Plan to buy airboat divides volunteers, commission

By Jeff Brown
Reporter staff

A decision by the volunteer firefighters' association to buy an airboat has opened a rift with association president Josh Finn and fire chief Brian Demrow on one side and retired firefighters and commissioner Doug Dypold on the other side.

Speaking at the fire district commission's monthly meeting on Thursday night, Feb. 6 Sumner town chairman John Dohner, himself a retired firefighter, said he had heard rumors about the purchase of the airboat and said he was concerned about the effect the purchase would have on his town's budget.

"The fire department account is going up and up," said Dohner. "The spending never stops." Along with Sumner, the towns of Albion, Fulton, and Porter and the city of Edgerton are members of the fire district, and each municipality pays an annual fee to the district for firefighting and emergency services.

Finn answered Dohner by saying the volunteers had approved the purchase of the airboat at the monthly meeting in January, but hadn't yet decided how to pay for it. Finn also said the purchase would not affect the fees each town and the city pay the district because the money in the volunteer retirement fund comes from the state's two-percent fund.

Each year, the state Insurance Commissioner collects two percent of the combined fire insurance premiums paid by businesses and homeowners in Wisconsin and deposits the money in a fund administered by the state Department of Safety and Professional Services, known as the "two-percent fund."

The Department of Safety and Professional Services distributes the money from the two-percent fund proportionally to the state's cities, villages, and towns, who by state law may use the money only to buy fire equipment, pay for fire inspections, train firefighters and fire inspectors, or fund firefighter pension funds.

Dohner asked Finn whether the association was considering paying for the airboat with money in the volunteer firefighter retirement fund, and if so how the fund would be paid back.

Dohner said that was important because when the retirement fund was established it was supposed to be self-sufficient after a certain period of years. "I know Ryan and Brian were in on those conversations," said Dohner, referring to Demrow and deputy chief Ryan Beckwith.

Finn said it was unclear whether the fund was restricted to being used for retirement benefits. "We haven't found anything in our by-laws or our meeting minutes stating that it can only be used for retirement." Finn said the association had hired lawyer Matt Roethe to advise whether the money from the fund could be used to buy equipment.

"That was always set up as a retirement fund," Dohner told Finn. "I've been around here a little longer than you."

Commission chairman David Viney, who represents the town of Porter, said the decision to buy the air boat has "nothing to do with the district. It's the volunteers that are doing it." But commissioner Doug Dypold, who represents the town of Albion, said the purchase of the airboat was an issue the towns had a right to weigh in on because the two percent money came to the volunteer retirement fund through the towns.

"We have quite a few reservations on this," said Dypold. "The two percent money can be withdrawn by the state at any time. If Governor Walker decides he wants that money we're all going to be short two percent. I think you need to consider this very carefully," said Dypold, looking across the table at Finn.

Imprecise wording in the intergovernmental agreement that created the fire district in 1992 makes it difficult to determine whether money in the volunteer retirement fund may be used only for retirement benefits.

Members of the volunteer firefighters' association have voted to buy an airboat like this one owned by the Fond du Lac County Sheriff's Office, shown here in action on Lake Winnebago. Association president Josh Finn said the boat is necessary to conduct rescues on Lake Koshkonong, but some retired firefighters are opposed to using money from the firefighter retiremnent fund to pay for the boat.
(Photo courtesy of Fond du Lac County Sheriff's Office)

Section of VII.E of the 1992 agreement requires the district to place the two-percent money "in the Volunteer Fireman Retirement Fund and Fire Department Equipment Fund."

From that wording, it's unclear whether there are two funds—one for retirement and one for equipment—or a single fund in whose name the word "fund" appears twice and from which money can be used to pay retirement benefits and buy equipment. The association has always main-

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tained only a single fund for the two-percent money.

An amendment to the intergovernmental agreement made in 2010 states that the two-percent money shall be placed "in the Volunteer Retirement Fund," wording that would seem to restrict money in the fund to be paid out as retirement benefits. However, Finn said the district has told the association that money in the fund may also be used to buy equipment.

Finn said the air boat was necessary to help with rescues on Lake Koshkonong.

The Rock County Sheriff's Office has an airboat, but Finn said the boat is "completely unreliable." "It's had blown fuses and they've had to go to gas stations looking for fuses while we have calls running," said Finn. "Other times, it just won't run."

Additionally, said Finn, an airboat stored at the Edgerton fire station could be on the water on Lake Koshkonong in 15 minutes, whereas it takes deputies 45 minutes to scramble the county's airboat to the lake. Those 30 minutes, said Finn, often mean the difference between life and death.

Finn also said the airboat would make water rescues safer for firefighters and EMTs. "We can get a piece of equipment that can go up the river or across the ice and go from water to ice, and we can go up to that person and pull them in the boat and take off and nobody gets in the water."

Finn addressed concerns about whether an airboat could handle big waves on the lake by saying the model the volunteers chose to purchase had a deep enough hull that it would be seaworthy in rough water.

The Fond du Lac County Sheriff's office owns an airboat like the one the volunteer association wants to buy, and uses it for rescues on Lake Winnebago. Like Lake Koshkonong, Lake Winnebago is a big shallow lake that's crowded with boats in summer and ice fishing shanties and snowmobilers in winter.

Fond du Lac County Sheriff's Lieutenant Bill Thadych said the airboat cost $150,000 and has been worth the money. "You can't put a price on saving a life."

Tadych likened the air boat to the "ducks" boats used to give river tours at Wisconsin Dells, "except on steroids."

"It will go through anything," said Tadych. "It can traverse from ice to open water and come right back up."

Tadych said the air boat runs on regular high-octane gasoline, not expensive and hard-to-find aviation fuel like older models. Tadych said the airboat has been very reliable. "It's met all of our expectations," said Tadych.

One of the retired firefighters walked into the *Reporter's* office the morning after the commission meeting looking for a reporter to talk to about the plan to buy the airboat

"I've talked to all but two of the retirees, and everyone is adamant in opposing taking money out of there for anything but retirement," said Arnie Lund, a big man with a neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper mustache. Lund, age 54, served as a volunteer firefighter for 28 years.

Benefits paid out by the fund are modest; according to Finn, the most any retiree receives is $2,000 a year. "The reason we started this was just to have a little bit of something for risking our lives, and then after 25 years it's like a 'Thank you,'" said Lund.

Lund said that was important to him and the other retirees, who received only a per diem for the time they spent out on fire fighting calls, unlike current members of the association who are paid a wage for the time they spend on call. For instance, said Lund, he and other firefighters spent nearly 16 hours battling the blaze that destroyed the historic Carlton Hotel in downtown Edgerton in 1991. "Our per diem was $8 a day, so it worked out to 50 cents an hour," said Lund.

Despite the fact that retirement benefits at their most generous amount to less than $200 a month, Lund said he and retirees depend on the benefits to help get by in a weak economy. Lund said using $120,000 or more from the volunteer retirement fund to buy an airboat is wrong. "These guys want all the frills," said Lund, referring to the fire district. "Let's leave what we built for 30 or 40 years."