

WHO'S PAYING FOR YOUR FIRE/EMS COSTS?

Towns and villages are experiencing increased costs to provide these vital services, and the dilemma is “who” and “how” should these costs be addressed in the future. Recent Wisconsin Towns Association scholarship winner, Cory Schlosser, addressed the issue for township officials to answer one major question: How can rural communities find balance between the cost and value of local fire departments?

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT:

Would you be comfortable seeing your neighbor's cabin burn down because they didn't pay a special fee for fire department services? How about an ongoing property tax increase to pay for fire services? Maybe the government should control all the fire departments? Maybe privatization is the answer?

The Wisconsin Dept. of Commerce categorizes fire departments/stations in three categories: Career; (full-time firefighters); Combined (half career, half volunteer); All Volunteer (no full-time staff).

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Funding for the 750+ fire departments/stations comes from taxes, fee-for-service, state and federal programs, and grants.

IS FIRE PROTECTION A RIGHT OR A PRIVILEGE?

There are a few government services—with which we've been brought up—with which we feel entitled. One of these is fire and ambulance services/availability...and we don't have a problem if the cost is somehow bundled with other like “entitlements”—like plowing snow, street repair, library, pool access, etc. These services are based not only as consumers but as citizens. And citizenship is not based on your ability to pay; it's based on your participation in the state and culture. Author Schlosser states “we should all be provided basic services because it is morally and ethically the right thing to do; good for the community as well as the individual.”

If you agree that basic services are considered a “public good” we must be cautious about privatizing such services wherein those who don't pay are considered free-riders and for whom a fire would not be extinguished. At the same time, it should be the job of both government and citizens to look for strategic ways to reduce and share rising costs.

FROM THE DIRECTOR'S CHAIR



Greetings! First off, a few changes: C.J. Knegten (CJ) has been on the advisory board for a decade or so and recently actually retired, and is leaving the board (as many of us who want to retire but never seem to get there well know.) He was able to both sell his primary residence and sell his 32-year-old business at the same time. Yeah for CJ! CJ will become a permanent Wisconsin resident AND (bless his heart) still remain a WISRA member. With as much help as he has been, it's nice to read him write "Thanks for watching out for me all these years." Kudos to you as well, CJ.

Sara Wagner has been on our website for many years under the tab "Cabin Rental Assistance" and was instrumental in helping those of you who wanted details on how to rent out your cabin for various times. She has moved out of state and has suspended her consulting business. We have removed her link from the website and thank her for helping our members during that time.

Politics here at SRA are slow (thank goodness; we all need a break) and we're all awaiting the governor's budget bill in which there are usually a lot of surprises hidden in the details. Some of these "details" will no doubt require some SRA input to shape matters to be less obtrusive to nonresident landowners. We've been successful a few times over the years in squeezing something into the budget bill that helps seasonal residents directly but not so much this time around.

Committees are starting to become more active and we monitor a dozen or so of them and their proposals/bills and sponsors. It's a good time for us to take inventory of the current political climate and see where we can be most effective.

The watchword for all of you—as we approach springtime and your annual town meetings and board of review meetings—is to pay attention to the local budget, mil rate, and contracts with fire, emergency, and police services that could discriminate against nonresidents. Regardless of your inability to vote, there are municipalities who offer online testimony and related input more. Also more townships are opening themselves up to alternative input because attendance at meetings is at an all-time low. Always ask for a straw vote that includes nonresidents. It isn't binding but it shows local leadership about nonresident values and opinions.



Keep the peace,

Nick Kaufmann,
SRA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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FUNDING RISING COSTS

As for funding, the “2% Fire Dues” is not enough. This is a “tax” imposed on fire insurance premiums for residential and commercial properties...paid by the insurance company annually. This needs to be reexamined by legislators and insurance providers. Block grants and assistance programs are available as are local fund-raising activities. Others have suggested a “fire tax” paid through utility bills—as unpalatable as that might be given all the taxes and fees now on phone and electric bills. The effort toward permanent funding would at least insure that residents could count on fire response.

FULL-TIME OR VOLUNTEER; DEPENDS ON YOUR AREA

There are roughly a million firefighters in the US and more than half (780,000) are volunteers. They are spread over 25,000 fire departments...and EMS depots. For most of our seasonal resident readers, they are not only volunteers but they are spread over large rural areas—easily understood when you see all those water tankers in

the parades; they are there because most fires are in areas where there is no water supply. Volunteers save taxpayers over \$140 billion (with a “B”) compared to having full-time firefighters on call 24/7. And many have to pay for their own gear...another thing to consider.

