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## Bill tabled; VFDs can stay volunteer

By KIM SCHMIDT , Hub Staff Writer

**LINCOLN — A state senator says a legislative bill requiring cities with more than 38,000 residents to have a paid fire department was unfair.**

The Urban Affairs Committee tabled LB607 last month. The bill would have required 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, and if the measure had passed, it someday could have affected the Kearney Volunteer Fire Department.

Sen. Brad Ashford of Omaha introduced the bill on the heels of complaints about the Belle-vue Volunteer Fire Department's response times.

"The bill functionally was just unworkable," said Sen. Mike Friend of Omaha, the Urban Affairs Committee chair.

Only two cities, Bellevue and Grand Island, qualify now 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.

If the measure had passed, KVFD would have had to hire additional full-time firefighters, which could cost the city an estimated \$1.7 million in addition to the present \$1.1 million budget.

The way the bill was written, it would have gone into effect by October, a deadline Friend said was impossible. Bill presenters, Friend said, also didn't make a good case to the committee that a change was needed.

"It's very difficult to make a public policy change like that without having a lot of statistics and facts to back up that change," Friend said. "It's hard to take a city that's working through public safety issues in a certain manner and then suddenly tell them you're going to totally change the way you do business in a short amount of time."

The bill will now go through some interim studies this summer and fall, Friend said, so the issue can be talked about more in-depth.

Kearney Fire Chief Jerry Thompson has opposed the bill since it was introduced and said the decision of whether or not to have a paid fire department should rest with the city, not the state.

"It shouldn't matter how many people live in your town, the service should be performed to the best duties of the firefighters in the community," he said.

Thompson also questioned the logic behind making cities with more than 38,000 residents have paid departments. He also knows the battle isn't over.

"Why not cities of 50,000? Why 38,000? Why is that such a magic number? More people don't make you have more fires," he said.

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