

Local

What it's like to be a ... Baker City Fire Chief

With college students choosing majors and high school students deciding between college or the workforce, this series will highlight one career path each week in August and September.

This week, we introduce you to **Mark John**, Baker City Fire Chief.

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The BCP: How long have you filled the role of Fire Chief?

Chief John: This particular role I've been in for seven going on eight months. Before I came here, I was a battalion chief for the city of Anaheim in southern California. I have been in this field for 30 years though.

The BCP: How does your day start? What is a typical day like for you?

Chief John: (Laughing.) Quickly. The role I serve is more administrative, it is much different than the others in the department. As a fire chief most of my responsibilities are administrative. My primary function as a department head is to oversee the total operations of the department. My day generally starts with administrative work, meetings, and other administrative duties, like for example on Tuesdays I have to do payroll. A lot of the things I have are time-sensitive. My day is different than their day (motioning to the firefighters) to a large degree.

As firefighters they have basic responsibilities—a typical day for them will begin with a basic briefing, an exchange information.

Then they do station maintenance, equipment maintenance, personal protective equipment maintenance.

They have to make sure their air tanks are full and ready to go, make sure the vehicles are fueled, have oil and are ready to go. Make sure all medical equipment on the Ambulance gets checked and stocked, the fire engine equipment gets checked and all of those things get done every day.

Once a week the engine gets pumped and a more thorough check of the equipment gets done. It's a constant process. When the bell goes off—they go. And you never know when that's going to happen so all those things get done while they are in between running calls.

Then blood pressure checks are done every Tuesday at the Senior Center at 11 a.m. and they will do Fire Prevention Inspections also.

The BCP: What was it like when you assumed your role?

Chief John: It's really very similar to what I was doing already as a Battalion Chief. As Fire Chief I still respond to certain calls, so with larger incidents I'll go just because we don't have a lot of staff.

In that respect it is very different to where I came from as far as the number of resources available. We are the only full-time paid department in the county,

so that means we're the only ones who are here 24/7, 365 days a year. We are the only responders in the whole county on the fire side and emergency services that is staffed to that level, and that is largely driven by call volume. We are getting busier and busier all the time.

As a battalion chief in Anaheim, I had half of the city—nine engine and truck companies to manage every day and that department ran 100 calls a day every day. That is a lot of activity. Here we run about 5-7 calls a day, occasionally upward of 12-13 calls a day and that's pretty busy for a one-station department.

In our department the emergency medical piece is integrated into our department and that is not the case everywhere. Depending on the structure, the county and the state sometimes the paramedic service is separated from the fire service.

The BCP: What skills, qualifications and education does one need?

Chief John: It depends on the types of services a department offers. We are not big enough for many specialized services but this department has evolved into an all risk agency.

If there is a big accident on the freeway we will go to that. If a train derailed today, we will go to that. If there is a fire, a flood we will go to that. Now we may not, because of the types of resources we have, be able to contain the situation and may require specialized help.

For example, we don't have a Hazmat team. We don't have a water rescue team or an urban search and rescue team. Larger departments like say Portland, Bend, Seattle—they will have more of those specialty personnel that have that training. The department I came from had all of those things. The one thing we do have is we have two paramedics who are on the SWAT team. They are considered tactical paramedics and they have to go through special training to be involved in those types of operations.

The BCP: How does one become a fire chief, how long does it take?

Chief John: Well, it took me 30 years. It can certainly be done faster but for me it was just a very natural progression. I was a firefighter/paramedic then I promoted through the ranks. In larger departments the rank structure goes from firefighter to firefighter/paramedic to engineer or driver to officer Lieutenant or Captain then to chief officer ranks like battalion chief to deputy or assistant chief and the fire chief.

The BCP: What is your background?

Chief John: I was fortunate in that I found this pretty early. I was about 21-22.

I began as an EMT. I got my EMT and did ride-alongs with ambulance services. I took a liking to it early. Once I got started, I knew right away. I was

interested in going to paramedic school so I inquired about that and beyond that I found, at least for me, the best option was the fire service.

