Written by Wendy Otto-Shimun
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IRON RIVER TOWNSHIP—The Iron River Township Board held a special meeting prior to its regular October meeting, informing voters of the importance of passing the township's operational millage on Nov. 6.

The township has been running without operational millage funds for the past three years, and according to board members, cuts will have to be made in the near future if the millage request fails again. __PUBLIC__

The board is asking voters to approve two mills, specifically for operational purposes, which would bring in $105,748 per year.

Resident Jeff Gendron inquired about the breakdown of the millage, questioning the dollar amount the township receives. Assessor Kim Schmidt and Clerk Amber Laturi explained that the one mill would bring in $1 for every $1,000 of taxable value.

The request on the November ballot is for two mills, meaning that if ones property had a taxable value of $50,000, the township would get $100.

It was also explained that the ballot wording will ask for an "increase," since there is currently no operational millage.

But, Supervisor Mark Polley pointed out, the past operational millage was two mills.

Despite the request for two mills, Polley said the township would need three and one quarter mills just to break even. Last year, the township took in $178,000 in revenues but spent $265,000 on normal department spending.

That did not include any extras or money spent on roads.

"We're not out there wasting people's money" Polley said.

Laturi added that every year they run without an operational millage, they are dipping into the general fund for $60-$80,000.

"We have to have a reserve," she added.

"We're not hurting now," said Polley, "but if we have a problem, we'd like to be able to take care of ourselves."

Polley noted that the Township Hall has now become a problem, with Americans with Disabilities Act compliance becoming an issue.

"If this passes," Polley said, "We're still going to be conservative." He added that one of the main reasons for getting the millage passed was for the next board.

"I don't want to strap them with nothing," he said.

If the millage does not pass, Laturi told the public, decisions will have to be made regarding cuts.

"It won't be easy, but we'd have to start," she said.

Polley concurred, stating, "We understand people are hurting, but we can't continue to provide the services. We have no choice."

Trustee Ken Piwarski discussed his desire to see Iron River Township grow and become progressive rather than going backwards, but noted that they need to live within a budget.

With the lack of millage, the board has been resourceful in keeping the township operational, using timber sale income to help out the general fund, keeping cemetery expenses down by having Polley fill in as needed and working with neighboring municipalities in sharing infrastructure as a money saving measure.

Grant acquisition and low interest loans have also been an immense help to the township, with several projects in the works.

A $500,000 MEDC grant helped fund water system infrastructure upgrades. A $3 million grant for the current Rural Development water system project and a 50 percent grant for wellhead protection were all awarded in the past few years.

The township has also recently applied for grants to help with updates to the sewer system and two Department of Natural Resources grants for recreational projects.

Despite the steps forward, Polley stressed to the public in attendance at the special meeting that the operational millage is vital in keeping the township's services as they are currently are.

With the current road millage set to expire in December, the November ballot will also include a request to renew the road millage for one mill for three years, which would generate $52,874 in 2013.