

VERNONIA RURAL FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT

Transitions, Adjustments, Modifications... Change



Change is a word that some embrace, some fear, while others do not totally comprehend the true meaning of the word. Henry Ford once said, "If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got." I bring this up because it is time for change. We have tried to merely adapt, make adjustments, and transitioned a few modifications. All to no avail, as nothing has seemed to make a difference.

The Vernonia Rural Fire Protection District responded to 548 calls last year (see chart on page 14). Of those calls, an average of only TWO personnel responded per call. VRFPD has only 12 members on the roster. To break it down another way, twelve members covered 548 incidents in the year 2015.

Volunteerism is on the decline and it's not just in our town. Vernonia and small communities alike all suffer from it. In conversations with fellow Fire Chiefs it seems that there are thresholds within each jurisdiction that parallel their call volume. For fire districts our size, that number is 500 a year. They agree that this number of calls is taxing on such a small number of volunteers. They just can't continue with the overwhelming time commitments. Burn out is a huge factor.

Your fire district has been continuously publishing information that daytime response is lacking. This is due to volunteers not being available or in the coverage area. That has not changed, in fact, it only seems to be getting worse. The reality is, these volunteers don't have the time to volunteer. The District is meeting its minimum training requirements, but attendance to

incidents, calls for assistance and public events is all but nonexistent.

As the Chief of the Fire District, aside from responding to calls for service, it is my duty to make sure that the volunteers have the equipment needed, and the apparatus to get them on scene. It is also to make sure that tax dollars are spent as wisely as possible. Money is used for training, building and apparatus maintenance as well as daily expenses of normal operations. Forward progress of the District is an issue that the Board of Directors and I work cooperatively on. We try to find ways to keep the equipment staffed to safely provide the appropriate level of service to the community. There are professional speakers and conferences held every year that have hundreds of attendees looking for more information to this issue.

VRFPD averaged 12 volunteers for 2015. Four of those are Lieutenants. Although some won't admit it, (and some will), burn out is a huge factor. They just get tired of always feeling that they can't plan something or leave town because there might be a call. Families get stressed when a parent has to leave the dinner table again to go on a call because no one else is in town or available.

We understand it is not feasible to hire/house a full time paid staff for 500 calls a year. However, it has been acknowledged that we need more than just one. The only way that we have found to add responding/available personnel is through a sleeper/resident/out of district program. The key to running a successful program of this magnitude is with a person that can dedicate the majority of their time to

manage and support its operation. A full time paid training officer would expand and solidify the training schedule, as well as allow a dedicated person to manage the extra volunteers from outside the community.

Where would these volunteers come from? Large metro areas have fully paid stations with little to no fire volunteer choices. Also, local community colleges have classes in Fire Science and Emergency Medical Services. These usually have prerequisites for volunteer/EMS programs to ensure that graduates have some form of real world hands on job experience. This results in students with a need for open volunteer programs. Geographically we are still close enough to appeal to these prospects.

Another aspect of adding a paid full time person is the safety factor. The VRFPD staff and volunteers have consistently responded to all the calls for service over the years. We have done so regardless of the number of volunteers available at the time. The status quo at the station has always been to do what we need to do to get the job done in a safe manner. If we had a policy, like most other departments/districts, where an engine did not respond to a fire, motor vehicle crash, or rescue with less than three people on it, this conversation would be considerably different. We have continually responded with less than a minimum, because we have all felt it was our duty and responsibility to the community.

The reality is that we are getting to a point where if we continue at this current ratio of calls to personnel, there will be calls that do not get a response from VRFPD. Being shorthanded also increases our chances of on the job

injuries.

With one paid staff member, the only thing the community is guaranteed is a command type person that will be able to call in outside resources for help. This position, which is held by the Fire Chief, is currently scheduled for 40 hours a week. I clock an average of 190 hours per month. That is 540 hours that have a high potential for no response.