There are other avenues once you have your paramedics license. You can work for a private company or emergency departments. You can fly—Don Taggart does that for Life Flight. There are a lot of opportunities. So after I went to EMT school I worked for a private ambulance service, tried to get into paramedic school as quickly as I possibly could, and once I got out of paramedic school I went back to the private service for maybe a year, 15 months. Then I got hired by a fire department and the rest is history. That was my path. It is a calling and it's difficult when you're younger to know that, but it becomes apparent quickly.

The BCP: What happens when a call comes in?

Chief John: Depending on type of call, that will dictate the type of equipment we take. If we get a fire call we will likely still take, depending on how many people we have here, an engine and an ambulance. We respond with as many people as we have in the station.

Then depending on the circumstances, if say, we had an active fire much like the one we had a few weeks ago on Valley, I would go because then one of the officers doesn't have to get involved in the direction of the incident. I would provide the command and control and then they would perform whatever functions are necessary and we would call for help. Something like a working structure fire or a brush fire takes a lot of resources.

We get there, do as much as we can early on, and wait for resources to arrive to do what's necessary.

Now if it is a medical call, we send two people on the ambulance and one if not both of them are paramedic trained.

The BCP: What is your favorite thing about being Chief?

Chief John: For me as a fire chief, I get to just determine the direction of the department. But I don't know that much changes a whole lot from the time you start at the entry level. This profession is one where you are truly making a difference in people's lives. Every day. I mean really call after call you are having a direct impact on people's lives in one way or another.

The BCP: What is your least favorite thing?

Chief John: I think the fact that it is dangerous—it's very, very dangerous. In fact I believe just in the last two weeks the Forest Service has had two people killed. That part of it is very stressful. I have a pretty significant responsibility to ensure that our people are well trained and are kept safe.

They were out on the freeway last week working a fire and not only was the fire a danger but the traffi



Submitted Photo.
Baker City Fire Chief Mark John.

as well. We are all aware of the amount of truck traffic that is on I-84 and having to operate on the side of the road—it is just really very difficult.

The BCP: What advice would you give to for anyone looking at this career path?

Chief John: First of all, I'd recommend it because there is just nothing like it. It is very unique what we do and how we do it. There is the dynamic of actually living together, that's the thing about the fire service, unlike a lot of other professions you're rarely ever operating alone so those interpersonal skills are really critical.

Explore it see if you like it, you will realize that there are just very few things like it. It is unusual for people to leave the fire service once they are here. We do offer volunteer opportunities, if they are old enough (18) they can apply to be paid call.

The BCP: What have been your biggest challenges?

Chief John: I think in any of these roles most of the really significant challenges I've had typically have to do with personnel issues. I've been very lucky here—I've had none.

The BCP: Parting thoughts?

Chief John: It is very much a calling—it takes a certain type of individual to do this type of work. When it gets right down to it, this is very difficult. It's very dirty and it's very dangerous. I don't know that a lot of people realize that. It depends on their experiences. If they have had a firsthand experience with us with a fire or an emergency medical call, generally their perception of us changes significantly because they have firsthand knowledge of what goes on.

I think it is still often the case that people think that firefighters are just sitting around here waiting for a call, and that could not be farther from the truth.

There is so much going on that any given day we really work diligently just to keep up with those things and manage them—and then there is training in addition to all of those other things mentioned.

Mandatory training that has to go on in order to keep your paramedic or EMT license. Then as a firefighter you want to stay well trained on all of the skills that come with that—pulling hose, tying knots, throwing ladder—things like that.

Needless to say the days fill up very quickly.

Bottom line: It's just an amazing career.

Presidential debate

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Yue said, "We still had 10 candidates on the stage. In an ideal world, we want to see four candidates on the stage so each would have more time to go beyond sound bites and talk about philosophy and experience behind their answers. It will take some time to get there."

