

MIDDLETOWN

Board rejects \$300,000 funding plan for fire station

An \$800,000 casino grant will cover most of the cost for work at the fire station, but the problem has been coming to agreement on the rest.

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The long road toward a new and improved home for members of the William Penn Fire Company's Middletown station on Bristol Oxford Valley Road just got longer, and more twisted.

The township supervisors voted 3-2 at Tuesday's meeting to reject a recommendation by township Manager Richard Gestrich to contribute \$300,000 toward a renovation/addition project for the station that will cost a total of \$1.54 million, according to estimates.

Gestrich proposed getting the \$300,000 from a 20-year loan. Paying it back would have cost the average township property owner about \$1.50 a year more in taxes, he estimated.

Supervisors Kathy Heuer, Chuck Thompson and Robert McMonagle voted against the latest funding plan because they said they didn't see enough of a willingness by William Penn officials to cut back or defer parts of the project to save money. Various options laid out by township-hired architect H. Joseph Phillips would have saved from \$130,000 to \$290,000.

"I'm concerned about the lack of compromise," Heuer told William Penn Building Committee Chairman Barney Wheeler at Tuesday's meeting. "You're asking for everything. You're not going with any of the plans of our architect."

Wheeler said William Penn members had worked on the plan for the Middletown station's renovation and addition for years and he didn't feel parts of it should be cut out.

"This has been designed to where we think it's appropriate," he said. "You can take anything and start chopping it up."

A township contribution of \$300,000 still would have required about \$438,000 from William Penn, Wheeler pointed out.

"That's a large commitment for an all-volunteer organization," he said.

Township and fire company officials were happy several weeks ago when the Redevelopment Authority of the County of Bucks announced an \$800,000 grant to Middletown that the township plans to use for the fire station project. Money for the grant comes from the Philadelphia Park Casino in Bensalem.

However, the scramble for more funds began a little later when the low construction bid on the project came back at \$1.32 million.

Items like furniture, signs, architectural fees and some other things bring the total to \$1.54 million. Wheeler said the fire company's share would come from a \$200,000 loan from the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Association and other sources.

"We can fund the balance," he said at Tuesday's meeting. "We'll find a way to get it done."

Thompson said one of the reasons he voted against the \$300,000 township contribution was that William Penn has been unresponsive to questions about its finances. Wheeler apologized for that at Tuesday's meeting, but said he doesn't handle financial matters at the company and estimated William Penn has somewhere around \$200,000 in the bank.

"We ask them how much they have in their treasury and they don't tell us, but they want the township to take out a loan on faith," said Thompson. "They didn't do anything but demand that they want everything exactly the way they want it."

Supervisor Jasper Caro, who voted for the \$300,000 township contribution along with George Leonhauser, said the latest funding plan was reasonable.

"I'm not saying the other board members are wrong, but these firefighters invest a lot of their time in a volunteer job and provide fire protection to 30 [percent] to 35 percent of the township," said Caro. "That firehouse has been there since the 1960s and is in definite need of

a rework. I don't think what they are asking for is overkill."

The plan calls for an addition more than triple the size of the station on Bristol Oxford Valley Road near Woodbourne Road. A 5,476-square-foot addition will have three vehicle bays, an engine room, office and storage. The existing 1,745-square-foot building, built in 1963 by members of the fire company, will be converted into a recreation room, multipurpose/exercise room and storage. Thompson said something must be done soon because one of the requirements of the redevelopment authority grant is that there be substantial progress on the project this year. "[William Penn officials] have to come back and be ready to make changes rather than just demands," said Thompson. Wheeler declined further comment.