

PEKIN DAILY TIMES

Will Peoria charge out-of-towners involved in auto accidents?

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PEORIA — Getting in an accident in Peoria could soon prove even more costly for out-of-towners than a dented fender.

The Peoria City Council will review an ordinance Tuesday that would charge non-Peoria residents for services fire department personnel perform at the scene of an accident.

The city hopes to raise \$200,000 through fees such as \$687 for putting out a car fire or \$1,483 to extricate an individual from a vehicle if rescue equipment is required.

Peoria Fire Chief Ed Olehy said firefighters would continue to respond to accidents just as they have in the past. "Our responses aren't changing because of the billing," he said.

What will change if the city adopts the measure is that non-residents will be billed for involvement in an accident. The idea for assessing charges came out of budget talks last year, said Olehy. "The fire department was tasked with coming up initiatives to raise money or face looming cuts," he said.

The fire department lost two rescue squads and 18 firefighter positions in the final 2019 budget that was approved in December but, without the proposed ordinance, the cuts would have gone deeper, said the fire chief.

"We meet regularly with firefighters in the 'Big Seven,' Illinois cities outside of Chicago with populations of 100,000 or more, and learned that a number of those cities are already charging for services at the scene of an accident," said Olehy, citing Naperville, Elgin, Waukegan and Orland Park as examples.

“Last year, Councilman Tim Riegenbach asked me about a bill that his daughter received from the fire department in Carbondale after an traffic accident down there. I said was familiar with the practice,” he said.

“People don’t realize it, but we’ve been charging non-residents for years for services like boat tows, putting out car fires and extricating people from vehicles,” said Olehy.

“The billing service that we’ve talked with works with over a thousand cities in 42 states, and they’re not the only company involved in this kind of work. This is nothing new,” he said.

City residents would not receive a bill, but non-residents would be held responsible, according to the proposed ordinance. The bill would first go to an individual’s insurance company. The non-resident would be responsible for whatever insurance didn’t cover, under the measure.

At Large Councilwoman Beth Jensen first proposed the idea of charging for fire services during budget discussions in 2017. “It’s taken awhile for the idea to come back,” she said.

Kevin Martin, spokesman for the Springfield-based Illinois Insurance Co., called the proposed measure “a hidden tax.”

“We’ve seen this time and time again,” he said of communities looking to find sources of additional revenue. “But it’s a double-edged sword. People that live in nearby towns may be coming into Peoria to work. This bill penalizes those people,” said Martin.

Twelve states in the country have banned the practice of charging for accident services, he said.

“Sometimes, the idea sounds attractive but there are a lot of pitfalls. It can backfire,” said Martin, noting that the city of Rockford recently rejected a bill that would have charged accident fees on non-residents.

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