

Duette considers tax to improve fire department

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EAST MANATEE — With an annual budget of \$26,000, the Duette Volunteer Fire Rescue Department needed donations to purchase its 1978 fire truck and 1985 tanker. Its tiny fire station, more like a pole barn, is staffed by 15 volunteers.

But Duette — like Braden River, Southern Manatee and Parrish before it — plans to create its own independently chartered fire district and impose a fire tax on what could be the only group of county residents who don't pay one now.

"This is kind of the big, untapped area of the county, and there is development pressure in this direction because of land values," said Duette volunteer fire chief Jim Leonard. "We are seeing more people move into the area, and we will need to provide services on a daily basis."

Some residents of this rural but evolving town 35 miles northeast of Bradenton indicate they want services that the nonprofit volunteer department can't provide, even if it means paying more taxes.

"I wouldn't mind paying the tax if it means faster help," said lifelong resident Betty Glassburn. "If I had a heart attack at my house, it would be a minimum of 30 minutes for an ambulance. I think we would get newer equipment.

Duette has 200 homes now but expects 1,000 by 2014, Leonard said. Duette has 10 to 15 traditional businesses, but it also has many orange groves, vegetable farms and small manufacturing facilities.

"We also get a lot of bedroom traffic from people who work in Hillsborough County," Leonard said. "We don't see the traffic because they travel north on Taylor Grade Road."

In order to become an independent fire district, Duette will have to create a charter and take it to its local legislative delegation. From there, the charter proposal must be put before the state Legislature and receive a majority approval.

Finally, the governor must sign the bill.

"Of all the options, this one is the most complicated and most subject to failing," said Henry Sheffield, the deputy fire chief and fire marshal at Braden River.

Sheffield was asked by the Duette board four years ago to lay out options for becoming a fire district, but town officials took no action on those alternatives.

"It is a lot of work, and we are all volunteers," said Leonard, when asked why Duette held off previously. "We have very limited financial resources to pursue anything."

Sheffield suggested four

which is controlled by a board appointed by the Manatee County Commission, or create its own dependent district.

Leonard said board members prefer to create an independent district, which would be elected by residents.

"Our leaning is to go toward an independent district because we feel it would give more local control to our community out here," Leonard said. "We want to have our commissioners elected by the community."

The idea of joining Myakka City wasn't appealing either, Leonard said.

"We want to make sure that funding raised in this district stays in this district," Leonard said.

It hasn't been decided how the tax would work, but it would have a ceiling so it wouldn't penalize growers with huge amounts of acreage, Leonard said.

"We would want to upgrade our equipment, personal protection equipment and communications," Leonard said. "The trucks we have now are adequate. But the county is getting ready to make a big change in radio systems. We also have a problem during the day with manpower. So many people work outside the district."

Duette fire department's seven-person board of directors recently voted unani-



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Jim Leonard, Duette Volunteer Fire Rescue Department chief, said development pressure is creating a need for more services.

more people out here all the time," said Gerald Groover, a member of the board. "These are people not used to taking care of their own."

Although no public meetings are scheduled to determine tax rates and options, that will be in the coming months, Leonard said.

Right now, Duette's volunteer firefighters cover an area roughly 210 square miles from Saffold Road on the west to the Hardee County line to the east, from Hillsborough County to the north and south to a mile north of State Road 64.

Manatee County provided some funding to help the de-

partment on one end and to provide bathrooms.

Most of the department's annual budget goes to insurance coverage, fuel and maintenance.

Richard Dymond, *East Manatee*