

Your Community and Your Fire Department

This letter is written for the “Airline Communities,” or the communities north of Eastbrook and Mariaville, including the Unorganized Townships south of Nicatous Lake. The Fire Department that serves this area of Hancock County is the Aurora Volunteer Fire Department. The AVFD has one station on the Old Airline Road in Aurora. It was incorporated in 1973 by local people who saw the need for fire protection and the need for neighbors to help other neighbors. Kudos to those who formed the first emergency medical and fire response, they served their communities well. Unfortunately, times have changed since the 1980s. The standards for fire departments have become much more demanding. There is nothing wrong with these standards; they ensure that firefighting is done as safely and effectively as possible. But when I joined the AVFD two years ago, I made a statement that the AVFD needs to do things right according to industry standards or the department would be in trouble in the future. These standards involve the physical structure of the AVFD building, the AVFD equipment and the training of its members. The AVFD has been non-compliant for years, so bringing the department up to compliance is not a simple nor inexpensive process.

This spring I was elected Fire Chief for the AVFD, so I am getting to “put my money where my mouth is.” But I also understand that if the AVFD is not brought into compliance, a Bureau of Labor fine would end up putting it out of business, a fine that might have come after a member’s injury or death. Although it comes at greatly increased cost, being compliant and operating to NFPA (National Fire Protection Association) standards is the right way to go. But the AVFD and other departments in northern Hancock County (with the notable exception of Mariaville) are all struggling to meet these goals. They suffer from having old, inadequate and outdated equipment, not enough money and not anywhere near enough help and members trained to be fire fighters. The only way these departments can have any sort of effective response to a fire is through mutual aid agreements where all the departments are called out to structure fires, and if they are lucky, enough trained people arrive to put the fire out efficiently and effectively.

This spring the AVFD asked for help from Safety Works, the branch of the Bureau of Labor that assists with Bureau of Labor compliance. Safety Works identified 11 hazards that had to be fixed by the AVFD. At this point, the work to mitigate these hazards, which included building upgrades and required training for members, has been completed at a cost of approximately \$17,000.00, depleting the AVFD reserve funds. The Safety Works training is only basic training and doesn’t address training needed to fight fires or respond to medical calls. That training is above and beyond the Bureau of Labor standards and is governed by the NFPA and state EMS system.

I am describing this so that people understand why the AVFD is asking for larger appropriations from towns for the fire department. Seeing the struggles that Osborn has had with its fire department, I wonder if these smaller communities can really support compliant fire departments. Ultimately, I hope that some sort of regionalization system can be created which will ensure compliance and better fire protection for the smaller towns of Hancock County.

So why do we need a fire department? First of all, in this area, the “fire” department really does more medical calls than fire calls. The department responds to about 60 calls a year, and about 2/3 involve a medical emergency. The area’s population is aging, and many older community members are living alone or being cared for by other family members. It is

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usually AVFD members who respond first to a 911 call for help. They provide care for the 40 or more minutes it may take for Capital ambulance to respond from Brewer or beyond. In some cases, this care may be critical. In others, it is comforting to see people you know show up to help before the transporting ambulance arrives. AVFD has two members with EMS licenses that can provide treatment, but it needs more.

The AVFD responds to traffic accidents to set up traffic control to prevent further accidents and to treat the injured. The AVFD can call LifeFlight if they are needed for a critical patient, and AFVD sets up the landing zone.

On the fire side, structure fires are infrequent, but the department has put out many brush fires that would have burned down buildings if they had continued to burn. There is also the occasional vehicle fire. Burning vehicles give off toxic gases and have parts which may explode (like the hydraulic tubes in the bumpers and lift gates). Downed electrical wires are also a hazard, and the older equipment on the poles in the areas can result in breakers that do not trip and "hot" wires blocking roads until Emera Maine can respond. The fire department also responds to gas leaks and smoke, fire and CO2 alarms.

In short, there are many public safety functions that the Department does. If it ceases to exist, the only resources that will respond are likely to be a few law enforcement officers and Capital Ambulance from Brewer. The response of other fire departments will be optional, and the surrounding departments cannot provide coverage.

