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NC feels volunteer crunch as rural towns become suburbs

SUMMERFIELD, NC — Years ago, whenever an emergency struck Summerfield, the community would count on its farmers to lay down their tools, put on their helmets and rush to the fire.

But as rapid population growth has changed this once rural farming community into small-town suburbia, it has forced changes to the makeup of its mostly volunteer fire department.

The farmer that used to live and work down the road has been replaced by the investment banker who commutes 24 miles round-trip each day to work in downtown Greensboro.

With increased demands from work, family time and children's interests, the time devoted to volunteer firefighting dwindles, if it exists at all.

"The time commitment is the biggest struggle," said Jason Marshburn, who balances his time as a volunteer at the Summerfield Fire Department with a full-time job at UNCG. "Essentially, we have two full-time jobs to look after. When you add family on to that, it makes things difficult."

The struggle to balance those time commitments shows up in recruitment numbers in Summerfield, Fire Chief Chris Johnson said.

Though still able to maintain a full staff — the number of volunteers coming from the community has declined compared to 10 or 15 years ago.

"There's not as many people working here in the community to become volunteers in Summerfield," said Johnson, who manages three stations made up of 17 paid firefighters and 44 volunteers. "We as a fire department have to find what entices people in order to bring them here and keep them here."

Between 1984 and 2006, the number of volunteers nationwide fell by 8 percent, or nearly 74,000, according to the National Fire Protection Association. During the same period, the number of emergency calls to volunteer fire departments doubled.

Volunteer fire and rescue personnel represent 72 percent of the nation's 1.1 million firefighters.

More than 50 percent of volunteers are associated with departments that cover areas with populations of less than 2,500, according to the U.S. Fire Administration.

In addition to volunteers' time constraints, fire officials blame the staffing decline on training standards — which can require roughly 400 hours of class and fieldwork to get basic certifications — the same required of paid firefighters.

Such increased training requirements didn't exist until about 10 years ago, officials said.



"The requirements to become a volunteer firefighter are more stringent," said Tim Fitts, Interim Fire Chief of the Pineroft Sedgfield Fire Department, which has 34 paid firefighters and 60 volunteers.

"It's especially tough on someone who is married and has a family to become a volunteer," Fitts said. "They are looking at a year of classes two times a week and on Saturdays. The good ol' boy system to become a volunteer is gone."

Local fire officials said they are seeing a decrease in the number of volunteers compared to decades ago, but are still maintaining adequate staffing with a mix of paid firefighters and core groups of dedicated volunteers.

But that's not the case everywhere.

In San Juan County, N.M., a fire chief recently launched a \$50,000-a-year advertising campaign that included videos on YouTube to entice volunteers.

Other small-town fire chiefs have started promotions that pay volunteers nominal fees or reward them with such perks as baby-sitting services and golf outings.

In Colorado and Nebraska, lawmakers have passed laws barring employers from disciplining or firing employees who leave work early or arrive late because they respond to emergencies.

Though recruitment hasn't gotten that bad here, local officials say they can see that a continued decline in volunteers will gradually change the way they do business.

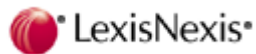
"More calls will mean more paid firefighters as mostly rural (areas) become mostly urban," Fitts said. "As areas continue to get annexed, more people will mean more costs. We'll have to hire more paid people."

Those added salary costs would come from already stretched municipal budgets, although federal grant money is available to defray some initial hiring costs.

"I would see the increase of (paid personnel) continuing," said Johnson of Summerfield's fire department.

"But, I come from the volunteer side, and I don't want to get rid of that — that is what this department was built on."

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