

By Jan Schultz The Imperial Republican

More questions than answers were raised at last week's city council meeting on possibilities of a suburban fire district.

At the council's request, the rural fire board's five members attended the meeting to discuss the 1991 agreement being used by the city of Imperial and rural board, which separates responsibilities.

A suburban fire district would encompass the same area now covered by the Imperial and Lamar Volunteer Fire Departments, but would have one board overseeing all operations.

That would remove the city council's current oversight of the city equipment and approval of volunteer firefighters. One board, elected at a public meeting, would oversee all operations.

Council member John Arterburn said plans for a new fire hall brought up discussion of a possible suburban district.

"I'm not sure if now wouldn't be a good time to consolidate the two fire districts," Arterburn said.

He said consolidation of the school worked well, "and I think this could work equally as well."

Currently, the agreement states the city and rural each provide its own equipment and insurance coverage. The city also provides the housing for both the rural and city equipment.

Equipment between the two entities can be shared to fight fires in "exceptional and unusual circumstances."

A large fire in the city limits could utilize rural equipment if deemed necessary. While the city truck has left the city limits in rare circumstances to help fight a major fire, generally that equipment stays in town.

Several questions were raised at the meeting, including what the change would do to tax levies and how would current bonded indebtedness be handled both now and down the road (both the rural and city have outstanding bonds on equipment).

The rural board was also interested in how the change would affect the two percent lid under which it operates. They are bound not to increase tax askings more than two percent over the previous budget year.

Rural board member Mike Bauerle said he would support the change if it makes fire protection more efficient.

"Shifting cost from one to the other is not the answer," he said.

One of the reasons the IVFD is planning for a new fire hall is due to space issues at the current 637 Broadway location.

In the past two years, the rural board has purchased two additional firefighting units, a 6x6 used tanker acquired from the Nebraska Forest Service and a second quick attack unit. Dive rescue equipment was added to the IVFD fleet the last six to eight years purchased with department funds, but is insured by the rural district.

City equipment had remained relatively the same, although its city pumper is now bigger than it used to be. The city also owns the Jaws rescue unit.

Ownership of the command car is shared.

Fire Chief Nick Schultz and members of the rural board said they feel equipment is adequate for fire protection at this time.

There was some concern expressed on how the suburban fire district discussion will affect

progress of the fire hall.

IVFD member Rick Elliott said the timing of it all bothered him.

“We need a new fire barn and this is just slowing the process,” he said.

City Attorney Wendell didn't think the discussion should affect the progress. If a suburban district would ever evolve, he said the city-owned new building could be leased or sold to the new district as possibilities.

Rural board member Steve Wallin, though, said that could make the change more complex.

No action resulted from the Feb. 19 meeting, but the rural board will meet this Monday to discuss things further, then meet again with the council.

In the meantime, Wendell plans to visit with the Grant Volunteer Fire Department, which operates under a suburban fire district, to get some input on how it all works.

Besides Bauerle and Wallin, other members of the rural fire board at last week's meeting were Pete Dillan, Keith Wood and Clay Lotspeich. They are appointed by the county commissioners. Fire hall planning continues

Fire Chief Schultz said the architect is continuing to work on plans for a new fire hall at the Broadway site at this time, but also noted some of the designs, particularly the truck bays, would work at either site.

The city council has not firmly decided on location for the hall. They are considering the city-owned lot north of the library and the Wellington football field that abuts East 12th St., now owned by Chase County Schools.

Early estimates put the building cost at about \$1.5 million, but until a location is finalized and drawings complete, the figure is just an estimate, according to past discussions.