

Township residents vote themselves large tax hike

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In a time when people everywhere are decrying any sort of tax increase, a property tax hike in the double digits is unheard of, much less a 50-percent increase passed by citizens themselves.

But this is exactly what the residents of Credit River Township wanted to do in a continuation of their annual town meeting Tuesday night.

Town supervisors were already proposing a significant township tax hike of 25 percent, which would raise the levy to \$1.25 million. Residents agreed to double that in order to do more road repair and reconstruction in the eastern Scott County township of nearly 5,000 people.

“It’s absolutely overwhelming to have that kind of situation. I bet it’s the biggest percentage increase in the metro area, maybe the state,” said Credit River Vice-Chairman Brent Lawrence.

The township voted 45 to 1 in favor of a \$1.5 million levy for 2011. Supervisors had said \$1.5 million was the amount required to make significant headway on a road improvement plan that was approved a few years ago.

“Nobody wants an increase in taxes, but this a situation where residents really understood the need,” Lawrence said. “Everyone who got up to the podium said we need to maintain the infrastructure. There were comments made that the roads were underfunded for a number of years and now it is time to look at that and build the fund up.”

By 2015, more than a third of the township’s 53 miles of paved roads will be more than 20 years old, said Supervisor Tom Kraft. “We’re trying to get 30 years-plus out of our roads.”

The best way to prolong the life of roads is to maintain them before they get in rough shape, said Lawrence.

Residents preferred to pay more now, rather than let road work balloon.

“In the past, the township has been more reactive than proactive, we’re trying to be proactive,” Kraft said. “If we don’t start doing something, by 2015, we could be looking at \$15 to \$20 million.”

“We need to build that fund up,” Lawrence said. “We have a lot of developments approaching 25 to 30 years old. In the days when they were built, developers came in and said we’ll build you a road, but we had no standards for them. Now we have the 9-ton Minnesota Department of Transportation standard.”

In townships, residents directly set their tax levy, either in March at their annual town meeting, or in a continuation of the meeting in the fall when more is known about the budget.

Lawrence was aware of no extra effort to get residents out Tuesday, other than the usual mention in the town's newsletter and Web site.

"This was the largest group ever for a continuation," said Credit River Chairman Leroy Schommer. "We have had as few as five people decide our levy. It was really a surprise when they filled the town hall."

While the township will be putting more money towards roads, it is trying to reduce other expenses as other municipalities are doing, Lawrence said.

"We are looking at all line items and saying what is necessary," he said. "We are looking at cuts in telephone expenses and other places."

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