

Government distributing more money to firefighters

FIRE, From 1B

cash that the federal government must bail them out.

"What did they do with the money they raised from local residents before terrorism?" said Pete Sepp, spokesman for the taxpayers group.

Some in Congress believe the Bush administration is preparing to cut grant funds next year to \$500 million — a 33% reduction but still much higher than in 2001.

Tom Olshanski, a spokesman for the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which administers the program, said the \$500 million figure has been submitted to Congress for "nothing more than discussion."

Olshanski said there is no longer any doubt about whether subsidizing fire departments is part of the federal government's mission.

"Firefighters are the front line," he said. "It's a very appropriate program for the federal government."

Along with FEMA, the program has been merged into the new Department of Homeland Security, created by President Bush to coordinate anti-terrorism efforts.

Grants defended

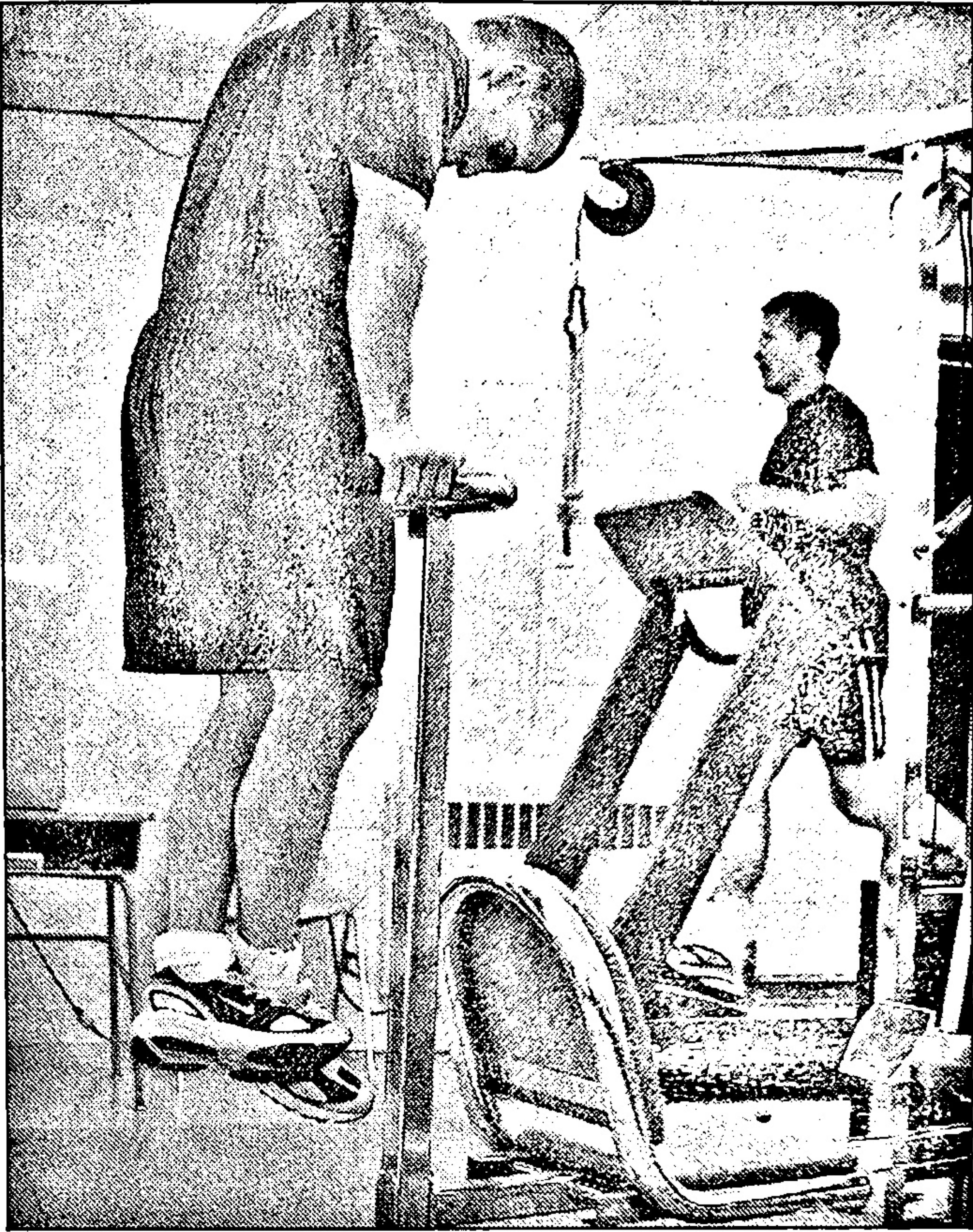
Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-Md.), who fought successfully to save the grants from a budget ax in 2001, said he would oppose any funding cuts at a time when fire departments are being asked to help guard the country against terrorism.

"We have billions to rebuild Iraq," Hoyer said. "We ought to have the resources to make Milwaukee and smaller communities in Wisconsin and Maryland safer."

Sen. Russ Feingold issued a statement urging FEMA to consider all Wisconsin grant applications, even though 585 applicants are seeking some \$60 million this year. If more money is needed to meet the needs of fire departments, the Wisconsin Democrat said he would vote for additional funding.

"Many departments are facing real hardships trying to meet their traditional needs, while meeting new national priorities," Feingold said.

Wisconsin fire departments



DALE GULDAN / DGULDAN@JOURNALSENTINEL.COM

Mark Forster (left) and Lt. Dan Bruesch of the West Bend Fire Department work out. Some fire grants go to fitness.

frequently cite budget constraints in making their cases for the federal funds.

The West Bend Fire Department won a \$67,000 grant last year after asserting that its annual budget of \$3 million lacked sufficient funds to start a physical fitness program similar to the one planned in Mount Pleasant.

West Bend Fire Chief Jim Vest said the grant will be used to buy new exercise equipment and to hire a consultant to evaluate the physical condition of each firefighter and then prescribe a workout regimen.

Vest said the city could not afford the program, but he expects it will benefit from fewer on-the-job injuries and fewer sick days.

"In a perfect world — which this almost is — everybody benefits," he said.

Brookfield Deputy Fire Chief Jeff Johnson said his department's budget of \$5.2 million annually does not offer the flexibility to free funds for the carbon monoxide detectors and other equipment acquired with the federal government's help.

He said communities should view the federal program as an opportunity to fill gaps in their operations.

"It's going to somebody," he said of the grant money. "It might as well go to your community."

MONEY

FIREFIGHTER GRANTS

COMMUNITIES THAT RECEIVED THE LARGEST AWARDS UNDER THE FEDERAL ASSISTANCE TO FIREFIGHTERS GRANT PROGRAM, 2002

Houston	\$750,000
Los Angeles	750,000
Millersville, Md.	750,000
San Diego	750,000
Honolulu	749,315
Battle Creek, Mich.	669,970
Baltimore	632,800
Cleveland	628,208
Huntsville, Ala.	620,906
Beaumont, Texas	592,216

THE LARGEST AWARDS IN WISCONSIN LAST YEAR

Trempealeau Volunteer Fire Department	\$207,000
Madison Fire Department	203,395
Kenosha Fire Department	172,305
Mount Pleasant Fire Department	159,574
Melrose Volunteer Fire Department	158,274
Pleasant Prairie Fire & Rescue	155,313
Dresser-Osceola-Garfield Fire Association	144,226
Appleton Fire Department	129,500
Fond du Lac Fire Department	126,362
Maine Fire Department	125,550

For a complete list of Wisconsin grants and a state-by-state ranking, go to www.jsnline.com.

Source: Federal Emergency Management Agency

Journal Sentinel