

Windham Exploratory Advisory Committee meets

By *Jamie Bowers*

There was a special meeting held by the Safety Committee in Windham Thursday, May 3 to discuss the possibility of a joint fire district between Windham Village and Windham Township. Council Representatives Rachel Barrett, Sonya Edwards and Phil Snyder, Mayor C. James Moore and Village Administrator Maurice Hankins as well as community residents Tom Bytch, Jesse Wirrick, Thomas Tauche, George Bengston, Bruce Riniger, Don Vanderbloom and Bill Sponaule are members of the Exploratory Advisory Committee. All members have a vote with the exception of Mayor Moore, who may only provide information to the committee. The township trustees were invited to be a part of the committee but none appeared at the first meeting.

The village and township of Windham had operating agreements regarding fire protection and medical response teams dating back to 1965. A two-mil levy, one for operations and the other for equipment, has been in existence for years. According to the Ohio Revised Code, the county auditor collects the funds through property taxes and pays them to Township Clerk Jayme Neikirk twice a year. With an operating agreement came power on both sides to make decisions on how the funds were spent, however, there has been no operating agreement since January 2004.

While everyone on the exploratory committee agrees that funds have not been misappropriated and that the township trustees have made sound financial decisions about the fire department, they believe that it is unfair to give all decision making powers to the trustees. June 2005 correspondence from the mayor and council to the township trustees claims taxation without representation.

Members of the committee and the audience questioned why the township trustees have ignored several invitations to research the possibility of a joint fire district. Mayor Moore said that the participation of an educated public is key to settling the disagreement. He hopes that future meetings of the exploratory committee will result in residents of the township and the village understanding that both municipalities should have decision-making abilities regarding the levy money generated for the fire department.

When questioned about the viability of the village separating from the township, Moore said that although the Ohio Revised Code permits the county auditor to divide the levy money and existing equipment between the two municipalities, that is not an option he or anyone else wants. He added that it would be costly to operate independently, and there would be a fight over the fire station that is located in the village.

Windham only required a 2-mil levy. He emphasized that additional tax dollars would be needed to pay fire board members and a fiscal officer if a joint fire district was formed. Furl added that with the current arrangement, fire levy money is kept separate from township money and that the trustees and clerk are paid by township funds to administer fire department funds. He also explained that once the township refused to sign a joint fire district agreement, the village refused to sign another operating agreement. Furl also noted that despite the fact that an agreement was not in existence, the trustees agreed to increase fees paid by the township for dispatch as well as to alternating their meeting place between locations in the village and the township when approached with such requests by Council Representative Marian Garrett in 2005. Furl concluded that fire department personnel are very happy with the current arrangement and that the township clerk, also known as the fiscal officer is liable to both municipalities and that the village receives a financial report every month from the township.

The Exploratory Advisory Committee for a Windham Joint Fire District will meet again Wednesday, May 16 in the boardroom of the high school. The S. Main St. entrance should be used. The goals of the committee are: to identify the specific problems which show reasons why a Joint Fire and EMS District needs to be considered; to obtain information about joint districts and how their personnel operate from board representatives and emergency personnel in Portage County and other counties and compare it to the Township Fire District; to determine if the cost to change to a joint district is more, less or insignificant; to determine potential consequences of continuing with the current fire district; to report to village and township residents about the information gathered; to provide a recommendation in the best interest of the community to the Windham Village Council and Windham Township Trustees and the residents of both.

During a post-meeting interview, Township Trustee Howard Furl said that the trustees were asked by the village to sign an agreement for a joint fire district two or three years ago. He said the offer was refused, because most joint fire districts require at least a 5-mil levy while the operating agreement in



Windham Village holds first meeting seeking Joint Fire District

**Township trustees not
interested in district,
feud continues**

JAMIE WARD

Windham

Without an operating agreement in place since the end of 2003, the Village of Windham feels it has no voice in the Windham Fire Department, which serves both the village and township.

On May 3, the village held its first exploratory advisory committee in an effort to establish a Joint Fire and EMS District.

Council members Rachel Barrett, Phil Snyder and Sonya Edwards of the safety committee met to discuss future options.

In a resolution passed by council on Feb. 20, the village said, "the (Windham) Township Trustees began making all of the decisions without equal voice and vote of the Village Council regarding the Fire District spending the resident's tax dollars."

So, rather than trying to pursue another operating agreement, the village wants to form a 3- or 5-man Joint Fire District, said Windham Mayor C. James

Moore.

Trustees have said the current operation of the fire department is working for all residents and a Joint Fire District would cost residents more money.

In a letter dated June of 2005, Moore wrote, "Our proposal is a peaceful alternative that we believe is fair, reasonable and provides representatives from both sides equal voice and vote. And most importantly, can provide an improved Fire and EMS service to village and township residents."

The exploratory committee will continue to meet before a recommendation is made.