

## How do you justify a new fire station?

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A fire department is a key element of the basic infrastructure of any community. North Tongass is no different. A well-equipped and properly trained fire department plays a pivotal role in attracting new residents and businesses to the community. It is more than population migration that underlies the need for a fire department. It is also more than housing equipment that defines the need for a station.

The North Tongass Volunteer Fire Department's (NTVFD) first mission is life safety! That means protecting the citizens and guests of the North Tongass Fire & EMS Service Area by the best means possible. Your emergency becomes our emergency and we do our best to always be ready to assist you, and we do a pretty good job of it with the help of very dedicated and committed volunteers.

Emergency service organizations provide a myriad of services to the community. Public fire protection services can include, but are not limited to, fire suppression, fire prevention, public safety education, emergency management, rescue, emergency medical service, hazardous materials response and response to other emergencies such as kids stuck in bathrooms or standing by at large events.

Fighting fire is more than responding to the call. It is careful planning; training; resource allocation; and strategic, proactive personnel deployment. Planning for what might happen instead of just reacting when something does happen. So while some may think the job of a fire department begins when the alarm sounds and the trucks roll out of the fire station, the fact is that continuous efforts are underway to plan where to place resources at the right places to be ready in a moment's notice as close to the emergency as possible. This placement of resources includes placement of fire stations.

At the last Board of Director's meeting under 'Public Remarks', acceptable risk was discussed. I thought about what an 'acceptable risk' might be. Fire risk is the product of three probabilities\*:

- the probability of a fire starting
- the probability of a fire spreading
- the probability of a fire doing harm to property and people

\*[http://www.fdexcellence.com/achieving\\_excellence/page/2/](http://www.fdexcellence.com/achieving_excellence/page/2/)

These three elements of overall fire risk have three primary prevention methods.

Public education is the primary means of reducing the probability of a fire starting. Code enforcement also helps but currently the Borough does not have fire code powers. The occupants are the key to preventing fires from starting. By and large, our society is pretty bad at managing fire, pretty bad.

Fire Code enforcement is the primary means of reducing the probability of a fire spreading. When a fire starts, building construction is a principle way of slowing down the fire spread and providing safe exiting from a burning structure. Public education also plays a role. Prevention is better than fighting.

While code enforcement and public education play a role, manual suppression efforts are the primary means of reducing the probability of a fire doing harm to property and people. Water works if we can get it there in time and in enough quantities. So, what does NTVFD do to help improve our fire risk?

Well, NTVFD provides fire education to the students of the Point Higgins School every year in fire prevention. Last year the department was awarded a fire prevention grant from the Office of Homeland Security to purchase an animated robot for use in teaching the concepts of fire prevention to the students. Through an earlier grant, the NTVFD purchased a fire safety trailer that allows the instructors to actually smoke up the rooms inside with safe theatrical smoke to show the kids how to

escape such an emergency. Through other grants, smoke detectors, carbon monoxide alarms, fire ladders and fire extinguishers were purchased to install in our residents homes at no cost to them.

Because the Borough has no fire code powers, the fire department must work to the best of our ability with the State Fire Marshall's office on related fire issues. The FM only visits a few times a year, unless there is a fire to investigate. That leaves the occupants in primary control of their fire fate.

Manual suppression is our only weapon left. In recognition of the inevitability of fire, NTVFD's personnel attend training sessions once a week to hone skills necessary when fire prevention fails. Manual suppression efforts have one major enemy in keeping a fire from spreading, distance.

NTVFD does suffer from two distinct difficulties; 1) lack of volunteers and 2) distance. Distance here is measured in minutes and many studies have shown that fire can double in size every minute. The bigger the fire the more resources we need, most have to travel a good distance to get here.

Finally there is water supply. Once the attack line is opened, the attack team has just a few minutes until the booster tank is empty. That means that a drop tank must be deployed quickly enough to maintain the water supply. In order to maintain the level in the drop tank, apparatus built to carry water-tankers- are needed to keep the drop tank full by ferrying water from a ready source to the tank. Distance here is measured in gallons per minute (GPM). The longer the distance traveled the less water on scene. Have we run out yet, no, close but not out.....yet. How that truly translates into action on the scene depends mostly on the number of personnel we can equip, train and depend upon to respond with the tone goes out. As much as we need a fire station, we need volunteers!

There is a fundamental notion of fire risk associated with modern society that says, "It will never happen to me." Fire Departments are expected to reduce the risk in their response areas by taking measures to prevent the outbreak of fires, to limit the extent and severity of fires, and to provide for the removal or rescue of endangered persons. We are also expected to control and extinguish fires that occur, and to perform other emergency response operations including the delivery of emergency medical services. In short, the fire departments of today are 'all hazards' response organizations.

The cumulative effects of preventive efforts, risk reduction and control, and fire suppression capabilities result in variable levels of risk to the service area and residents. The risk remaining after deducting the effect of the fire department's efforts is the responsibility of the individuals, including owners, operators, occupants, and casual visitors to properties. It should be noted that fire risk cannot be completely avoided or eliminated. Fires do happen regardless of all our best efforts and intentions. Sometimes fires do very destructive and deadly things without reason or remorse.

So, what do we do?

Well, putting a fire station at 10540 North Tongass Highway isn't the only thing that needs to be done, but it will help immensely. Having a location within a third of the population of the area is a tremendous advantage to residents living close to the station. Is it the only thing that is needed? Of course not. We have equipment to place there and we have the personnel to man the equipment.

A fire station doesn't just have to be used to house fire equipment. The Boy Scouts meet at Station 8, we have had a wedding there and KQRS utilizes Station 6 as a command and training post. Both stations are used for voting. What can we do with Station 7? With a little hammer work, a live in person could be stationed upstairs to make response times even better. People could use it for other appropriate things or gatherings. Cub Scouts? We could and would teach CPR and First Aid classes. How do you justify a fire station? You don't, history does. When all is said and done, Fire Station 7 would be a good investment in the future of the service area. Let's make it a future of our making.