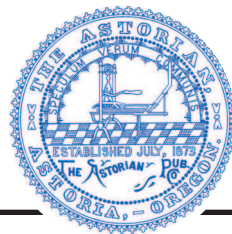


OPINION



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SOUTHERN EXPOSURE



Members of the Gearhart Volunteer Fire Department.

Gearhart Fire

Ask the firefighters

Firefighters are great at saving lives, but they're not always as good at promoting on their own behalf.

Public relations is antithetical to the selfless spontaneity that enables someone to respond to a call at 2 a.m. and enter a burning house. And to forgo evenings and weekends for training necessary to save not only the lives of others, but protect your own, too, in the most desperate and dangerous situations imaginable.

Over the past couple of years, I've had the privilege to write about the heroics of the Clatsop County strike teams who leave their homes and families to volunteer on the lines, in Ventura County and Sonoma, California, and in wildfires in southern and eastern Oregon.



R.J. MARX

Gearhart's 35-person department sent seven men and women to California to fight the most destructive wildfire in that state's history.

In Paradise, California, James Hutchinson, Jordan Chandler, Tanner Rich, Sean Kirby, Angels Vargas, Kayla Miller and Lindsey Wolfe saw images that will remain with them for a long time — the remnants of charred homes, rotting animal carcasses on roadsides, and the raw fear on the faces of residents and homeowners who had lost everything.

"A lot of us have seen fatalities and we've seen the devastation before," Chandler said in November. "But none of us have seen what we saw down in Paradise. It's on a much larger scale than anything we've dealt with here. That town will never be the same."

Children waited in lines to thank them for their service. Community members brought them food and supplies, even if they had little to nothing themselves.

Fires, floods and snakes

Over the decades Gearhart fire has responded to fires, flooding and gales, literally serving as a lifeline to families isolated by the storm of 2007.

They've made untold numbers of ocean rescues. Firefighters helped find countless children and lost dogs.

In November 1956 they even responded to a fire at Cobra Gardens — victims of the fire were snakes on display at the building along U.S. Highway 101.

Gearhart Fire was on the scene in the aftermath of a horrific plane crash in 2008 that took the lives of two adults and three children.

I come from New York City, where of the 2,977 people killed in the 9/11 attacks, 413 emergency workers perished, 343 of whom were firefighters.

There are Gearhart Fire Department volunteers today who weren't even born then.



Gearhart residents packed the fire station to consider a new firehouse location.

Jeff Ter Har



Oregon Department of Public Safety Standards and Training

Fire training in Salem in February. The Department of Public Safety Standards and Training provides training to more than 25,000 students each year throughout Oregon and at the Oregon Public Safety Academy.

When they built the fire station in 1958 the word "tsunami" was perhaps only a Sunday Times crossword puzzle word for what happened somewhere else.

Nothing has changed except the science. It's more precise and the threat is more certain.

Station is 'maxed out'

The firehouse is "sagging about 5 inches and we have a lake every time it rains hard," fire committee chairman Gary Gillam said — in 2017.

Firefighters are "maxed out" on lockers to store their gear. There's no space for new volunteers or even to have drills. If there's a disaster, how will they even get their gear?

Sue Lorain, a member of the original firehouse committee, told me at the time about cracking cinderblock, crumbling walls — "not such a different scenario

from the school," she said.

Gearhart Elementary School is closing in spring 2020 — firefighters will still be in a deathtrap on Pacific Way.

City Planner Carole Connell sent out a revised tsunami map in February — 1,221 Gearhart tax lots are located in the "medium" risk zone; 1,861 would be impacted by a "large" and 2,130 or every property in Gearhart impacted by an "XXL" or "extra extra large."

Gillam was back at this year's town hall. "It's taken me three years — or more — to fully compile the information shared tonight," he said.

Input sought

Three sites are in contention: the current station, the city park at North Marion and Pacific Way, and what is referred to as the High Point site farther north on Marion.

Gillam and others shared what they

called "ideas and concepts. They can or will be altered or changed. We want to know not just what you don't like — but what you do like."

The purpose of the strategy, Mayor Matt Brown said, is to spend the next three months collecting public input.

"I want everyone to tell me what location they like, which one they don't like, and I want specific feedback how we can make any of these locations better or designs better," Brown said on Jan. 29. "Pro, con, give us your ideas. Our only strategy is to listen for three months. I want some specific feedback how we can make any of these locations better, these designs better."

Unofficial survey results show the city park site lagging behind High Point and the current site, Brown said at the city's March 6 City Council meeting.

Fire Chief Bill Eddy said good information was presented at the January town hall.

"Most of this is getting out to the public what we've done so far and what their feedback is," he said. "That's all we want: their feedback."

The decision of where to place the fire station remains with the people of Gearhart, he added.

"If the people feel the park is where they want to put the station, that's the direction they're going to go. If they like one of the other locations, that's where the city will go. The people are going to direct where this location is going to be. It's not going to be the city. It's going to be the people, the citizens of Gearhart."

Does he have a preference?

Eddy paused.

"All I know, is I don't really care for it to be in this (current) location again, mostly because of the tsunami problem. One of the other two locations are fine. Even here, if it gets to be a worst-case scenario, I guess this is better than nothing."

R.J. Marx is editor of the Seaside Signal and Cannon Beach Gazette, and covers South County for The Daily Astorian.