the community.

Part of the challenge for Homer Fire is to differentiate itself from Northwest Homer; they're two separate entities, and Northwest Homer is asking for a far more substantial increase, Schofield said.

The fire districts also will be up against Lockport Township High School District 205, Homer School District 33C and the village of Homer Glen, all of whom will be asking for tax increases come February.

Schofield said the fire district and school referenda go hand in hand. As firefighters, they don't want to see

the overcrowded conditions at the schools worsen, but if a new high school is built in Homer Glen, that will be another building and 3,000 more people they'll be protecting, he said.

"Everything goes hand in hand. It's a domino effect, because every referendum obviously affects every resident. It affects the quality of our community, which affects the quality of our service, so it affects everything," he said.

"Firemen don't want to see crowded schools--it's only going to make our jobs that much harder," Essenburg said.

Schofield added that if Northwest Homer were to put its contract for firefighting and paramedic services out to bid, Homer Fire might end up bidding on it.

That would only work if Northwest Homer's referendum passed, though; to staff Northwest Homer with all full-time people would cost \$2.5 million, and Northwest Homer's budget is only \$2.1 million currently, Schofield said.

But it makes sense to consider as a possibility, he said.

"If they get their referendum, there's no reason we shouldn't look at consolidation. Between Northwest Homer and Homer Fire District, we cover 90 percent of Homer Glen," Schofield said. "We're going to the same calls--if they have a fire, we go. ... It makes no sense to duplicate services."

He added that there are new bills proposed at the state level, with which Schofield is involved, that would give districts the ability to consolidate intergovernmentally--sharing staff and equipment--before going to the taxpayers for approval.