TAKE AN INTEREST

As you go about your summertime business at your cabin ask your town clerk or local fire station about these matters. How are you now being covered? How has your homeowner’s insurance premiums been affected by the type/distance/services for fire protection and EMS availability? Will you be billed for services if you need them? What is included in your property taxes now? How is your local government dealing with rising costs?

Tell us here at the office (e-mail or letter) what your experiences are and we’ll report back on the problems/opportunities; pros/cons of fire/EMS services in YOUR area.

SUPPORT REPORT

A selection of members’ problems concerning their Wisconsin residency; a sampling of the breadth of issues your dues support. Locations and specifics are kept “sketchy” to protect privacy. Images shown are not actual members. None of the following should be considered legal advice for the reader.

BRUCE RUCKS, ELGIN, IL We talked about his dilemma in the context of the broadband issue in Wisconsin (see Issues & Updates in this POST) but this report is on what happens when you try to deal with the providers themselves. Bruce is trying to get a tower from AT&T on his hilltop; he’ll even pay for it!

SRA connected Bruce with Angie Dickison of the Public Service Commission—she is the director of the



Wisconsin State Broadband initiatives. She has been very helpful and supportive. She put Bruce in contact with Bob Webb who is VP of “Fixed Operations and Technical Projects” with Nsight

Telservices of Green Bay. (Apparently they are connected to AT&T in some way but we’re not sure.) His response: “Our director of RF Engineering looked at the location. His comment was that

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ISSUES & UPDATES



POSITIVE RESPONSE TO BROADBAND SURVEY that SRA sent out this past fall (and continues to send out) to members. Governor Walker is now proposing to accelerate the investment in broadband infrastructure across Wisconsin. (“Broadband” is a term generally used to describe wide-bandwidth, high-speed connections to the Internet.) He proposes to increase funding to underserved areas by \$35 million with an increase just this year from \$1 million to \$15. At the same time, the Public Service Commission (PSC) announced it will increase funding to \$26 million. Plus there’s an infusion of federal money from Connect America Fund 2 between now and 2020. These investments will have a big impact on town residents throughout rural areas.

CONSERVATION ORGANIZATIONS BEHIND NEW FEE INCREASES. As reported in January’s e-mail ALERT, 14 such organizations have joined in support of raising hunting/fishing fees on resident anglers and hunters. As we’ve discussed, nonresident hikes will not be far behind. SRA testifies that this would be a good time to develop a new category of fees for nonresident landowners who get caught up in the resident-nonresident policies. We urge DNR policymakers to bring such proposals to the legislature since they are the only ones in a position to establish such fees and “products.”



STONE FENCES IN DOOR COUNTY MUST GO. So argues the Wisconsin Dept. of Transportation (DOT) against stone fences in the right of way of Highway 57 going through much of Door County. These stones were “piled” by farmers years and years ago as they cleared the land for farming (and cherry trees!). Rumor has it that DOT might overlook some stone fences that were/are “stacked” as opposed to piled. Go figure. Thanks to Jim Maronek of Ellison Bay for the heads up on this. Seasonal residents be informed!

FRUSTRATED BY WISCONSIN’S SHIFTING WATERWAY POLICIES? From year to year it seems that policies governing the waters’ edge (lakes and rivers) go from one extreme to another. Wonder why? A new report is available that examines some of the decisions around water management so if you want to know all the details download this 80-page report: Shifting Currents at www.wisconsinacademy.org/shiftingcurrents or contact Matt Rezin at mrezin@wisconsinacademy.org or call 608-263-1692 ext 10.



RULES ON FALLEN TREES AND PLANTING TREES IN EASEMENTS CLARIFIED. If a tree falls in the road, who cleans it up? Can you plant a replacement? Trees in the right of way or town easement belong to the landowner but if the tree in the easement falls on the road, the town has to clear it. But if your tree next to the right of way (not in it) falls into the right of way (not the road) then you, the owner, has to clear it. As for replanting, you need town permission to plant within 10 feet of the right of way. Most right of ways are two rods from the center of the road. Know what a rod is? Something to look up.

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN TUITION. Seemingly an unlikely occurrence but Governor Walker has suggested it as part of the budget bill being reviewed this spring. He is targeting a cut for undergraduate residents only, in an attempt to encourage resident enrollment. Nonresident tuition seems unaffected at this point but it’s SRA’s history of reporting such matters that it will be no time before the nonresident fees are hiked a bit also. Two factors mitigate against each other; a bounce back of the economy leaving more discretionary dollars for college tuition; a national outcry against the total cost of a college education and the debt it’s leaving for the graduates.