The District has done research and has come to one conclusion. The best possible chance we have at improving response and maintaining our current level of service is by adding one full time paid staff to the roster. This will be the most cost efficient and will broaden the availability of training for a volunteer force.

If you have any questions, please call or email any time, or you can attend our monthly Board of Directors meeting, 2nd Tuesday of each month, 7:00 pm. Budget meetings start in March on the same night at 6:30 pm. VRFPD is a special district in Columbia County and receives its funds from taxes collected and is a separate fund from the City of Vernonia.

The VRFPD Board of Directors and staff are open to any and all suggestions.

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Recreational Vehicle Safety

By Bob Schattschneider

Many Oregonians love to get out and travel throughout our great state of Oregon. Whether you are an Oregonian, or just an American who loves to travel throughout our great nation, there are some important things to know and remember when it comes to recreational vehicles to ensure that your expedition has a happy ending.

Over the weekend of February 6th and 7th, one of our Vernonia residents tragically died in a recreational vehicle from carbon monoxide poisoning. Daryl turned the heater on to keep warm while on a camping trip, but there was a malfunction with the heating system which allowed carbon monoxide to build up within the camper. As a result, Daryl Tuttle lost his life.

Because of this recent tragedy, we would like to point out some safety tips provided by the Oregon Office of State Fire Marshal concerning recreational vehicles.

Heating systems that use a combustible fuel need to be inspected by a qualified heating and air-conditioning specialist on a yearly basis. The heating system must be free of any leaks that would allow carbon monoxide to build up within the confines of the RV.

You'll want to have a smoke alarm and a CO alarm installed for early warnings of the presence of smoke or carbon monoxide (CO). If one of these alarms sounds a warning, get out and stay out.

Remember when using any type of cooking or heating device in your RV, proper ventilation is important. Use that exhaust fan and open that overhead vent for proper ventilation.

Remember that the number one cause of kitchen fires, whether it's in your home or your RV,

is leaving the cooking area unattended while food is cooking on your stove top. Grease fires will rapidly spread in an RV, creating little time to react.

Make sure that your RV has the proper fire extinguisher readily available near the primary exit. You'll want everyone in the family or group to know where it is located and how to properly use it.

When it comes to generator safety, if your RV has a built in generator, make sure that your generator's exhaust system is leak free at each connection, and that the tail pipe extends past the edge of the RV. Always operate generators in an area where the wind will carry the exhaust fumes away from the RV.

Electrical heaters need space. Keep things that can burn such as paper, furniture, bedding or curtains, at least three feet from heating equipment. You'll need to plug any electrical space heaters directly into an electrical outlet in your RV. Do not use extension cords or power strips to supply power to these types of heaters. If you are using an electrical space heater, make sure that it has an automatic shut-off feature so if it is tipped over it will shut off automatically on its own.

Make sure that you have a fire escape plan. Make sure your emergency exit windows and hatches are clearly marked and in good working order. Make sure that everyone knows where they are and how to operate them.

A memorial fund has been set up at the Vernonia branch of Wauna Federal Credit Union.

Donations will be used to purchase carbon monoxide detectors that will be installed for free for anyone living in Vernonia by Gadget's Gadgets of Vernonia, while supplies last. You can contact Gadget at 503-429-0517 for more information.

Daryl Tuttle was a close friend of Gadget, he would like to help ensure that no one else loses their life to carbon monoxide poisoning.

If you would like to make a donation, the fund has been set up under the name of Garret Abney in memory of Daryl Tuttle.

For more information concerning recreational vehicle fire safety, go to the Oregon Office of State Fire Marshal website at: Oregon.gov/osp/sfm.

Calls responded to January 1-31

Fire	0
Emergency Medical Service	19
Hazardous Condition	0
Service Call	4
Good Intent	0
Severe Weather & Natural Disaster	0
Special Incident	0
No Emergency Found	0
False Alarm	1
Total	24