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# The Northern Light

Blaine and Birch Bay's Community Newspaper

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## NWFR considers new volunteer firefighter program in Semiahmoo

Features, News November 15, 2017



By Stefanie Donahue

Tucked away in a stretch of forest along Semiahmoo Parkway, North Whatcom Fire Rescue (NWFR) station 62 may soon be home to a handful of volunteer firefighters participating in a new resident program.

The station, located at 9001 Semiahmoo Parkway, contains living quarters for firefighters, office space for administrative services as well as a fully-functioning ambulance and fire truck. NWFR fire chief William Pernet said it's the only station in the county to still have a fire pole. The station was built in 1992 and ownership was transferred to NWFR from the city of Blaine in 2013.

"It's a really nice station," he said, but due to a lack of volunteers, it hasn't been used by fire and rescue personnel for the past few years. The administrative offices are currently leased to the Semiahmoo Resort Association. Once a week, staff from Birch Bay Station 63 take the ambulance and fire truck for a test run to ensure their operational readiness.

"[The station] is fully functioning and ready to go," he said. "We just need people."

In 2015, there were more than 1.1 million firefighters in the US, according to a 2017 report from the National Fire Protection Association. About 345,600 (30 percent) were career firefighters and 814,850 (70 percent) were volunteer firefighters.

The number of volunteer firefighters began to decline in the 1980s and 1990s and increased slightly from 2005 to 2009. From 2010 to 2011 the rate of participation dropped again and slightly picked up from 2012 to 2015, with an estimated range of 783,300–814,850 volunteers firefighters, according to the report.

To help boost volunteer participation, Pernet is proposing a new resident program to the NWFR board of fire commissioners, which are in the midst of their annual budgeting process. He estimates it would cost the district \$30,000 per year to provide volunteer firefighters no-cost, full-time residence at station 62 if they respond to a certain number of calls per week.

"It's really a win-win for the district and the individuals," he said. "They are assets for us."

In 2007, NWFR recruited volunteer firefighters through a resident program, similar to the one he's proposing. It was only open to students enrolled in Skagit Community College's fire science program and eventually fell by the wayside largely because of the challenging commute, he said.



North Whatcom Fire and Rescue fire chief William Pernet.

Pernett intends to start laying down the groundwork for the new program as early as this January. This time around, he said he'll recruit locally and have volunteer firefighters working shifts as opposed to some programs that require volunteer firefighters to remain on-call and respond from home.

NWFR is responsible for providing fire protection and emergency medical services to more than 25,000 people in Whatcom County, according to the district's website. Also known as Whatcom County Fire Protection District 21, NWFR was formed in 2006 following a vote to merge fire protection districts 3 and 13; in 2011, it merged with district 4.

The district employs 50 paid staff and has 34 volunteers, Pernett said.

### *Public Hearing*

North Whatcom Fire and Rescue (NWFR) is hosting a public hearing to discuss a 1 percent increase to its budget at 7 p.m. on Thursday, November 16 at Blaine Station 61, 9408 Odell Road. NWFR fire chief William Pernett said, if approved, the budget is slated to increase by \$58,350.27 in 2018. The budget will be presented to the commission for approval on December 21.

Aside from Semiahmoo Station 62, two other fire halls serve locals including the Birch Bay Station 63, located on 4581 Birch Bay-Lynden Road, and Odell Station 61, located at 9408 Odell Road. Each are manned by three paid career firefighters 24 hours per day, seven days per week.

The Birch Bay station responds to about 1,200 calls per year, while the Blaine station responds to about 900. Firefighters from the Birch Bay station typically respond to calls from Semiahmoo, which averages 100 calls per year that are mostly medical related. Pernett said the average response time to locations in Semiahmoo is nine minutes, which he's comfortable with.

As far back as Pernett can recall, station 62 has only been operated by volunteer firefighters, which he said are essentially held to the same standard of a paid-career firefighter. To become a volunteer, you must go through a hiring process, drug and alcohol testing, medical training, volunteer academy and pass an exam, among other things. Pernett said the academy takes about six to eight weeks to complete and about four to five district 21 volunteers go through the program each year.

"It's always been a challenge to keep people engaged," he said. "We don't retain as many as we train."

Pernett is hopeful the program in Semiahmoo will come to fruition. "As the rooftops increase here, the calls will increase," Pernett said. "We try to staff where we'll have the most impact."



POSTED BY **STEFANIE DONAHUE**