RETIREMENT TO WISCONSIN WAS SLOW... MIGHT INCREASE.

When our members end their membership with SRA, it's usually because (a) they have sold their summer home, (b) they have sold their primary home and moved to their summer home, or (c) they/ or mate have deceased. Ok, a few become disenchanted with SRA progress and leave...but not usually. With the housing market being so tight and mortgages not as readily available to young people as they once were, overall movement associated with retirement has slowed down. No one wants to "give away" their primary residence in order to move to Wisconsin and the recreational market for selling a Wisconsin home is equally slow. Thus a sort of stagnation...or holding pattern. We see this about to change with a few more members here and there announcing their plans to retire in Wisconsin...and others leaving their summer homes to stay put at their primary residence or move on to another place to retire. With a new administration, perhaps the economy will rebound and we'll see more movement.

Just Ask Q&A

Answers to members' questions that might have a general appeal and be useful to others.



Q: Years ago my township would plow our road and divide the charges amongst the few of us on the (private) road and put a charge on our property tax bill—the same way cities charge for mowing if an owner creates an eyesoar on his/her property. They would also do a driveway and bill the same way. But over the last decade or so they've shied away and now they will not do it. Why? Also, is there a problem with me pushing some snow from my driveway onto the road? *Name withheld until the winter is over.*

A: Attorney Carol Nawrocki addressed some of these issues for the Wisconsin Towns Association. Here's our paraphrasing of her article. While statutes allow for a county, town, or city/village to enter into a contract (meaning it's not for free) to do such, it is the general opinion that it is not advisable unless there are no other means for the owner(s) to have the snow removed. If contracted, the government entity may not profit from the service. In other words, government can't be seen to be competing with private industry for customers...i.e. private snowplowing services, i.e. anyone with a pickup truck and a plow. There are a few cases under review that might change the statute to prohibit plowing. As for pushing snow in the road, if the road is private you can do whatever you like but if it's a public road, there's a state statute prohibiting it and a town can request the county sheriff to cite people for a violation.

MEMBERS' FORUM

Letters, notes, e-mails, and voice mail messages from the members. Sometimes critical, mostly informative; sometimes answered by the staff; most times they are self explanatory.

General thanks, kudos, and short notes from members: Meredith Robinson, St. Paul; Fred Bisch, Huntsville, AL; Cheri & Jerry Turner, Naperville, IL.

Nick, so you know, I sent a note to Ms. Stepp regarding nonresident hunting licenses. Your latest issue of the newsletter prompts me to write her, and I appreciate the reminder. I told her we had several hundred acres and host hunters as well as wildlife. I pay taxes and upkeep. It is fair to say that I have given my financial support to the state and that support should yield a fairer license fee. That's why I propose that nonresidents who own 50 acres or more be allowed to purchase a bow/gun deer license for the same fee as residents. >> *Editor's note: Thank all of you who wrote DNR Secretary Cathy Stepp in support of a new fee category as did member Donal Nekrosiu, Oak Park, IL.*

Hi. We've been members a long time; thanks for your work. We received a note that a revaluation is coming and they want to enter my home. If I'm not there, I need to call them to verify what the interior looks like. Do I have to allow them entry? Can decorating increase my taxes? They haven't been in since we finished it. GLENN SCHWEITZER, WHEATON, IL >> *Glenn—nope, you don't need to let them in or even call them. However, you then forfeit your right to go before the board of review if you don't like your assessment, and yes, indeed, your valuation might increase dependent upon the value of your finishing work and decorating. Vinyl floors vs. ceramic? Formica tops vs. marble? Best to cooperate because they can be nasty if you ignore them. Good luck. —Nick*

Erika, I'm not sure why to renew. I have yet to see anything for hunters. The DNR dislikes out-of-state-landowners—we pay full price for licenses. MIKE THIEL, LAFAYETTE, IN >> *Mike, we feel your pain, but the DNR has been super supportive of nonresident landowners. It's the legislature that is the problem. We've made marginal gains with a few fee categories but not the biggies like deer gun and annual/or senior fishing. We can only hope and keep the pressure on them. —Nick for Erika*

Nick...hate to be picky but your reference to Chris Kent in the last POST was that he "hales" from Wauwatosa rather than "hails" from the same area. Hopefully he's still pretty hale and hearty in his work. I couldn't resist. WALTER PEARSON, ST. PAUL, MN. >> *LOL! One for the astute readers...zero for me, the proofreader/editor. Glad to see you're reading. —Lisanne*

