

2008-2009 Citizens Committee Report for Cowlitz 2 Fire & Rescue:

“Lexington Fire Station”

**Committee Members:**

Terry Anshutz

Darlene DeRosier

Mark Higgins

Marv Kasemeier

Bob Kiser

Gayle Kiser

Pat King

Loren Portwood

Monte Roden

Ray Smith

Brad Thurman

Laura Thurman

Blaine Tolby

**Staff Support:**

Assistant Chief Alan Headley

District Secretary Laura Bouchard

Captain John Comte

Captain Larry W. Hembree

Respectfully submitted January 2009

## **Table of Contents**

- 1. Cowlitz 2 Fire & Rescue Overview**
- 2. Background of Station 25**
- 3. Lexington Community**
- 4. Preliminary Planning**
- 5. Needs for the Future**
- 6. Formation of the Lexington Citizens' Committee**
- 7. Recommendations**
- 8. Conclusions**

## **Cowlitz 2 Fire & Rescue Overview**

Cowlitz 2 Fire & Rescue is a combination career and volunteer department that serves approximately 40,000 people over 170 square miles in central Cowlitz County, which includes the City of Kelso, with fire and advanced life support ambulance transport services. The response force is divided between 6 fire stations with the headquarters station located in the City of Kelso. The Fire District currently employs 30 career responders and approximately 80 volunteer responders and 7 support staff members. In 2008 the Fire District responded to approximately 4600 calls for service. Typically about 70% to 80% of those calls are for emergency medical services.

## **Background of Station 25**

Cowlitz 2 Fire & Rescue originally constructed the fire station located in the community of Lexington in 1978. The 3,520 square foot station was designed for an all volunteer response and did not include crew sleeping quarters or adequate meeting room space to facilitate today's required training. The station was constructed using an Economic Development Agency matching funds grant that mandated that the funds be used within a specific time period. As construction proceeded it was discovered that there was a problem with the fill material that was used to level the lot and that there was significant likelihood that the building would settle. As a result of the funding time constraints the contractor was instructed to install an expansion joint in the structure to allow movement without causing structural damage to the fire station.

Over the years the station has settled as predicted and as a result the problem has caused a number of issues within the building including separation of the exterior wall at the expansion joint, doors that do not shut properly, numerous cracks in the sheetrock walls, and the apparatus bay floor is now significantly sloped to the point that emergency vehicles tend to roll if parking brakes are not set properly.

## **Lexington Community**

The unincorporated area of Cowlitz County known as Lexington has seen significant residential growth over the last several years. It has grown from a very rural flood prone area into a suburban residential community. The construction of a new bridge over the Cowlitz River connects the Lexington area directly with Interstate 5 and the more rural residential area east of the freeway and has made the area even more desirable for residents who may commute north or south for work. There are now plans for a commercial strip mall in the area and additional housing is under construction. As a result, the number of calls for emergency response has grown from less than 200 calls per year to the point that the all volunteer staff is now responding to over 600 calls for service each year. The Fire District has recognized the need to augment the traditional volunteer staffing but the existing station will not

accommodate a change in staffing methodology due to the lack of sleeping accommodations. The future promises even more growth in the area including a new elementary school that is projected to serve 500 students sometime in the next 10 years.

### **Preliminary Planning**

As the emergency call volume in the Lexington area started to rise, the Fire District evaluated the existing fire station to determine whether or not it would be feasible to expand the structure to facilitate staffing the station on a regular basis to give some relief to the traditional volunteer responders. A structural engineer was retained in 2003 to evaluate the station and he determined that, while the building is not dangerous to occupy as it exists now, expanding the building would not be feasible and in fact could possibly destabilize it. As a result of that input the Fire District contracted with an architectural firm to design a new fire station that had all of the necessary features to facilitate regular staffing in order to handle the growing call volume.

Preliminary design work indicated that the fire station would need to be approximately 8500 square feet to provide the services the Lexington area is demanding. The construction costs were estimated by the architect at that time to be approximately \$4,200,000. Without a means to provide that level of funding the Fire District was forced to suspend the planning effort.

When it was discovered that a fire station using modular and panelized construction may be more economically feasible the planning effort was restarted and a preliminary design was developed that meets all of the required elements that were identified to accommodate on-going staffing. With this preliminary design it is estimated that the new station can be constructed using modular and panelized construction techniques for approximately \$2,000,000.

