

Rural Fire District Annexation Vote on April 6 Ballot

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By Mike Scott

Approximately 310 voters in the southern part of Clark County will face higher taxes if a ballot issue passes on April 6. At the same time, many could see a reduction in their insurance rates, and the elimination of their fire protection dues.

The question on the ballot will read: "Shall the boundaries of the Canton R-V Fire Protection District be extended to include the area currently serviced by the Monticello and Williamstown Fire associations and the unassigned fire service areas of municipalities of the St. Patrick and Lake of the Oaks which also include their immediate environs?"

A yes vote will on the issue will add much of southern Clark County to the Canton R-V Fire Protection District. The area includes parts of Clay, Jackson, Union and Washington townships. The area stretches from north of Gregory Landing west past Lake of Oaks and St Patrick to Road 348, then north to approximately Road 257, then westward again past Route D about one mile, then south about a mile, and west again. The area is roughly the southern 3-5 miles of Clark County.

According to Jeff McReynolds, Canton Emergency Management Director, the initiative was started by the Williamstown and Monticello associations. The Lake of the Oaks area was added by request of residents within that area.

"Lake of the Oaks property owners have asked to join us more than once in the past 10 years," said McReynolds. "With the resources of the other departments, and the construction of a new fire station on Hwy 81, we felt we were in a better position to serve them.

"The Monticello and Williamstown associations started talking to us about annexing last year," said McReynolds. "They initiated the petitions." Public hearings were held in both Monticello and Williamstown late last year.

Small fire districts, like Monticello and Williamstown, have been struggling to raise enough money to continue service, as the number of dues-paying members decreases while expenses increase. In many cases, the volunteers hold fundraisers such as fish fries to raise the money needed to meet expenses.

"At some point, these small departments will cease to exist," McReynolds said.

The Williamstown and Monticello associations considered forming their own fire protection district, but Canton R-V's tax levy would have been lower, so they chose to approach Canton R-V about the annexation, according to McReynolds.

The area of approximately 1000 parcels of land would join the Canton R-V Fire Protection District, which unlike the Monticello and Williamstown associations, has the authority to tax property owners for its revenue, rather than rely on dues-paying members. At present, the total tax is 44 cents per \$100 of assessed valuation, but it is projected to drop to approximately 36 cents per \$100 of assessed valuation if the measure passes, and drop to approximately 34 cents per \$100 next year.

To estimate what your taxes would be, find your assessed valuation, both real estate and personal property, on your 2009 tax statement. Then divide that number by 100, and multiply that figure times 0.36. For example, if your assessed valuation was \$10,000, divide the \$10,000 by 100, which will give you \$100, and then multiply that by 0.36, which would give you an estimated tax of \$36.

McReynolds estimated 60 percent of the households would pay less in property tax than the cost of their current fire association membership.

Residents may see significant reductions in their homeowner's insurance, said McReynolds. Many, but not all, abide by the ISO (Insurance Services Office) rating of the capability of the community's fire department. Insurance companies can provide a different rating to homes within five miles of an ISO rated fire department. Canton R-V currently is ISO rated, and by joining with Canton, the Monticello and Williamstown fire departments would also be.

"About half of the people in the area could see their insurance rates change. I recommend that they call their insurance agent to see if it will make a difference for them.

The current fire stations in Monticello and Williamstown will remain in service.

"The only thing we see that will change for these departments is where their money comes from and what fire board they report to. The chief in Williamstown will remain, and the chief in Monticello will remain,"

McReynolds said.

"If I lived in that area, the two questions I'd want answered are: 1) How much with this cost me?, and 2) What

do I get out of it?" said McReynolds.

Jack Riter, Fire Chief of the Wayland Volunteer Fire Department, which has 30-40 members in the area, questions whether people living in the area will get their money's worth with the new tax. If the annexation is passed, Wayland will lose the \$40 annual dues of those members.

"It's not the idea of us losing members. It takes us too long to respond to that area, but if they have to come out of Canton, it will take just as long," Riter said, noting that Canton's new fire station on Hwy. 81 is not manned at all times. "We don't feel they will get any better fire protection than what they have now, and I don't think it's right for Clark County people to pay a tax to support Lewis County fire departments. Everyone I've talked to along Rt. Z is opposed to the annexation."

Riter will be attending a meeting of the homeowners association at Lake of the Oaks this week. McReynolds said he plans to host additional public meetings in Monticello, Williamstown and St. Patrick closer to the election.