Dear SRA members, I have put my cabin up for sale after getting rid of family stuff collected over 60 years. It was a difficult few months. I gave, and gave, and threw away. I will miss going there but it's too hard for me to

drive by myself. Anyone out there interested in a “rustic” place without facilities? MADALYN YEZDAUSKI, SAN ANTONIO, TX >> Madalyn, this is a sad, sad story that we’ve heard over and over as our members “age out” of their summer places. Unfortunately SRA doesn’t get involved in real estate but we’re sure your local realtor will find a good home for your home...so to speak. In the meantime, come up and visit sometime when the weather is good and thanks for your support over all these years. —Editorial

Nick, first, congrats on your wedding! Many years ago my husband and I attended an “OSLO” meeting in Rockford. I noticed that there were pictures from a WISRA meeting last February. I work weekends so I have to plan way ahead. Will there be a meeting in 2017? Thanks, VICKI LENART, PALOS PARK, IL >> Thanks, Vicki, for remembering my wedding this past August. No, we have no seminars planned for 2017. But if some subject comes up that requires us to respond quickly with details, we’ll arrange one. Online webinars and social media discussions/blogs have obviated the need to get together for such meetings in order to exchange information. —Nick

Editor: I’d like to take some informational brochures to the annual meeting of our association in July. Can I arrange to have some shipped to me? Thanks so much. SUSAN McMILLAN, BURLINGTON, VT. >> No problem. Call or write us a week before and we’ll ship them to you or your association. —SRA Staff

Editor, you don’t make it easy to renew membership from my smartphone. I was at the doc’s office and tried to renew but I didn’t have my ID number. Most other nonprofits make it pretty simple to renew. RICHARD PRICE, CHICAGO, IL >> Richard, duly noted! It’s hard to keep up with all the digital and online options... but we’ll try. Thanks for looking after our processes. —Erika

Exec. Dir. Nick, thank you for trying to reduce fishing fees. It’s so little to ask compared to what is paid for property taxes. Ah well, another year of not fishing in my lake... PETER BROZEK, ST. PAUL, MN >> Peter, don’t give up! Nick says the two-day license for seniors is a low-cost alternative for those few occasions when the time is ripe to drop a line. —Editorial

SRA, I just read the most recent newsletter and was disappointed to see no mention of the talked about new hunting and fishing fee for nonresident landowners. Did anything come of it during this past legislative season? Is the idea dead or just on hold? Thanks for your efforts on this topic. DENNIS HAMMER, SPEEDWAY, IN >> Dennis, nothing has turned into a formal proposal or legislative action as of yet but our current work is to keep the fees from rising even further for nonresidents. But your excellent letter to Secretary Stepp outlined the problem for many. Thanks!

SRA, my server was not able to print out the last edition of POST and you guys reacted quickly. Thanks! Keep plugging for us as you and your late partner, Sylvia, have been doing for years. I always forward your newsletters to fellow riparians to reinforce my pleas for them to join us. FRED & CHARLENE FOREST, LISLE, IL

AROUND WISCONSIN

Bits and pieces of news, factoids, and what's happening at the capital, and around the state.



- ➔ **PROPERTY TAX BILLS CREEPING UP** ...forecast coming in at 1.6% average increase...highest since 2009-2010... will vary by community and type of government...counties could be held to 2% increase in their levy...since 2011 increases have been kept to just 2.5%.
- ➔ **HOW ABOUT THOSE PROPERTY VALUATIONS?** Overall up 3%...but still below peak values in 2008...good to see a gain for 3rd year in a row after 5-year decline. Equalized values, of course.
- ➔ **HIGHWAYS IN RELATIVELY GOOD SHAPE** ...according to a study comparing highways around the country...only 4% of rural roads in poor condition with a 40th ranking among poor roads (a good measure!)
- ➔ **BRIDGES ALSO PRETTY GOOD** ...with 14% in deficient condition, it's better than the 20% nationally. Only 6 other states had better bridges.
- ➔ **400 DAIRY FARMS GONE** ...again last year...the number has been declining for decades as farmers retire without a successor...number of cows grows as mega-farms expand.
- ➔ **MIGRATION FROM WIS. SLOWING** ...10,000 folks moved out in 2015 but only 7,500 last year...nevertheless WI gained 3,000 from IL...200 from MI and 50 from IA...mostly retirement movements.
- ➔ **BUT POPULATION GROWTH STILL LAGS OTHERS**... with a meager 0.2% increase in population compared to twice that in IA and three times in MN.
- ➔ **DNR DROPPING PEOPLE** ...as positions are being eliminated...almost 600 in last decades. High point of 3,000 in 1995 and down to 2,500 this year. Doesn't seem to be slowing their effectiveness.
- ➔ **FIRST IN PRODUCTION OF 11 PRODUCTS** ...including cheese, cranberries, oats, ginseng, mink pelts, corn for silage, dry whey, and milk goats! That's Wisconsin!
- ➔ **BUT RANKS 30TH IN PRIVATE SECTOR JOB GROWTH**...reflecting national slowing of economy over last two years...1% growth compared to 1.5% in prior years.
- ➔ **WHOOOPS...RANKED LAST IN BUSINESS START-UPS** ...compared to neighboring states...which were not ranked that much better...entrepreneurs scarce in this economy.
- ➔ **UW TUITION CUT FOR RESIDENTS**...as proposed by Gov. Walker...for undergrads only...nonresident tuition unaffected.

