

Vernonia Fire District Hires Full-Time Duty Officer

The Vernonia Rural Fire Protection District has announced that Dean Smith has been hired as the Full-Time Duty Officer and as Deputy Chief.

The announcement was made by the chair of the Board of Directors, Steve Weller, at the weekly District Drill on September 14. Smith has been serving as a temporary part-time duty officer, along with Tom Ramsey since the resignation of Fire Chief Paul Epler last fall.

"We needed someone to be here full time-- to respond to calls, to deal with the day-to-day activities, take care of maintenance," said Weller before the announcement was made to the District membership. "Dean had expressed an interest in that and so we have offered him a contract and he has accepted."

Weller explained that Smith currently does not have the experience or qualifications to be hired as Chief, but that the Board's intention is to get Smith trained to the level where he can

move into the Chief's position in the future. "It's not going to be a quick thing, it's probably going to be a couple of years out," said Weller.

Smith says he is looking forward to stepping up and handling the

community know where to go when they need an answer. This will show people that we are moving forward. I appreciate the confidence the Board has shown in me and thank them for the opportunity."



challenges of the new position. "I want to help create some stability and help the District find ways to support the community," said Smith. "We've been without formal leadership for a while, and now our volunteers and the com-

In the meantime, according to Weller and Board member Don Schulte, the Board of Directors is considering finding a Chief on a part-time basis to handle administrative duties and assist with Smith's education.

The process of replacing Epler has taken longer than the Board had anticipated. According to Schulte, the cost of a salaried full-time chief has proven prohibitive at this time, and the hiring of Smith is a temporary fix while the Board explores possible options. "We're looking at other communities and their models to see what might be the best way for us to get this done," explained Schulte.

But in the meantime, the Board appears to have confidence that Smith is the right person for the job. "One of the things we've noticed as a board since Dean has been in, is the willingness of volunteers to be part of the program has really come alive," said Weller. "We've really been pleased. And Dean has really grabbed this opportunity and shown his interest in learning and growing. I think we have someone who really has that eagerness and willingness to want to learn."

Hines Sentenced in Birkenfeld Manslaughter

By April Bamburg

On Sept. 1, in a Columbia County courtroom, a family in mourning reached out to the man who killed their son and stepson in March.

Thirty-one-year-old Desmond Hines, of Birkenfeld, was sentenced to 85-90 months in prison after pleading guilty to charges of Manslaughter in the Second Degree and Felon in Possession of a Firearm,

in connection with the March 19 shooting death of 29-year-old Darrell Schoonover.

The incident occurred in Birkenfeld on March 19, 2009 at Hines' home, where, according to prosecuting attorney John Berg, Schoonover had spent time with Hines after the death of Hines' father. The two drank, made dinner and were shooting firearms in the woods there.

At some point, Berg said that Hines put a gun to Schoonover's head and pulled the trigger.

"Darrell died almost instantly," Berg said. Despite multiple suggestions of why the incident occurred, including that Schoonover dared Hines to do it, Berg called the incident "totally inexplicable."

Members of Schoonover's family addressed Hines prior to sentencing.

"It's hard to stand here and know I'm talking to you," the victim's father, L.V. Schoonover, said through his tears. "Get the help you need. I still care about you. Forgive yourself and do what's right," he said.

Darrell Schoonover's stepmother also addressed Hines.

"When you get out, you'll need support," she said. "I want a call from you, but only if you're clean and sober. If you're not clean and sober, I don't ever want to see you again."

Before her client read his own letter to Schoonover's family and the court, defense attorney Jean Martwick offered a theory that abuse throughout Hines' childhood as issues that may have had some impact on Hines' drug and alcohol abuse throughout the years.

From a young age, Desmond Hines was a victim of his father's physical abuse, Martwick said. Three days before the shooting at Hines' home, Martwick said Hines' father, Dennis, died, and that the will revealed that Dennis Hines had left all of his property to an individual outside the family.

On March 19, Martwick said her client immediately called 9-1-1 and admitted to police that "I shot my best friend in the head," instead of killing himself, running away or trying to change the circumstances of the situation.

Hines addressed Schoonover's family, at some times in tears.

"I just want to tell you how sorry I am," he said. "There's no way I intended for any of this to happen. I took one of the greatest men away from you. I loved him like a brother."

"When I get out, I do plan to be a different man," Hines said in closing.

Hines waived his right to delay sentencing, and Judge Jenefer Grant made a statement of her own before announcing his sentence.

"Mr. Hines, you're very lucky that you're able to be forgiven to the level that [this family] has forgiven you already, that's pretty rare," she said. "Guilt, remorse, those are huge triggers for relapse. You will spend years actively fighting relapse. The best thing you can do to make it up to them [is to never drink again.]"

Grant sentenced Hines to 75 months in prison with three years post-prison supervision. He will receive credit for the months served in the Columbia County Jail awaiting trial.

Manslaughter in the second degree is a felony that falls under Measure 11's mandatory minimum sentencing guidelines. Grant entered a finding that Hines is a drug dependent person, and will be eligible for programs in prison that may assist his recovery, but will not reduce the amount of time he will serve.

Hines will spend 15 months in the Oregon prison system as a result of his guilty plea to a charge of felon in possession of a firearm, and will not receive credit for time served. This sentence will be consecutive to the manslaughter sentence. In 1998, Hines was convicted of burglary in the second degree, a felony, according to Berg, who served as the prosecutor for the Vernonia Justice Court.

"He'll spend 80 to 90 months in prison, but he can remake his life," Berg said.

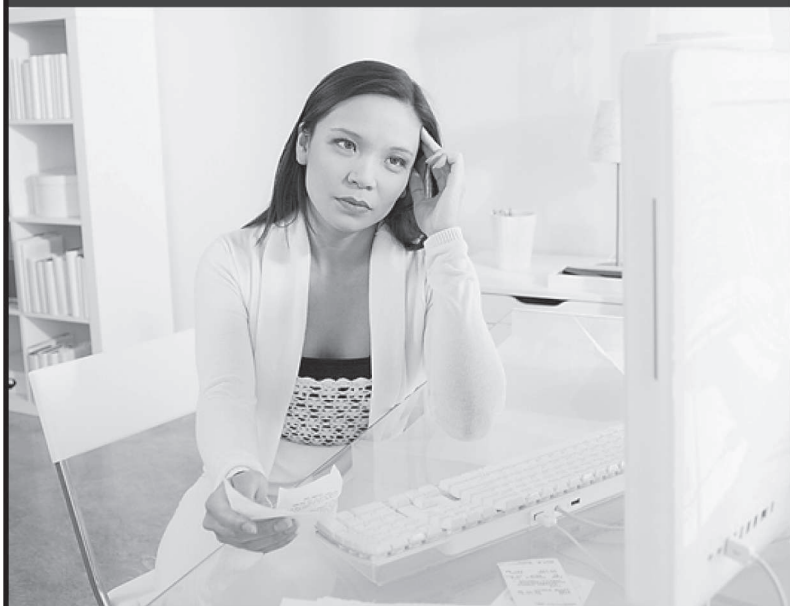
That may be true for Hines, but for the Schoonover family, the loss of a son has been something to contend with.

In addition to the heartbreak of losing a family member, they have also lost a care provider at the care home that LV Schoonover runs in St. Helens. "He was a part of our care staff," he said. "Not only did I lose my son, but I lost my partner."

LV Schoonover said that his son and Hines had known each other since high school, and that he considered Hines "just one of the kids."

"I just hope he gets the help he needs," Schoonover said.

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