

## **Volunteers spend majority of their time raising money to supplement tax contributions**

*NOTE: All counties donate funds to their VFD and VRS companies that has the effect of reducing time devoted to fund raising.*

Editor's note: This is the fourth in a series of stories on the rapidly changing nature of fire and rescue service in the Northern Shenandoah Valley. -- By Sally Voth (Daily Staff Writer)

Providing fire and rescue service is an expensive undertaking across the Northern Shenandoah Valley.

Much of the cost is borne by taxpayers, but fire and rescue companies still have to supplement public spending through countless volunteer hours spent raising money through bingo games, ham and oyster suppers, community carnivals and other fundraisers.

All the time spent working on fundraisers takes a toll on volunteers, according to Shenandoah County Fire and Rescue Chief Gary Yew.

"I think it contributes to burnout because so frequently within a lot of the organizations so many of the same folks that are responsible for answering the calls are also the active ones that participate in a lot of the fundraising activities," he said. "I think that's always been the case ... as the responsibilities of the organizations grow, so does their need obviously to raise funds.

"Call volumes are growing annually, especially in parts of the county from Woodstock north that are experiencing a lot of growth," Yew said.

Meanwhile, county, town and city officials see outlays for emergency services as a substantial line item in their annual budgets.

In the valley, that's what it takes to cover the cost of saving lives and property.

In Shenandoah County, alone, the annual outlay is \$2.5 million — and that's not counting what town governments chip in for emergency services.

For fiscal 2008, Shenandoah County has budgeted \$1,043,000 for volunteer fire and rescue companies, County Administrator Vince Poling said. That includes \$135,587 for liability insurance, \$76,600 for workers compensation, \$24,845 for group accident and life insurance, and \$70,799 for gasoline.

Each department gets \$30,000, with the exception of Star Tannery — located in Frederick County, but also serving Shenandoah County — which gets \$15,000, Poling said. Additionally, \$2,500 apiece goes to four fire departments that also have first responders who go on medical calls.

The \$30,000 annual contribution has been standard for some time, Poling said.

"The insurance, the fuel, the contribution is a board decision," he said. "There are some other categories in there which they may request, like mechanical and equipment repairs and maintenance."

Additionally, the county has budgeted \$1.6 million for the Shenandoah County Department of Fire and Rescue, which employs career firefighter/emergency medical technicians, according to Poling.

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Surrounding counties face similar issues.

In Frederick County, roughly \$1.75 million is slated for contributions to fire and rescue departments this year, according to information provided by County Administrator John Riley Jr.

Although fire and rescue companies are combined, contributions are divided among the two services. For fire departments, contributions are based on \$2 per capita in each department's first-in-due area, whereas rescue squad contributions are based on their level of certification.

In Frederick County, individual departments pay for their buildings, as well as the insurance on the buildings and equipment, although the county buys and insures some advanced-life support units and a ladder truck.

There is also a volunteer length of service fund cash balance of \$190,215.

"If you've been in the volunteer system for X number of years, and you earn points each year based on roles that you play, whether it's fundraising or it's responding to calls, you earn points," Riley said.

The money isn't a bonus, he said.

"I think it's more of an incentive fund to encourage folks," Riley said. "You don't have to be a young person that responds only to fire calls. You can help the fire companies in other ways, so you can earn points either way, and if you earn those points, you're entitled to a length of service benefit."

Warren County also pumps millions into its fire and rescue services, which are combined. The funding covering the overhead of the administration office and career staff is budgeted at roughly \$1.19 million for fiscal 2008, according to Fire Chief Richard Mabie. Contributions to the departments and paying their insurance cost about \$850,000, he said.

The cost recovery program, in which patients pay for ambulance transport, was budgeted at \$500,000 in fiscal 2007, but brought in \$600,000, Mabie said. A good portion of that revenue goes to other items in the fire and rescue system, he said.

Five or six of Warren County's stations get fairly equal contributions, Mabie said, but Front Royal Fire Company gets about three times that amount owing to its large call load, while two companies get less because they also receive funding from other counties, with one getting support from Clarke County, and the other Rappahannock County.

