



## **FIRE PROTECTION: Nationwide, volunteer fire rolls slimming; NT plans to respond**

**By Neale Gulley**  
The Tonawanda News

June 10, 2009 11:48 pm

— For years, volunteer firefighters have worked to distance themselves from being labeled a social club but recent concern over a shrinking number of volunteers nationwide has officials everywhere calling for added perks.

After all, the job they do is very real, very dangerous and requires hundreds of hours of training regardless of the fraternal aspect of the job.

But keeping time-strapped community members hauling hose, putting out fires and supporting the city's paid force for free requires new incentives.

Tom Pendleton, 82, with 55 years as a North Tonawanda volunteer, shed some perspective on the issue: "Because the kids who are eligible are young, married people — it takes two to work and support the family so they don't really have the time to take all the classes that are required before we can put them on the fire rolls," Pendleton said.

At the root of the problem is the fact, while there are 600 registered volunteers in North Tonawanda, only about 75 regularly respond to calls.

"A lot of the guys are older, they can't put on an air mask and run into a building," Piwtorak said.

Aside from older members being less nimble, he said new recruits have difficulties meeting strict new training standards.

"It's well over 100 hours if you want to be an interior firefighter and it usually takes a year-and-a-half to two years to complete all that," North Tonawanda Fire Capt. Joe Piwtorak said.

Also there are monthly drills required to stay active. It is during this phase of becoming a volunteer that he said many simply lose interest.

The decline in volunteers isn't specific to North Tonawanda alone. The Daily-Gazette of Schenectady reported a decline in volunteers across the state of 28 percent in the last decade. Across the nation that figure is reportedly 10 percent.

The National Volunteer Fire Council claims the nation's 825,000 volunteer firefighters save communities \$37.2 billion each year in lieu of their paid counterparts.

North Tonawanda uses both volunteer and professional firefighters, and while the career guys drive the trucks, talk on the radios and handle medical calls accounting for most of the department's work, Pendleton pointed out it would be a lot more expensive to pay more of them to handle massive maintenance and cleanup tasks, among many other things the volunteers typically do to augment the city's paid men.

"It's sort of like many hands make light work," he said. "And if you don't have enough who are willing to help it makes a lot of work for a small group of guys."

Piwtorak said more fringe benefits and things like tax breaks will help to retain the city's volunteers and increase participation. More than anything else, though, is the need to sell the profession to older teens.

"We've just got to let the younger generation know what it is we do and what the perks will be," he said. He lobbied the city council in April for \$2,500 for an information booth at the high school.

The city hasn't decided whether to grant the request, but on June 2 passed a resolution supporting a

federal bill recently introduced by Sen. Charles Schumer. The bill, if passed, would translate into \$1,000 federal tax credits for volunteers across the country.

The measure would cost the federal government hundreds of millions of dollars each year, but would mirror a \$200 state income tax credit already in effect.

Tuesday night, Piwtorak, North Tonawanda Fire Chief Joseph Krantz and others convened a new committee to discuss all the options, at Krantz's request.

"My idea is, the city fathers are going to shake their heads and say yea, good idea, but if you don't give them a plan they're not going to do anything," Krantz said.

It has been decided to apply for a matching grant through the Department of Homeland Security that provides for a paid position as well as various recruitment and retention programs.

"Basically it's our plan to get this all rolling by the time school comes around so we can show the kids all the options and benefits they get if they become a volunteer firefighter," Piwtorak said.

Some of the perks already in place include the state tax credit and free tuition toward a two-year degree at Niagara County Community College for volunteers with five years of active service.

Other communities offer their own incentives, like a pension benefit based on years of service and the number of emergency calls attended.

"That's something we have to look into," Piwtorak said, adding such a move would likely require a public referendum.

At Active Hose, where Piwtorak is now stationed, the hall comes complete with a bar/lounge, pool table, shuffleboard court and a new basketball hoop out back.

"We have a huge generational gap in the age of our volunteers, the 28-year-old said, adding a rift exists between those in their middle to late 20s or younger and almost everybody else in their middle to late 40s or older.

He started 11 years ago, as a teenager, and told council members recently recruiting others might be one way of keeping younger adults in the area.

In addition to getting new younger members on board, the finishing touches are also now being completed for a new fire police crew to help direct traffic in an emergency and put older members to work.

The requirement is that the fire police have to have dedicated a minimum of 15 years as a volunteer.

About 20 such members have already completed training.

Contact reporter Neale Gulley at 693-1000, ext. 114.

Copyright © 1999-2008 cnhi, inc.

Photos



090610 FIREFIGHTERS3 - TON/JUNDOUG BENZ/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER  
NORTH TONAWANDA, N.Y. - Joe Piworak is at North Tonawanda Fire headquarters, Wednesday, June 10, 2009.