

Two Firefighters Promoted and Budget Discussed at GFPD Board of Trustees Meeting

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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GODFREY – Monday's meeting of the Godfrey Fire Protection District (GFPD) Board of Trustees focused on budgetary concerns – as the GFPD is operating nearly \$100,000 in the red – as well as promotions.

Firefighter John Wilson was promoted to lieutenant. He was pinned with the new badge by his wife and described by GFPD Chief Erik Kambarian a great firefighter who dedicated years of his life to serving the GFPD. Lieutenant Brian Estes was promoted to the rank of captain. He was pinned by his son. Kambarian said Estes is the station's building manager, saying it is "literally his job to keep the place together." GFPD Trustee Maurice "Mo" Hand was also given a plaque. Hand started in the GFPD in 1975 and has served as a trustee since his retirement. His plaque celebrated Hand's four decades of service to the people of Godfrey, as his last meeting with the GFPD Board of Trustees was Monday, and his term ends April 30. Trustee Terry Ford also recognized the GFPD's lawyer, Jim Sinclair, for donating thousands of dollars worth of his time to an indebted fire protection district following the March 5, 2019, loss of Firefighter Jake Ringering at a mutual aid call to a house fire on Culp Lane in Bethalto.

Both the debt and that fire were further discussed at the meeting. Ford said the GFPD is currently \$96,003.97 in the red and may be on its way to a half million dollars in the hole by the time the next budget is approved in June. To make the issue more pressing, only 11 of the GFPD's 15 full-time firefighters are on full duty, and the GFPD has yet to make a new hire to replace Ringering, something his fellow firefighters said would need to take place soon – something, even, he would have specifically wanted.

When the cost of hiring a new firefighter was raised as a concern by the board, a firefighter in the crowd told them continuing to work firefighters on overtime would be much more of a financial burden than hiring a new firefighter. As the numbers currently stand, each personal, sick or vacation day taken would incur overtime for at least one firefighter, Kambarian said. As many as 69 of these days are scheduled in the coming months. In fact, that firefighter told the trustees they could save as much as \$250,000 a year by hiring a new firefighter.

Other expenses included the replacement of the pump of Engine #1460, which would cost just below \$5,000, new windows at GFPD Station #1, which would cost around \$1,500, and a new suction unit to replace a missing one (following as many as 25 fire departments backfilling the GFPD's stations in the wake of Ringering's death), which cost \$415. Kambarian also suggested increasing the GFPD's donations to Backstoppers from \$100 monthly to \$500. That organization provides immediate and continuing assistance to the families of first responders killed in the line of duty. All of these items were approved unanimously.

The trustees also approved Kambarian attending the National Firefighting Academy in Maryland for an all-expenses-paid, five-day course in leadership and safety. Kambarian said, though the complete report on the Culp Lane Fire has not been released by the Illinois Fire Marshall Service – as it is awaiting electrical reports – he wanted to be sure

he was doing everything he could to ensure the safety of each firefighter working in the GFPD.

That report was also mentioned during the meeting. The Illinois State Fire Marshall Service as well as Illinois OSHA investigated the March 5 incident, and Kambarian also submitted information voluntarily to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), which operates through the Center For Disease Control within the Federal Government. Findings from that investigation will assist other departments across the county, which will be able to learn from its findings.

Good news from the district included grants and donations to make the engine tasked with taking Ringering to his resting place like new again. A new paint job and updated LED lights were donated to the GFPD from the community. The Godfrey Women's Group also ensured the GFPD's rescue pods would continuously be refilled in honor of Ringering. This was combined with good news from Alton High School Student Council President Betsy Papin who announced the donation of \$5,000 to the GFPD's rescue fund for the purpose of purchasing ballistic vests.

Echoes of the last meeting of the GFPD Board of Trustees also came from public comments when a member of the public asked Ford if he referred to firefighters asking for a new pumper beyond their price range as “children.” Ford said he did not, however, at the previous meeting, he said he compared them to children throwing a tantrum if they did not get a toy out of their parents' price range. A construction meeting with KME regarding that approved pumper (described as “adequate” by Kambarian) is scheduled to take place in coming months in Pennsylvania with Kambarian accompanied by two of his lieutenants.

Following several action items, the board entered a closed session to discuss personnel matters. When open session continued, an estimated 20 minutes later, Kambarian's contract was extended until Oct. 31, 2019.