

An Opinion: Firefighters Need Us to Respond

By Scott Laird

Vernonia area first responders were busy last week. In the early morning hours of Wednesday, March 25, local fire fighters from the Vernonia Rural Fire Protection District (VRFPD) fought a structure fire, a single story apartment building, with assistance from the Mist-Birkenfeld and Banks departments. Late the next night law enforcement officers were called to the scene of a fatal shooting.

Both these events were tragic, but thankfully are rare occurrences in this community. They were a stark reminder of the importance of our local first responders, who are called to help us at our worst moments.

The VRFPD just announced two ballot measures for the May 19 election that would help address several critical issues currently facing their department.

Vernonia Fire Chief Dean Smith is a long time member of the department, a dedicated volunteer firefighter and officer that the VRFPD Board of Directors thought so highly of that they promoted him to Chief several years ago. Smith is VRFPD's only paid responder.

Smith has been expressing concerns about the need to address several issues for many years. According to Smith, call volume is increasing annually and is at an all-time high. Volunteers from the VRFPD don't just respond to fires, they are also trained to be rescue and emergency medical responders as well, assisting with medical and other emergency assistance situations.

Meanwhile community volunteerism is slowly declining, not just in fire departments across the country, but within our communities in general. The VRFPD currently only has eleven volunteers. Smith says he often has a shortage of volunteers available to handle the calls they face. State requirements for training also continue to increase and are becoming more difficult to reach and maintain.

In addition, the costs associated with the purchase, operation and maintenance for firefighting apparatus continue to increase while current equipment ages and no longer meets recommended safety standards.

The VRFPD Board of Directors, working closely with Smith, have crafted two measures they think will help address some of these concerns.

One measure would fund a paid Training Captain position. The second,

a tax levy, would pay for the purchase of a brand new water tender/pumper.

Both these measures make sense for so many reasons.

The Training Captain position would create a dedicated position responsible for the District's required training program for volunteers. The Training Captain would also be available to respond to calls during day time hours.

The creation and funding of this position would have many benefits for the VRFPD. Obviously, having another paid responder to handle calls gives the District flexibility and better coverage.

Having a paid professional in charge of volunteer development has its own advantages. In recent history the Training Officer position has been staffed by a volunteer, usually one of the best and top officers in the department. The job often requires an extra fifteen to twenty hours of work per week to plan and develop weekly drills for volunteers. Smith says the position quickly leads to burn out; the recent average length of time someone has held the position is three years.

A paid Training Captain could work with volunteers to plan a more flexible training schedule to meet their needs around their other commitments and busy personal lives and help with volunteer recruitment and retention.

At this point we should probably take a moment to recognize and appreciate the huge commitment each and every one of these dedicated volunteers make to our community. They spend an enormous amount of time training, responding and fundraising, all with no compensation. When they respond lives are saved and property is protected. These people are important in our community and they deserve our respect and gratitude.

The equipment levy would allow the District to purchase a brand new piece of apparatus, something sorely needed. The current first-out engine, purchased in 2000 with a similar levy, is now fifteen years old; the recommended standard for first-out vehicles is ten years. This past year the District was fortunate to purchase a twenty year old rig from their friends in Banks, which is now their second-out vehicle. Again, this rig is five years beyond the recommended standard. Their current water tender/pumper is thirty-five years old and has needed continual maintenance and band aids to keep it on the road, and is well beyond the twenty year

standard for a backup unit. Funding for apparatus succession and replacement is desperately needed.

Together these two measures would cost Vernonia area voters \$58.21 per \$100,000 of property value. That's less than \$5 month.

Chief Smith says the District has patiently waited its turn to ask for funding as the community has tried to address its waste water treatment issues, recovered from a flood and entirely rebuilt its school campus. Smith doesn't mention the fact that the Columbia County Sheriff's Office has recently placed several levies on the ballot to fund operations and keep the jail open.

Chief Smith says it's imperative that the VRFPD receive this funding for operations and equipment and I believe him.

As the firefighters were finishing up extinguishing the recent apartment fire last week, a task that took several hours, nearby neighbors who witnessed the fire expressed thanks for the firefighters who arrived and kept the fire from spreading to their homes.

Whenever the members of this community call for help, whether it's to battle flames, perform a motor vehicle extrication, answer a medical emergency, or assist law enforcement in maintaining the scene of an emergency, our local firefighters respond, at anytime, anywhere, every day of the week.

Now they are asking for our help. I hope you will join me in responding to their call.

VERNONIA'S
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One year subscriptions
(24 issues) \$35

Vernonia's Voice is published
on the 1st and 3rd Thursday
of each month.

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