

An Opinion: Why VRFPD Needs Our Support

By Scott Laird

The Vernonia Rural Fire Protection District (VRFPD) has submitted a ballot measure for the upcoming May 17 election, which citizens living in our fire district seriously need to consider approving.

The measure is a five year tax levy that will raise funding to assist with training and operations for the fire district and could go a long way to help alleviate some of the struggles our local fire fighters and first responders are facing.

The measure would pay the salary and benefits for a Training Captain position who would be responsible for creating, delivering and maintaining a training program for the local volunteers who respond to emergencies.

Vernonia Fire Chief Dean Smith has identified three areas of concern for his department which he hopes will be addressed with the passage of a tax levy: a dwindling number of volunteers, an increasing number of calls that need to be responded to, and increased requirements for volunteers to be able to participate.

A look at some recent history of call volume versus the number of volunteers available to respond clearly explains the main issue our local fire district is facing:

Year	# Annual Calls	# of Volunteers
1997	250	26
2000	337	25
2005	344	20
2010	416	25
2015	548	12

While the number of volunteers has fluctuated over time, volunteerism has trended downward and fallen drastically in the last 5 years; it is currently half of what it was in the late 1990s. Meanwhile the number of calls has risen dramatically, more than doubling over the same time period.

The numbers speak for themselves – our volunteers are being asked to do more, with less of them to do it.

Which brings me to an important point. These aren't just numbers we're talking about here, these are actual people. These volunteers are people who give up their personal time to train and be available to help us when we need them, in whatever kind of weather or whatever time of day or night that we

might call. These are our friends, family and neighbors who are calling for help – more and more of them each and every year.

With volunteerism down and call volume up, the other big issue Chief Smith points to is the depth and breadth of the required certifications his volunteers need.

For a volunteer to be certified to fight a fire they need to attend 240 hours of Fire Academy – most do it during their weekends over the course of 3 months. After Fire Academy, volunteers must go through a rigorous skills training process at their department and get signed off on each skill they show mastery of; this can take as long as 18 months to complete, but depends on the ability of the department to schedule and provide the training needed and the ability of the volunteer to attend those trainings.

Once certified a volunteer must complete 60 hours of continuing education training each year to maintain their certification. If a volunteer wants to preform additional skills, like operating the pumps or driving the rig or be available for wildland fire fighting, additional hours of training are needed. "That's why we don't have a Swift Water Rescue Team or a Rope Rescue Team, because the excess training is just too hard to get and maintain," says Chief Smith.

"I have a volunteer training officer who plans and presents trainings for our volunteers," explains Chief Smith. "We know which volunteers need which skills and sometimes our training officer will spend 15 to 20 hours preparing a training and then those volunteers that need that training are unable to attend the drill that week. That's the way it works with volunteers."

Smith points out the these certifications that volunteers are required to receive and maintain are the very same certifications required by professionally paid fire fighters at Tualatin Valley Fire and Rescue or Columbia River Fire and Rescue who make upwards of \$75,000 a year. "We're asking our people, most of whom have a full time job, families, and other activities they would like to do, to do the same requirements," says Smith.

Chief Smith has recently been visiting with local groups and organizations explaining the need for a Training Officer. Smith, along with a part-time office manager, are the only paid personnel at VRFPD, everyone else is a volunteer. Smith notes that last year, of

the 548 calls for service the district received, there was an average response of two volunteers per call, and that he personally responded to 296 of them. "So that means over half the time it was me and one volunteer," says Smith.

Smith says volunteer burn out is becoming a huge issue for his department and will continue to be a problem as the number of volunteers continues to decline and the work load for those still there mounts.

Smith currently has 13 volunteers. Four of them are officers, three are certified as Fire Fighter I, three are still on probation, two are logistics only volunteers, and one is brand new. Smith says two of the probationary members have been on probation for about 10 years, trying to complete their training so they can become certified as Fire Fighter I. "That shows how hard it is to complete the training," he says.

Ten years! Talk about dedication. How many of us would volunteer to do something and spend over ten years in training before we could reach our goal and perform the duties we signed up for?

"I can't fault our volunteers for wanting to spend time with their families, but we just don't have the people anymore who are willing or able to leave work, put the fork down, turn the TV off, get off the lawn mower, or walk away from their kid's game, in order to help the community," says Smith.

So what is the answer? Chief Smith and the VRFPD Board of Directors believe that hiring a Training Captain will give the department flexibility in how they present and schedule training opportunities for their volunteers, offering more and varied options to work training into and around their busy schedules. This could also relieve the burden for planning and presenting training from the overworked volunteers currently assigned that task.

A paid Training Captain could coordinate with other area departments to share and present training opportunities; this is already being done in places like Forest Grove, Cornelius and Banks where volunteers at any department can attend trainings anywhere they are presented. This type of sharing of resources could be managed to help all volunteers receive their required training.

A Training Captain could respond to calls during their shifts, providing an additional responder and some relief for an already overburdened staff



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and volunteer group.

A Training Captain could organize and maintain a reserve or cadet program that could bring in outside fire science students looking to gain first-hand experience, and possibly provide training classes for students in our own high school. Bringing in outside volunteers as well as training our own young volunteers, is a great way to expand and develop a core base of responders.

A Training Captain could work with the community and local employers to recruit more volunteers and expand the ability of the department to respond to the needs of the community.

These volunteers have spent so much time training and giving to our community. It's time we gave back to them. They need our help.

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