

Brattleboro, Swanzey trying to decide how to address fire station needs

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Officials in the towns of Swanzey and Brattleboro are in the midst of deciding how to address their needs for new fire stations. Nearby, the city of Keene built a new station two years ago.

But, according to fire officials in those communities, it's unfair to compare the plans for fire stations because the size of the towns, and their responsibilities, are different.

Two years ago, Keene built its fire station, a two-story, 28,070-square-foot structure with features including a spacious apparatus bay, training areas, bunk rooms, male and female locker rooms, a decontamination area and fitness room.

The price tag: about \$5.9 million.

Today, Swanzey officials are embarking on an effort to deliver a one-story, 17,660-square-foot station sooner rather than later. Their goal is to have a warrant article about the project ready for town meeting in March 2015, which means they have about four months to sell the proposal to voters.

The arguments for the new station have so far included that the current station is cramped, doesn't meet health, fire safety and building codes, and is a subterranean building with no windows and drains.

The estimated price tag for that project: about \$4.5 million.

A third community, Brattleboro, is also in the process of seeking voter backing for a multimillion-dollar project to renovate and add onto that town's central fire station, and build a new second station in West Brattleboro to replace the existing one. Both buildings are cramped, out of date and in need of extensive repairs, the town's fire chief says.

Fire Chief D. Michael Bucossi said this is about the third go-around with the project over the past 14 years, but this time is the farthest it's gotten.

The central fire station project is estimated to cost a little over \$5 million, while the West Brattleboro station project is projected to cost about \$1.2 million, he said.

While there will be some similarities between the three stations because of state and federal rules and regulations, and guidelines from the National Fire Protection Agency, there will be differences, as each community has different populations and responsibilities, according to fire chiefs from the three communities.

The communities also have different needs, layouts and firefighter staffing levels, the fire chiefs said.

For example, the Keene Fire Department has 45 full-time firefighters and 20 paid on-call firefighters to serve a population of about 23,300 over 37.6 square miles. Besides the central fire station, there is also a second station in West Keene.

Swanzey has one full-time firefighter — Fire Chief Norman W. Skantze — 40 paid on-call firefighters, a part-time deputy fire chief, a part-time fire inspector and a part-time emergency medical services coordinator.

The town has three fire stations, one in West Swanzey, one in Swanzey Center and one in East Swanzey, to serve a population of about 7,200 over 45.4 square miles. The station in Swanzey Center is the one local officials are proposing to replace. Swanzey officials have no plans to close the east and west stations, saying they are a valuable part of firefighters' ability to respond quickly to emergencies. Those aren't in need of extensive repair.

Brattleboro has 25 full-time firefighters and 10 paid on-call staff. It has two stations to serve a population of about 6,900 over 32.4 square miles.

“Each community is different,” Keene Fire Chief Mark F. Howard said. “To start comparing them isn't a good idea.”

The Keene Fire Department sought a new location after outgrowing the old central station, which is across the road from the new one on Vernon Street.

In planning for new stations, officials from the Brattleboro and Swanzey fire departments say they're looking to the future. Keene took a similar approach when planning for its new station.

Swanzey faces several questions, including whether to hire firefighters to work day shifts, and if the town should start its own ambulance service as medical calls continue to rise.

Skantze said regardless of those questions, the town is in desperate need of a new fire station, and to do it once, and do it right, thought has to be given to what the fire department may look like 10, 20 or even 50 years from now.

“It would be irresponsible not to,” he said.