

**Fire districts look into special assessments**

By I.M. Stackel

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Shortly after state legislators approved a 3 percent tax rollback and before Gov. Charlie Crist signed it into law, fire chiefs around Collier County received a note from Big Corkscrew Island Fire Chief Rita Greenberg.

She wrote that she's gathering a list of government consultants who might be able to draft paperwork to create a special fire assessment fee for her rural district.

Greenberg spoke with Camille Tharpe, senior vice president of the lobbyist Government Services Group, who had written an article for the May 2007 issue of Florida Fire Chiefs Association magazine, extolling the virtues of special assessments for fire districts.

Government Services Group would offer any member of the association a 10 percent discount, and an additional discount if four or more districts entered into a contract with the consultants, to draft special assessment documents, Greenberg reported.

"If I hear of something similar from any of the other agencies, I will let you know," Greenberg wrote.

Greenberg said she's just now looking into a possible special assessment to raise money to support fire districts. Assessments aren't the same as property taxes, the organization contends.

Big Corkscrew hasn't entered into a contract with either Government Services Group or other districts. It is just a process, she said.

"We haven't made any commitment so far," Greenberg said.

Greenberg's search for ways to supplement her budget may become routine this summer as independent fire districts throughout Southwest Florida — and the state — address legislative directions.

Independent fire districts that rely solely on property taxes are tense about how to handle future expansion with state-ordered rollbacks, and panicked about a so-called super homestead exemption that Florida voters will get to weigh in on during January's presidential preference election.

Some fire district leaders say the exemption, if passed, could slash their budgets by more than 30 percent.

Greenberg's district wasn't rolling in money before the Legislature's special June session, with a \$4 million budget for the past year.

"We're already looking at a shortfall of \$1 million," Greenberg said of her anticipated \$1.5 million impact fee budget.

While some Collier and Lee neighborhoods are experiencing construction growth, it is not true of every community.

Greenberg attributed her department's lack of money to "a lack of growth, a slowdown in the market, and a slowdown in construction."

The result is that prior to the legislation, she had anticipated hiring three new employees and building a new fire station at DeSoto Boulevard and 22nd Avenue.

“We have the property, but the time frame is going to become a question mark,” she said.

This is major injury to a small district that has 24 budgeted firefighter positions — 23 are filled — and a mere six workers to administer the department, including her job and a fire marshal.

These folks have to protect between 12,000 to 15,000 people spread out over a 194-square-mile area.

Proponents of special assessments say the absence of fire services costs people in other ways. For example, insurers use the distance from a fire station to determine how much one’s home or business fire protection policies will cost.

“A lot of the areas we cover are not yet currently populated but ISO (insurance) ratings could be affected,” Greenberg said.

It could result in an increase of up to 40 percent on the cost of insurance policies, she said, adding, “That’s just in our district.”

“We already have areas that are uninsurable,” Greenberg said, noting that this occurs when a property is more than 5 miles from a fire station.

“That’s been a challenge we’ve been faced with in rural areas,” Greenberg said. “DeSoto (was supposed to) take in a large portion of those areas that are uninsured.”

While other fire districts in Collier and Lee counties acknowledged that they will get slammed by rollbacks — and crushed if the constitutional amendment passes — no one else has, thus far, uttered the “assessment” word.

Even Immokalee Fire Chief Ray Alvarez, whose department is in a similar situation, didn’t use the “A” word.

“We’re just listening,” Alvarez conceded.

Alvarez’s department faces an interesting dilemma: how much guaranteed growth he can afford to plan for.

Last year, his annual budget was \$1.7 million. Now, because of pre-existing state requirements and cuts, he’s looking at a little more than \$1 million. Prior to the recent session, fire districts already were prohibited from budgeting more than 95 percent of their anticipated property tax total.

“We’ll be frozen. There will be no raises. There will be nothing. Only additional equipment (paid for by) the impact fees for the current year,” Alvarez said.

That’s \$1.128 million for now. He’s got two fire stations, 15 firefighters and is responsible for 225 square miles.

He’s not sure how to plan for what will become his jurisdiction: Ave Maria University and the town of Ave Maria.

“As they grow, we’ll grow,” Alvarez said, although it is difficult to plan without the money.

That’s the scenario explained by both small and large independent districts in both Collier and Lee counties.

Passage of the proposed constitutional amendment also scares Bonita Springs Fire Chief P.H. Kinsey Jr.

“That would be a very significant hit,” Kinsey said.

The 3 percent cut is bad enough.

Bonita Springs' saw a 12.2 percent growth in assessed value in the past year, but fire district leaders have to keep their hands in their pockets, Kinsey said.

"We lost that revenue. We have to, theoretically, operate on 97 percent of this year's (\$29.1 million) budget."

Kinsey's 122-person department protects between 43,000 and 80,000 residents and businesses, depending on season.

"I'm a taxpayer (too) but I'd be derelict in my duty if I didn't consider public safety," Kinsey said.

"Government's first job is to protect. Most of the districts (will find) some way to augment the budget if the constitutional portion passes, because you look at it from a public safety standpoint."

No one at the San Carlos Park fire district was able to comment on whether assessments are under consideration, but the department protects about 30,000 people on a budget that is richer than Immokalee and Big Corkscrew combined.

With three stations, the department expects to collect \$8.67 million in property taxes by Sept. 30, spokeswoman Alexis Rothring said. However, San Carlos Park anticipates only \$325,000 in impact fees, Rothring reported.

Ironically, the San Carlos Park district reduced its property tax rate for the current year to give property owners a break. The property tax rate was cut from \$2.50 per \$1,000 worth of property to \$2.40 per \$1,000 worth of property.

Back in Collier, East Naples fire district leaders are shaking their heads.

They were counting on building a new station and administrative offices at Collier Boulevard and U.S. 41 East.

Some 5,000 to 6,000 people have moved into the district since last year, increasing the number of residents and businesses that require fire protection, Assistant Chief Robert Potteiger said.

He figures that the fire district is now responsible for about 58,000 to 60,000 people but expansion plans have been placed on hold.

Due to growth, two of the district's six stations were built in the past five years, and 20 more firefighters were hired.

But that's about where expansion will end until East Naples, like other independent fire districts around the state, can determine how to account for the budgetary shortfalls.

Adhering to the mandated 3 percent cut from last year's \$14 million budget will create a tight budget, but even shaving general expenses a bit will hamper the level of service offered, Potteiger said.

"We won't be able to (work on) any long-term capital projects," Potteiger admitted.

The real scare — and problems — will result if the constitutional amendment passes in January, causing East Naples fire to lose 30 to 33 percent of the department's budget, he said.

In her May column, Tharpe reminded fire chiefs around the state that special assessments could be of value if cutbacks get too large, and assessments aren't tied to property taxes. That means the Legislature's directives don't include assessments.

Unlike impact fees, assessments aren't limited to equipment or other capital expenditures, Tharpe wrote. Special assessments can be used for fire trucks and new stations, but also for ongoing operating costs.

A special assessment program for fiscal 2008, which begins on Oct. 1, can be developed — and implemented — in a minimum of three months, Tharpe wrote.

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