In addition to the facility planning effort the District is working with Cowlitz County Parks to redraw lot lines to better facilitate a new fire station on the existing property and prevent impacts on the Riverside Park soccer fields that currently overlap onto Fire District property. The new lot lines will maintain the current soccer fields while allowing the Fire District direct access to the park road system that currently is not adjacent to Fire District property.

### **Needs for the Future**

The current fire station has served the Lexington area for 30 years. The preliminary design that is being proposed is intended to serve for an additional 30 to 50 years. The goal is to provide 24 hour staffing to assist the traditional volunteer responders to meet the growing demand for emergency service in this area.

The new station will incorporate design features that support that staffing and will include a meeting room that will provide needed training space for fire and EMS responders. The meeting room will also be available for use by the public for nonprofit community activities. The Fire District intends to use eco-friendly design features that will be energy efficient and low impact to the environment while providing the necessary improvements to facilitate a safer building for responders and improved service to the community. The station design will also include a helicopter landing pad to facilitate air ambulance operations in this area. The existing site is well located to serve the citizens of this area and the direct I-5 access gives additional benefit to give support to neighboring response areas.

### **Formation of the Lexington Citizens' Committee**

The Fire District Board of Commissioners authorized the formation of a citizens committee to evaluate the possibility of using a local improvement district (LID) to fund a new fire station. Mr. Terry Anshutz, who owns the convenience store in Lexington, was instrumental in recommending many of the people that were identified as potential members of the committee. Without his assistance it would have been difficult to assemble a representative committee of this quality. The citizens committee consists of residents and business owners in the area served by the Lexington Fire Station. The committee was presented with information about the preliminary design of the fire station, the possibility of using modular and panelized construction, and using a LID as a funding mechanism.

The citizens committee has provided exceptional insight and guidance to fire district staff members as the station replacement planning has moved forward. One of the committee members suggested approaching Representative Dean Takko to see if there may be funding available for critical infrastructure through the State's capital facility budget. After discussion with Representative Takko and approval from the Fire Commission the Fire District is seeking assistance with this replacement project. Understanding the economic situation that the State is facing the District is requesting partial funding in the amount of \$500,000 to assist with the construction of this critical facility. At the recommendation of the citizens committee the District is proposing to seek the remaining amount through the implementation of a local improvement district that incorporates the primary area served by the Cowlitz 2 Fire & Rescue Lexington Fire Station.

### **Recommendations**

The committee reviewed the condition of the existing fire station, explored the feasibility along with the pros and cons of using modular and panelized construction and looked at the potential of forming an LID to fund a new facility. As a result of this research the committee is making the following recommendations:

- The Lexington area needs a new fire station to better serve the emergency response demands of the community.
- The Lexington fire station needs to be staffed on a full time basis to reduce the load on the current volunteer responders.
- While modular and panelized construction appears to meet all of the design and quality needs that are necessary to provide an adequate facility, the District needs to be open to alternate construction methods and materials.
- It is important to write design specifications so that local contractors may also bid on the work to construct the new facility.
- The formation of a local improvement district appears to be feasible to provide the necessary funding.
- The Fire District needs to pursue any and all grants that may be available to reduce the amount of funding that needs to be generated through the LID.
- The Fire District needs to continue to investigate the feasibility of having the Washington Survey and Rating Bureau rate the areas with fire hydrants to see if there is any possibility of an insurance rate reduction.

## **Conclusions**

The Lexington community has grown significantly over the last 10 years and as a result calls for emergency services have more than tripled from less than 200 calls a year to over 600 calls a year. The number of emergency calls is taxing to the all volunteer responders and history shows that they will not be able to maintain this level of demand without some form of full time staffing assistance. Recruiting and maintaining a volunteer response force is becoming more challenging due to cultural changes in our society and the ever increasing training mandates necessary to maintain proficiency as a fire/EMS responder. The existing fire station was never designed to support the staffing necessary to handle this level of activity and because of its design and a significant settling of the structure it is not feasible to modify or expand the building to accommodate full time staffing. The citizens committee recognizes the economic limitations of the community but also sees the critical need to replace the aging, obsolete fire station that is currently serving the Lexington area with a modern facility that is capable of housing the staff necessary to handle the current and future emergency response needs of the area.