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Town of Chilmark Fire Department

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Dear Honorable Selectmen of the Town of Chilmark,

Budget season is upon us. After a couple of serious calls I've begun to rethink a few areas of our general operations. We not only have the need to upgrade some of our equipment, but it is time to commit to a restructuring of stipends offered to our volunteers. Additionally, we need to address the rising costs associated with operating the department that are and will remain out of our control.

BACKGROUND-

Many municipalities are now charging user fees for essential public services -- alarm calls, vehicle crashes, etc.-- in order to maintain the viability of those services at the breakeven point or with a slight surplus to hopefully fund other services. After looking into how other fire departments recoup some of the expenses one simple way is attributed to responding to alarm calls.

Many homes have alarm systems through service providers that automatically alert the Island Communications Center whenever their systems are triggered (think about that commercial "ADP- we're home even when you're not.") Many municipalities now charge an annual fee to homeowners with these types of systems that provides a direct connection between a private fire alarm system to the fire department via the Comm Center. Their annual fees range anywhere from \$200 to \$300 per year.

Under the fire alarms policy currently in place, an on call member of the department (typically the chief) responds to the call once they are alerted through the Comm Center. If it is a false alarm, which more times than not it typically is (perhaps it was set off by a painter doing some heavy duty sanding), the

homeowner receives a warning letter. It isn't until the third false alarm that a fine of \$100 is issued. Each subsequent false alarm is issued a \$150 fine. This process is time consuming, ineffective, cost prohibitive and inequitable.

Currently, all taxpayers, even those who do not have alarm systems, are paying for the department to respond to numerous false alarms while the homeowners with alarm systems see a reduction in their insurance fees.

FEE PROPOSAL-

I recommend we implement a \$200 annual fee to homeowners who utilize alarm systems that automatically alert the Comm Center and eliminate the fine process. This would redirect the costs to those homeowners that are utilizing the service rather than continuing to fund it through all of the taxpayers. As in many other municipalities, it will be up to the Chief to ensure those utilizing the service continue to contract with an alarm company and that their systems remain in good working order.

Fee examples:

- o Westwood, MA annual fee is \$250
- o Ayer, MA annual fee at \$300
- o Woburn, MA annual fee is \$250

In addition, some towns charge a one time activation and/or reconnection fee of, most commonly, \$100.

POTENTIAL REVENUE-

The town's expected revenue from the 438 addresses that currently use an alarm company is \$87,600 per year. Once the Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) fees and duty shift stipends are deducted, the remaining amount can go towards vehicle stabilization, fire prevention, and a smoke detector purchase program for townspeople who need assistance.

RISING COSTS EXAMPLE-

A number of hidden costs directly affect our operating budget every year. These costs are out of our control. For example, our CAD expenses have increased:

- For fiscal year 2019, the Chilmark Police Department's share was \$27,438; the Chilmark Fire Department's share was \$5,940.
- For fiscal year 2020, the Chilmark Police Department's share was \$24,337; the Chilmark Fire Department's share was \$6,204.

- For fiscal year 2021, the Chilmark Police Department's share was \$24,231; the Chilmark Fire Department's share was \$7,097.

MAJOR DEPARTMENT GOAL-

It is our hope to purchase a fully outfitted response truck. It will be equipped with a large number of fire extinguishers, a thermal-imaging camera, a step stool (to enable us to get to the hard-to-reach smoke detectors) and Scott air packs for entry into hazardous areas and smoke-filled rooms.

VOLUNTEER STIPEND INCREASE PROPOSAL -

Currently, we pay \$75 for a 12-hour on call shift; that works out to \$6.25 /hour. I propose an increase to \$150 per 12-hour shift bringing the hourly rate to \$12.50. Take note, these shifts are only utilized when the chief is out of town or otherwise unavailable.

Sadly, emergency services are not a priority in many Massachusetts communities and sometimes the needs of fire services go unnoticed in rural areas. Yet, as more and more people move here from metro areas, not only has the quantity of our responses increased, but also the public's expectation of the level of services delivered has increased.

Fees for service are a method to help ensure a viable department that either meets or exceeds the response times we are able to provide now. With updated and added equipment and better coverage for on-call shifts, we will be able to ensure quality of service and a level of excellent response.

We hope implementing an alarm service fee will, not only streamline our revenue, but may address much of the costs associated with other departmental needs.

Respectfully,

Jeremy Bradshaw, Fire Chief

JB/kc

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Diana Lees 10/28/20, 5:37 PM
Confusing