

Jackson Fire Department lobbies for \$5 million station

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JACKSON — The Jackson Fire Department held an open house Nov. 6 at the station at 58 Main St., as well as an open plea to residents to replace the 4,000-square-foot station built in 1947.

Prior to the station being built, the town got by with a pumper truck stored behind the Jackson Grammar School. What led to its construction was the horrific Oct. 22, 1947, blaze that leveled the entire town of Brownfield, Maine, according to a member of the Jackson Fire Department.

The station since has been renovated several times, adding additional highway bays in the 1960s and a second story in 1983. In 2004, a fourth bay was added.

Greeting visitors at Jackson's open house, was not only Fire Chief Jay Henry and Deputy Chief Peter Benson but fellow members of the selectmen-appointed Jackson Fire Station Building Committee, including Barbara Campbell, selectmen's chair.

ADVERTISING

A detailed eight-page handout was provided to anyone who stopped by the open house. It paired numbered deficiencies with corresponding pictures on laminated photo boards that illustrated such concepts as "no floor drainage," "no maintenance shop," "inadequate interior lighting for vehicle maintenance and for work areas," "training room not ADA accessible," and "poor ventilation," along with the dated look of the building: "street presence for a fire station is not the best for community pride."

To address these inadequacies, voters were persuaded to appropriate \$25,000 for a floor plan and elevation designed by Samyn-D'Elia Architects of Holderness, the same group that did the \$6.7 million North Conway Fire Station that recently replaced a smaller 1962-built station on Norcross Circle.

Ward D'Elia was the architect who designed the proposed Jackson station. Reached Tuesday, he said the structure would be 8,100 square feet and the design has incorporated all the wants and needs of the Jackson Fire Station Building Committee. "They've been working for years on getting this building," he said, which he noted is one-story, though there is a mezzanine in the apparatus bay.

"We helped them consolidate their thoughts. We developed a program for their space needs. We talked about whether the present building could be renovated. Based on the size of the building they wanted, we concluded you might as well build a new one," D'Elia said.

The new Jackson station he designed incorporates translucent skylights, a large training group area, room for four fire engines plus other vehicles, a decontamination room, and separate men's and women's toilets.

D'Elia also assessed possible sites, providing four "schemes" in terms of where to place a new station. Scheme 1 showed it going up on the west side of the Jackson Public Library, currently a parking lot for a trail system. The other three schemes show it on the same parcel as the current station but with different placements on the lot. In one, the road going up to the town highway garage is shown possibly moved to the left of the fire station. In another it butts up against the adjacent police department with a connecting pathway.

"Ultimately, they decided it was best to keep it on the same site as the current station, except farther back from the street, which provides more parking," D'Elia said.

According to Campbell, the estimated cost of the new station would be between \$4.5 million and \$5.7 million, with the range reflecting the costs of materials and labor, which have been rising since the pandemic started.

A chart from the New Hampshire Municipal Bond Bank provided by Town Administrator Julie Atwell showed a July 2022 bond sale of \$5.7 million, with a 3 percent 29-year interest rate would have an initial tax rate increase of 88 cents per \$1,000 property valuation. The bank said the interest rate will probably be lower.

A tour of the station showed four cramped bays at the front of the building, along with an annex that held a vintage wildfire-fighting truck and a CanAm UTV that was gifted to the department.

After a look at the gear room, and up at the rafters from which the hoses are hung to drain, the tour continued up a flight of stairs to the second floor, which held a duty room filled with recliner armchairs, a trestle table and benches, a large if somewhat dated kitchen and a flat-screen TV. On the paneled walls were photos of past fire chiefs along with maps and white boards. Behind it was a corridor leading to two small rooms: a file room and the office of the town's code enforcement officer and building inspector, Kevin Bennett.

Before heading downstairs, one comes to the world's tiniest office, that of Chief Henry, shoehorned into a space about the size of a broom closet (albeit with a commanding view of the town highway garage).

A 2020 Jackson Fire Department Report written by Chief Henry in the recent Jackson Annual Town Report said fire apparatus repairs for last year were above normal. He said this was due to the fact that "some of the equipment is older (20+ years) and requires attention due to age."

Henry also said "call volume for 2020 has been extremely high, with 145 calls for service." Reasons given were storm trouble with trees down, an increase in town residents and visitors, a rise in motor vehicle accidents and car fires, and more mutual aid calls.

A neighboring department, that of Bartlett, also reported a busy year. In Bartlett's Annual Town Report, Bartlett Fire Chief Jeff Currier reported an increase from 313 calls for service in 2019 to 365 calls in 2020. "This is probably due to an influx of people escaping the city," he said, adding, "This has put a strain on all emergency services across the valley, with more fire alarms, car accidents and other calls for emergency service."

According to firenews.org, the North Conway Fire Department logged 1,394 calls for service last year.

Along with Henry, Campbell and Benson, fellow members of the Fire Station Building Committee are Jerry Dougherty IV (chair), Hank Dresch, Debony Diehl, Pat Kelley and Dick Bennett.

Selectmen recently approved the pre-order of a new fire truck to replace a Mack tank truck that is over 30 years old (see related story). However, in order to fit the new, larger truck, the department will have to bust out a back wall.

Selectmen will get to hear more about the need for a new building at their next meeting on Dec. 14 (no meeting Nov. 23).

MORE INFORMATION