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it is a good site. However, we do not see significant (cellular) demand or request for additional coverage for our service in that area at this time. Thank you for reaching out to us.” SRA follow-up is in



process. Our actions will include a major question to the policymakers: “How are you going to provide broadband to rural areas when they ALL don’t have ‘significant demand?’” That’s the whole problem; not enough people over a rural area to justify the costs of towers and things. If the money poured into the problem doesn’t change the attitudes of folks at Nsight Telservices then the money will be wasted.

PRISCILLA STURM, MOUNTAIN

VIEW, CA The Sturms want to keep a car in Wisconsin for when they come here but are having trouble getting insurance and registering the car in Wisconsin. To get the car registered in Wisconsin you need to show insurance written for the car in Wisconsin, but she reports that insurance



companies require a Wisconsin driver’s license which she is not about to get since she’s from California. SRA looked into this and we can’t find ANY insurance company that has that requirement but we did find that some “local” agents prefer not to write insurance on cars of absentee owners so they’ll come up with excuses like the one Priscilla was given. Other suggestions? Have your homeowner’s insurer include the car...or change agents.

MIKE MURPHY, GOSHEN, IN Mike’s weighing the pros and cons of moving to Wisconsin vs. Missouri and wants to have input. SRA’s advice on this is to watch relative assessments between like properties; Wisconsin is high compared to MO. Cultural factors are significant so look into retirement mobility from IN to MO. versus IN to WI.

JEFFREY LUCKSTED, CHICAGO, IL

Jeff has his Class-A RV parked on his 2-acre parcel in Waushara County and is being cited for a zoning violation. He has a permitted and approved well, electric, and septic.

After a few suggestions/warnings, we put Jeff on to attorney Wally Shannon for some legal advice. Just because other departments gave permits it doesn’t supersede the overriding zoning requirements. Unlike a mobile home, the RV can’t remove the axels



and make it a house, so it’s hard to “disguise” it. Most ordinances like this require that the RV be moved every so often so as not considered fixed. Consulting attorney Wally Shannon’s advice before going to court over it is, “Call the county and work with them before turning it into a fight; there is often room for an

early compromise/solution to these issues. In fact there might be a straightforward process that a cooperative clerk can walk you through so you can still enjoy your RV on the site.” SRA adds that Jeff should also get a copy of the actual ordinance and read it; often it gives other alternatives.



WAYNE WOLSEY, ST. PAUL, MN.

“We have a cabin on Bone Lake in Polk County and have been attending the annual meeting of the lake district association and would like an answer to this question: Is it legal for a Wisconsin lake district to pay for firework displays on the lake using district funds?

Attorney Vanessa Wisshart expressed that the plain language of the statute does not explicitly allow for funds to be used for fireworks, however “the District might be able to argue that fireworks displays are encompassed by the District’s authority to undertake projects to enhance the recreational uses of the lake” —which is in the statute. The strength of this argument lies within the goals of the district’s entire program.

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

TIPS & HINTS

QUIET READING ALONG THE LAKESHORE THIS SUMMER



TIP: Check out "The Best of Wisconsin History and Culture Since 1855"

HINT: The Wisconsin Historical Society PRESS offers a unique catalog of titles on everything Wisconsin from the Green Bay Packers to famous musicians, heroes, and pioneers. A brief 24 pages of book covers, short bios, and affordable prices. For quiet reading along the lakeshore this summer, put

your Kindle away and cuddle up to a real book. Go to www.wisconsinhistory.org/whspress or call 800-621-2736 to order a printed copy. You can also request a print catalog from this e-mail address: whspress@wisconsinhistory.org.