There are other long term problems associated with having no fire protection. If the department ceases to exist, the insurance classification for areas within 5 miles of the department will go from a class 9 to a class 10. This will probably lead to an increase in insurance rates for the major businesses in town. Homeowner rates will also go up. How much depends a great deal on the insurance company and the value of the property. For example, the house I lived in on Long Pond in Aurora went from a class 9 to class 10 when the insurance company decided it was 5.1 miles from the AVFD station. The insurance premium went up \$1000.00 a year. Community members and businesses with insurance within 5 miles of the AVFD should check with their insurance companies to see what would happen to their insurance rates because every insurance company is different. Insurance rates affect mortgage rates, making it harder or more expensive to buy or sell a home in the area. Over time, these factors may become a drag on the viability of the community.

The long-time residents of the area and town officials understand that it is volunteer help and people willing to work for minimal payments as selectmen, town clerk, planning boards, road maintenance, animal control, etc. that keep these small towns running. They are not salaried, full time workers with benefits and extensive training like those in the larger towns and cities. In recent years, local officials have struggled with the new governmental mandates and internet based business systems that larger towns and cities handle with professional employees. Fire departments have similar problems except that the standards are more complex and physically demanding of volunteer personnel.

The AVFD will have a larger budget in 2018 to help keep it complaint and catch up on building and equipment maintenance. Ultimately, in the future, new vehicles and other equipment that need to be replaced on a regular schedule (SCBA, vehicles, hoses and turn out gear for example) will have to be purchased at great expense. It is possible that some of this money might be obtained from grants. However, the AVFD needs all the towns to step forward

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with funding. If any town votes against funding the department, then the department's budget needs will not be met and all three towns will be affected.

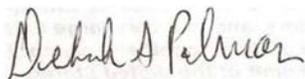
However, even if I won the lottery and gave all the money to the fire department, **THE DEPARTMENT WILL CEASE TO EXIST IN 3 TO 5 YEARS UNLESS IT HAS MORE MEMBERS WILLING TO HELP AND TRAIN TO DO FIRE FIGHTING AND/OR EMS RESPONSE.** More than anything, besides to inform townspeople about increased costs, the AVFD is begging for help to accomplish their mission. We understand that not everyone has the physical ability and/or mindset to complete the training to be a fire fighter or EMT, but even help with simple tasks will give us more time to train and respond to calls. Every hour I don't have to sweep and vacuum the floor is another hour I can use applying for grants that might get us a new fire engine or expensive gear we must replace. We have mundane tasks as fundraising, weed whacking and brush cutting around the station, painting, repairing the front steps, all things that must be done and are often done by the trained members who would be better off spending their time on required training courses or responding to calls. Any repairs done by someone for free are repairs the department doesn't have to ask the towns to pay for. We also need help with tasks such as accounting, taxes, advice on running a corporation and business, grant writing, truck and equipment repairs and office equipment donations.

The department recognizes that people like Todd Hodgins, John Harris and Jack Davis have provided services for free (plowing, sanding and equipment repairs), but we know that these services may not last forever. As anyone who owns an old building and old vehicle knows, there are lots of repairs and maintenance that must be made over time.

I am writing this letter so that the townspeople can be better informed about the fire department, what we are trying to do and how we are trying to just survive in the next few years. I want the townspeople to understand that funding or not funding the department is crucial to its survival, but that **funding alone will not be enough to ensure its survival.** More volunteers and people willing to be trained and go to calls are needed. It doesn't matter if you work out of town if you are willing to respond when you can during the night or on weekends. Many hands make light work. You don't have to go to every call. Many of our members work at full time jobs out of town but respond when they can. It is a matter of commitment and doing the work to retain the readiness and preparedness of the equipment and personnel that is important. If we have enough help, we will have enough to respond to calls, and the rest of the need at major fires must be made up by aid from the departments from surrounding towns and Forestry. These departments also depend on our help as much as we depend on theirs. Other long term alternatives might be some sort of regional arrangement with other towns to hire part time or full time personnel, but volunteers will always be an important part of this mission, no matter what happens with the County or state.

In short, there are no easy solutions. Ultimately, it will be up to the people of the local towns to decide if there is a fire department.

If you would like to help with anything or would like information on the department, please call me at **207-944-1131** or e-mail at dpalman1@rivah.net.



Deborah Palman, Chief, Aurora Volunteer Fire Department.