"Fox News even hosted a no-audience debate for the second tier candidates," Yue said.

Those seven second tier candidates who polled lower and were invited to participate in the earlier forum were Rick Perry, Bobby Jindal, Rick Santorum, Lindsey Graham, Carly Fiorina, Jim Gilmore, and George Pataki. The moderators for the earlier debate were Bill Hemmer and Martha McCallum.

The debate, including its moderators, encountered a tidal wave of criticism from the public. Comments flooded major conservative sites such as Breitbart.com, Glenn Beck's Facebook feed, and well as Mark Levin's feed.

Nearly across the board, viewers felt that moderator Megyn Kelly was out to discredit Trump, and were unhappy that air time was not distributed equally. Many viewers expressed perceived favoritism during the debate for more establishment candidates such as Christie and Bush.

Behind the scenes in production, where the national television viewing audience couldn't see, Yue said, "The debate was electrifying."

He went on to add, "When Fox News cut to commercials, candidates formed their three to four people little groups to converse. During the debate they went after each other on issues, not waging personal attacks like what happened in the 2012 presidential debate cycle. I could not help to notice how deep is our bench in comparison to the DNC presumptive nominee—Hillary who is afraid debating her second-tier candidates."

As to the criticism of the moderators, Yue said, "Fox News moderators are tough and fair. Megyn Kelly should not allow Trump to make her defensive."

Yue said, "I am hoping for a battle-seasoned nominee who can connect with voting public, can offer solutions to our national challenges, and can articulate philosophical reasons to support the solutions to emerge."

To that end he encourages the moderators "to ask our candidates tough and uncomfortable questions such as the bankruptcy question for Trump, the Common Core question for Bush, and the gay marriage question for Kasich."

ORP Chair Bill Currier also shared his experience.

Currier said, "I was invited to attend as a member of the Oregon delegation to the RNC. While in Cleveland we not only attended the presidential debate, but also met with other state party leaders to discuss and plan for victory in the 2016 elections. Seeing the debate live was a real treat because you could see personalities up close!"

Currier also felt the questions were "tough, but appropriate for each candidate."

He believes that with the candidates on the stage, America got its first glimpse of a variety. "There will be at least eight more debates," he said, "so there will plenty of opportunity to get to know the candidates through different moderation styles and debate formats."

Currier says what the audience saw on television, a production that created such controversy, was somewhat different in person.

He said, "I watched the debate when I got back home. It was a very different experience. In the live audience you got to see how the candidates interacted with each other, and their body language when the camera was not on them. This was especially evident on commercial breaks, where they would interact with each other and the audience."

Currier doesn't believe a winner or loser was evident from the reaction around him in the audience. "Each candidate clearly had their supporters, but the responses from the audience were closely tied to how they answered the individual questions. Trump's responses evoked the strongest reactions, but not necessary the most supportive. I appreciated the genuine manner in which each candidate responded."

Rep. Greg Barreto said, "I thought some of the questions were hostile, but I appreciated the directness of most of them. The tone could have been a bit more gracious and achieved the same results."

Currier said in the end, "Americans need and want a president they can trust." He added, "While they may not agree with every policy position of a candidate, they are tired of politicians who are not true to their stated convictions, and who do not operate in the best interests of our country. Americans are fortunate to have a variety of quality Republican candidates from which to choose. As we get closer to the election it will become clearer who is best."

Rep. Barreto noted, "The audience definitely had a large base for Kasich—but we were in Ohio." Kasich is the governor of that state. He continued, "I felt each candidate had their supporters and you could see that when they were called on to answer a question. It's too early to tell on the candidate—there will be several more debates. Some will drop out, and I see others rising to the top 10."

Currier concluded, "Republicans are fortunate to have so many qualified candidates running. I am confident Republicans will have a strong nominee for the general election."

"It was a great experience, a good time to visit with a broad base of people," said Chris Barreto. "An opportunity to listen, learn and observe."

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