Clarke County also contributes to fire and rescue services in the county, to the tune of \$582,693 in fiscal 2008. Of that, \$373,074 is in-kind emergency medical services funding, or five full-time emergency medical technicians as well as part-time staff, said Tom Judge, director of joint administrative services. Three of the volunteer departments get \$38,000 contributions, with Enders Volunteer Fire Company receiving \$58,865.

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Even with Shenandoah County's contributions, fire and rescue departments still need to raise much of their own funds.

Orkney Springs Fire and Rescue, the only combined fire and rescue company in the county, had its annual lawn party on June 23.

"For this, we probably have close to 1,000 man hours just preparing for it," Assistant Chief Aaron Miller said.

Fundraising efforts have had to be stepped up in recent years, he said.

"Equipment's more expensive and it's got to be more specialized," Miller said.

Volunteer firefighters spend more time working over the flames of a grill than putting out the flames at a house fire.

Orkney Springs Lt. Stacey Rinker figures volunteers spend about 70 percent of their time fundraising.

"[It interferes with life] but my wife understands," said Rinker, 34. "I've been doing this since I was 13. That's the majority of our time, fundraising to make the money to be able to have the truck."

He doesn't think all the time devoted to fund raising makes volunteers shy away.

"[It's] just something that you've got to have the love to do," he said.

Such dedication takes a strong person, Miller agreed, "[a person] that has a lot of family support."

"It takes you away from your family," he said. "It takes you away from your work, and this is your social. That's why it's always been considered a brotherhood."

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As volunteer fire and rescue departments continue their efforts to raise money to buy more and updated equipment, some fire and rescue leaders are questioning whether all those new engines and ambulances at each department are necessary.

"That's one thing that the system is currently looking at," Yew said. "We're taking an inventory of apparatus in the county to perhaps look at ways we can combine resources that some of the companies have."

The assessment was sparked by the companies' leadership, and is being undertaken by the Shenandoah County Fire and Rescue Association and the chiefs and captains group, he said.

"I think they see that too, and realize [duplication] may be happening," Yew said.

Years ago, the various fire and rescue companies in the individual towns worked independently of each other. That's no longer the case, Yew said.

"They can see perhaps that they can capitalize on each other's resources instead of working so independently," he said.

It would make economic sense.

An aerial truck costs about \$750,000 new, Yew said. There are three in the county — one each in the north, south and central areas, so those are ideally located, with all the companies able to use them, he said.

The average price of a fire engine runs \$400,000 to \$500,000, according to Yew.

"Many of the companies keep a reserve engine in their house in case they have one break down," he said.

There might come a time when the county owns a reserve engine, so the individual departments won't have to, Yew said.

Mabie sees a similar situation in Warren County, although he feared talking about it might be somewhat controversial.

"I think we've got more resources than what we actually, one, need, and two, have staff to use, but with that said, I'm not going to do a whole of elaboration on it," he said. "The board of supervisors has just approved to have an outside consulting firm come in and look at our fire and rescue department. Some of the areas they're going to look at is our resources, manning our apparatus and fire station locations. We hope they can tell us whether we can replace some."

Riley doesn't see redundancy of equipment being a problem in Frederick County.

"I think the ladder trucks that are purchased by companies are strategically placed based on level of service," he said. "We have ladder trucks in the eastern side of the county where it's highly urbanized, and then on the western side of the county, we have specialized equipment, like tankers, because there's no potable water. I think they've done a good job through the association mixing and matching the equipment needs where they think they need to be."

Another way to combine manpower and save money in Shenandoah County would be to merge each town's fire and rescue companies into one department.

"It's something of great interest [to] the Shenandoah County Board of Supervisors where it's possible to put the fire and rescue agencies into one facility," Yew said. "I know that has happened already at Orkney Springs and has worked out very well."

It's happening in Mt. Jackson, and is being talked about in Strasburg, he said.

"That's something we hope will happen in the future, too," Yew said.

Saturday: The future of fire and rescue service.

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