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KVFD: Pay mandate no good

By KIM SCHMIDT , Hub Staff Writer

KEARNEY — Kearney volunteer firefighters don't want pay for battling fires or responding to rescue calls.

In Legislative Bill 607, introduced last month, state Sen. Brad Ashford of Bellevue proposed requiring any first-class city with more than 38,000 residents to have a paid fire chief and firefighters. Although Kearney's population is at 29,506, the city continues to grow. If LB607 passes, the measure could someday affect the Kearney Volunteer Fire Department.

"I don't like it," said Jerry Thompson, KVFD chief. "I don't think this is a state responsibility. I feel it's probably better for local governments to decide what they need to do with their fire departments and how they need to run them."

Should LB607 pass, KVFD would have to hire additional full-time firefighters, which could cost the city an estimated \$1.7 million more than the present \$1.1 million budget. City Manager Mike Morgan said the bill's passage could ultimately mean a property tax increase.

"We're opposed to anything that eliminates our local control and what's best for our community," Morgan said.

At the moment, only two cities, Bellevue and Grand Island, qualify under LB607. Grand Island has had a paid department since 1909. Bellevue has the state's largest number of volunteer firefighters with 140, and it also is fighting Ashford's plan.

Kearney has the second-largest volunteer department, with 75 firefighters. KVFD has two stations that serve a 272-square-mile area in and around Kearney.

Kearney volunteer firefighters planned to go to Lincoln today to oppose the bill before the Legislature's Urban Affairs Committee. However, their trip was cancelled because of today's weather.

Instead, firefighters flooded committee members with letters and e-mails opposing the bill.

Ashford introduced the bill after being approached by a family concerned with Bellevue's response times, and by a statewide union, the Nebraska Professional Fire Fighters Association. A paid department would cost Bellevue at least \$6 million a year.

Mike McDonnell, president of the Nebraska Professional Fire Fighters Association, said his group's issue isn't with the training of volunteer firefighters in Bellevue or elsewhere. Instead, the union contends it takes volunteers longer to reach emergencies than paid firefighters.

But Kearney firefighters take offense to that statement. They say they have one of the best response times in the state at 3½ minutes. Bellevue's response time is about 6 minutes.

In fact, in 2005, KVFD improved its service rating making it one of the top unpaid departments in the state. The department was given a Class 2 rating, which means commercial and industrial owners could see a decrease in their insurance premiums.

Savings vary depending on insurance carriers and the size of the business.

Kearney was previously rated a five. Fire departments are rated on a scale of one as best to 10 as worst on the department's water supply and distribution, equipment and communications.

The ranking makes KVFD one of only five departments in the state with a similar ranking and puts it ahead of Grand Island, Hastings, Lincoln, North Platte and Omaha fire departments.

Veteran Kearney firefighter Mike Martinosky said LB607 isn't about money to him; rather, it's about pride.

“It’s all in the pride and the job that we do that makes our department function. We take pride in volunteering for the community,” he said. “That’s what makes the Kearney Volunteer Fire Department is the pride in serving the community.”

Anyone wanting to express their opinion about LB607 can contact state Sen. Mike Friend, the chair of the Urban Affairs Committee, at 402-471-2718.

The Associated Press contributed to this article.

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