

Gas pains for towns

EMERGENCY FOR RESPONDERS

8:11 PM, May. 23, 2011

Written by

Maria Prato | Staff Writer

Five dollars per gallon. That's where some experts predict gasoline prices will reach by midsummer.

While the news might shock the driver of even the most fuel-efficient sedans, that rising price's same impact on municipalities and emergency responders is nothing short of intense.

Unlike the average driver, police officers, emergency-service technicians and firefighters are constantly on the go, their mission hinging on keeping their gas-guzzling transportation idling at the scene.

Ahead of the curve

As Central Jersey municipalities do their best to crunch the ever-growing fuel-cost numbers, one local official said Middlesex County has done its part in helping prepare for recent hikes.

For the past five years, the Middlesex County Board of Chosen Freeholders offered its communities \$500 toward the purchase of a hybrid vehicle, for the first two vehicles it purchased, Freeholder H. James Polos said.

In all, 11 communities took advantage of the grant money, for a total of approximately \$22,000 before the funds dried up.

Polos applauded Highland Park for using the grant money toward the purchase of a hybrid Ford Explorer for its police department's traffic bureau.

"When we began our green initiative in Middlesex County, one of the roles we felt the county needed to play was understanding and implementing green quality of life," he said. "We offered a mini-grant so they could have exposure. Six short years ago, there was a large learning curve. We were hoping that they would grow in their (green) fleet."

In a National Public Radio story on Jan. 1, former Shell Oil President John Hofmeister anticipated the \$5 fuel rate, which the Department of Energy noted would be up nearly \$2 from the beginning of the year.

In line with Hofmeister's thinking, Monroe officials increased their spending for fuel by approximately \$50,000, just prior to passing the municipal budget, township Business Administrator Wayne Hamilton said.

The public typically pays more than a municipality, which is exempt from paying taxes on its fuel, he said. For example, the township is paying in the neighborhood of \$3.29 per gallon for diesel and \$2.90 per gallon for gasoline; however, that's up from just a few months ago, when the same products were \$2.85 per gallon for diesel and \$2.60 per gallon for gasoline.

Even so, municipalities are feeling the pinch at the pumps.

In Monroe, Hamilton said increased spending has resulted in changes in procedures.

"This year we'll be keeping meticulous records on it," he said.

On the road

As prices continue to increase, so do the calls.

Monroe's 12 Emergency Medical Service vehicles responded to 8,217 calls last year – a jump from the 7,794 calls in 2009, said Judy Olbrys, director of the department.

On nearly all of those calls, temperature control and everything from the radios to the overhead lights required a running vehicle.

Olbrys pointed to Monroe's aging and growing population, which had to contend with abnormally erratic weather over the past few seasons, for the climbing number of calls.

Monroe Fire District 2's Chief James Carbin said the district's gas expenditure is expected to nearly double this year from \$8,900 in 2009 to \$15,000 budgeted for 2011.

Maria Prato covers Monroe, South Brunswick and Spotswood; 732-565-7263; mprato@njpressmedia.com.