

Volunteer fire departments depend on community

By MICHELLE CASADY

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South Brazos County Fire Chief Emily Staples may have said it best.

"There's nothing volunteer about the volunteer fire departments," she said. "It's the same training, we just do it on nights and weekends. The only thing that's volunteer is whether you decide to sign up."

Four volunteer fire departments serve areas of Brazos County not under the jurisdiction of the Bryan or College Station departments.

Each operates on a budget comprised of an allotment from the county, donations and fundraisers, state and federal grants, and taxes collected from those within the service area -- which for most departments amounts to an annual budget of about \$100,000.

The county has given \$29,000 to each of the departments for the past 20 years, though it is not required to contribute at all.

"We always have that set aside up-front," said County Judge Randy Sims. "Our firefighters in the rural areas play an integral part in keeping our residents safe, and the commissioners recognize that."

For comparison, the College Station Fire Department operates on an annual budget of about \$11.5 million, and Bryan's budget is about \$10.5 million. Each of those departments responds to around 8,000 calls for service annually and has a full-time staff of more than 100 firefighters.

Chiefs from each of the volunteer departments said their work is only possible with support from the community in terms of volunteers and donations.

District 2

Chief Merrie Noak said a tough economy has impacted the number of donations coming into her department.

"They have dropped so dramatically," she said. "We used to get around \$8,000 annually. Now, we're lucky to see \$3,000. Now that people are working two or three jobs, they don't have funding to donate to the volunteer fire department like they used to."

The economy also has cut the number of firefighters volunteering, she said, recalling that when she started with the department in the 1980s, about 30 firefighters were volunteering. Today, the number is 16.

The tax base in District 2 contributes about \$68,000 to the department's annual operating budget.

Of the \$29,000 given by the court, \$14,000 goes to pay for workers compensation insurance.

The department has received regular grants from the Texas Forest Service to pay for fire training schools, but a federal grant hasn't been awarded to District 2 since 2007, when it got \$110,000 to pay for gear.

"The fires don't burn any different in the county than they do in the city," Noak said, referencing the differences in how municipalities are funded compared to volunteer departments. "But without the public's help in the way of donations and volunteering time, this just wouldn't be possible."

Precinct 3

Chief Gerald Burnett said donations to Precinct 3 have slowed considerably over the past few years, but a recent \$5,000 donation from a former volunteer will go a long way in making up the difference.

On average, the department receives about \$3,000 in donations, and last year was awarded nearly \$15,000 in grant funding from the Texas Forest Service for training and equipment.

Five years ago, Burnett said, his department was staffed with 40 volunteer firefighters, a number that has dwindled to between 20 and 25.

"Nationally, there's just been a real down trend in the number of people volunteering their time," he said. "Everyone's very busy trying to provide for their own families."

Taxpayers in the service area contribute about \$70,000 to the department annually, and, as is the case with most volunteer departments, fundraising is not considered a reliable source of funding

"You just have to compete with so many other events," he said. "By the time you get the food and go through proper permitting with the health department, it's just nearly impossible to make money, not to mention the time it takes to organize."

Burnett stressed the importance of personnel in running a successful volunteer department.

"You don't have to fight fires to volunteer for your community department," he said. "If you've got a skill or desire to help, I can use it."

Precinct 4

Precinct 4 has been awarded several federal grants for training and equipment over the years.

In 2009, it got a \$190,000 Federal Emergency Management Agency grant to purchase a new tanker truck. In 2004, 2006 and 2007, the department saw more than \$100,000 in grant funding.

But fundraising isn't a focus for Chief Joe Ondrasek, who is a full-time Bryan firefighter when he's not leading the volunteer department.

"The reality is, we do very little fundraising simply because we have a very limited staff and very limited time to allocate to planning," he said. "We do a newsletter and a mailout once or twice a year telling folks what's going on and asking for donations."

The efforts net the department about \$1,000 annually.

"We did our last auction about five years ago, and we just didn't make any money on it," he said. "So we decided to stop."

About \$65,000 comes each year from the tax base.

Annexation has caused a few issues in Precinct 4. Ondrasek said that though the city has been annexing portions of his service area over the years, which depletes the district's tax base, calls for service continue to rise.

That stretches a tight budget and staff just a little tighter.

He said he'd like to see an increase in volunteers.

"We could realistically have 35 firefighters and pay for their gear and everything they need," he said. "But we're doing well with what we have. Ideally, I'd love to have 50, 100 firefighters, even a waiting list, but that takes more budget money."

South Brazos County

Serving those who pay taxes for fire services is something Chief Emily Staples takes very seriously.

"We're the only department that responds to 100 percent of all calls for service," she said. "It's not an option to do otherwise. When they call for help, they expect that someone's coming."

Staples takes a lot of things seriously.

Like fundraising efforts for the department, which netted South Brazos County about \$25,000 last year, far more than the other departments combined.

It's estimated the department's coverage area serves about 10,000 residents, but Staples said the department is supported through donations by less than 300 of them.

"That's why it's so important to get to know your neighbors," she said, describing the department's efforts to go door-to-door meeting people and the monthly newsletter that's sent out. "You just can't hardly make money on fundraisers anymore, so we really appreciate those donations, and keeping them informed of what's going on and what we're doing for them makes that easier."

South Brazos County has the largest tax base of the departments, \$200,000, but that money doesn't come to the department directly. It's used instead to pay for needed equipment, insurance and to make payments on vehicles and stations.

The station hasn't received any grant money in the past four years, though Staples applies for funding annually.

There are a few things she'd like to see change -- update some of the older trucks, increase the number of firefighters -- but for the most part, she's satisfied with the work being done with the resources available.

"None of what we do would be possible without the unbelievable commitment these firefighters make to do this job," she said.

"Family comes first, and your full-time job is second, but they know if we can't be third, then they need to get out. It's all about your community, and you have to care about your community."

Department breakdown

District 2

- * 133 square miles of coverage area
- * 16 firefighters
- * Two stations with one truck stationed at a third location
- * Operates on about \$99,000 annually
- * Averages 350 calls for service a year

Precinct 3

- * 140 square miles of coverage area
- * 25 firefighters
- * Three fire stations
- * Operates on about \$100,000 annually
- * Averages 400 calls for service a year

Precinct 4

- * 120 square miles of coverage area
- * 25 firefighters
- * Three fire stations
- * Operates on about \$125,000 annually
- * Averages 550 calls for service a year

South Brazos County

- * 180 square miles of coverage area

- * 30 firefighters

- * Four fire stations

- * Operates on about \$75,000 annually (tax base contributes about \$200,000 annually to directly pay for insurance and equipment)

- * Averages 600 calls for service a year

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