



Soaring Eagle Press e-Edition
Templeton's "Almost Daily"

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FROM THE EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

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The Loss of a Fire Chief

Part II – Limited resources and expanding responsibilities in a growing community

For most of its history, the small town of Templeton was served by an all-volunteer Fire Department made up of selfless, dedicated local residents who were able to drop what they were doing at the sound of the fire bell, race to the station, and respond.

But by the late 60's – early 70's, the beginning of substantial, ongoing growth along with significant changes in the role of Fire Departments, and limited local resources made it absolutely necessary to begin to find new ways to meet the need for emergency services in Templeton.

Templeton has undergone tremendous growth over the last four decades – growing almost 10-fold between the late 60's and the 2010 census. The population almost tripled in the twenty year period between 1990 and 2010, and almost doubled in the ten years between the 2000 and 2010.

Demographics also shifted from a mostly blue-collar local workforce with a plentiful supply of potential volunteer firefighters, to a community and culture in which there are increasing demands on people's time, longer commuting distances to and from work, the prevalence of two-income households, and a larger percentage of senior citizens.

Coupled with this explosive growth and evolving community was the changing role of Fire Departments and firefighters throughout the United States.

Firefighters went from primarily fighting fires to becoming first responders for a whole multitude of emergency services that can include everything from medical incidents to vehicle and equipment accidents, hazardous materials, water rescue, high-angle and confined space rescues, terrorist events, and many other types of public service calls.

And as firefighting evolved, so did the technology, necessary equipment, and training, as well as the costs to cover them. The amount of time needed to study and train has increased substantially adding another challenging element to being a volunteer firefighter, with further constraints added through an officer leadership culture whose paradigms are often deeply rooted in past experiences.

In its **January 2010 "White Paper on Volunteer Firefighter Training"**, the National Volunteer Fire Council had the following to say about the impacts of time and leadership constraints on needed training for volunteer firefighters:

Under Time Constraints – "Americans in general, but particularly residents of rural communities, are spending more time commuting to and from work. Labor force participation among adults has been rising steadily since 1950. As individuals find

themselves with less free time available, devoting their nights and weekends to obtaining firefighter training and certification is becoming increasingly difficult. Training and certification delivery methods must be calibrated to minimize the time demands that they place on volunteer firefighters.”

Under Leadership Constraints – “The individuals comprising the leadership in many volunteer fire departments came up in the fire service during a time when most training was performed informally within the fire department. Drawing on decades of experience, many of these individuals view the modern training standards and requirements as unnecessary. Gaining the buy-in of volunteer fire chiefs and officers regarding the importance of training and certification is critical.”

Under Leadership Constraints Cont’d – “As much as national and state organizations work to promote the adoption of training standards, volunteer fire departments are operated and controlled locally. The leadership within those departments has significant influence in determining the level of training that will ultimately be required. Volunteer firefighters are rightfully proud of their departments’ history of service and tend to resist outside efforts to impose changes on their operations. Without the buy-in of the leadership in individual volunteer fire departments, efforts to encourage increased adoption of training standards are likely to be unsuccessful.”

Along with the growth of the community, the changing demographics, and the evolution of the role of firefighters, call volumes have substantially increased – putting further stress on the department’s most important assets – Templeton’s volunteer firefighters.

But in spite of all the growth, Templeton’s monetary resources for the Fire Department continued to remain limited.

Templeton’s Fire Department (TFD) operates under the auspices of the Templeton Community Services District (TCSD) in an unincorporated area of San Luis Obispo County. Local taxes are assessed and collected by the County, and only a fraction of those collected within TCSD’s boundaries are available for local non-enterprise services.

According to outgoing San Luis Obispo County Auditor-Controller Gere Sibbach the most recent assessment of property values within TCSD’s boundaries – enclosing approximately 4.5 square miles – came in at a little under \$1B or about \$917M. Out of that, approximately \$9.17M in property taxes will be collected and TCSD will receive about \$830,000 (from May figures used to develop the 2012-13 Budget) – or about 9.22 percent.

Out of the \$830K, TFD is allocated 72 percent, Templeton Recreation 24 percent, street lights 3 percent, and the Community Center 1 percent in the 2012-13 TCSD Budget – a budget which puts TFD’s total revenues for the current fiscal year at \$636,000 for personnel, equipment, and operating costs.

But according to a March 6, 2012 Sacramento Bee analysis of 2010 data from the State Controller’s Office, California firefighters and engineers earned an average of \$113,882 and fire captains earned \$141,525 state-wide – showing just how limited TFD’s budget actually is.

As a result of increasing demands on volunteer firefighters, ever-increasing call volumes, the growth and changing demographics of the community, and limited resources, it was and is becoming more and more difficult to field, fully train, and keep qualified volunteers.

In the late 90’s, TCSD recognized the need to find solutions to the challenges that were beginning to face the Fire Department. The first step was to make an immense change within TFD – and for the first time in its history – hire a full-time paid Fire Chief.

TCSO hired Greg O'Sullivan in mid-1998 to fill that position.

There was a great deal of work to be done including updating fire ordinances and firefighter training requirements, obtaining new equipment, the recruiting, training, and retention of new firefighters, serving as a liaison between TFD and other fire departments, procuring grants, and juggling calls, while doing fire inspections and the review of new development plans.

Among the most critical responsibilities that O'Sullivan shouldered was the development of a long-term plan that would meet the challenges of a 21st century volunteer fire department with limited resources and expanding responsibilities in a growing community.

Many times during his tenure, O'Sullivan said that his biggest concern was that someday an emergency call would come in and there would be no one to answer.

Recruitment, training, and retention of enough volunteers to answer emergency calls were becoming more and more critical.

After some time and a great deal of work, O'Sullivan presented his solution. In a nutshell, it was comprised of three items – a second fire station, enough full-time paid firefighters to man one station – two at a time, 7 days a week, 24 hours a day – and an assessment to pay their salaries. The assessment would mean higher taxes for the town of Templeton.

In the meantime, at O'Sullivan's urging, TCSO hired long-time volunteer firefighter Rod Hewitt as the department's Assistant Fire Chief. Among his other duties, Hewitt served as TFD's Training Officer. The hiring of Hewitt was a second benchmark for the then almost century old department. But it was a trade-off that put significant strain on TFD's budget.

O'Sullivan presented his plan and the Board of Directors gave the green light to proceed with outside experts to develop the assessment and everything that was necessary for its implementation. After a considerable amount of time and work, a change in the original assessment plan to a different type, and expenditure of funds, the final product was ready to go out to the voters – but the bottom dropped out of the economy.

Should the district move forward with the assessment vote or wait out the recession?

The Board's decision boiled down to time and its effects on the ability of the department to field the necessary volunteers, versus whether or not the town would recognize the need and vote for the assessment in the early stages of a recession. The time and dollars already expended on the project provided the tipping point and the Board voted to move forward.

Several notable community members – including Bill Van Orden and Geoff English – stepped up to the plate to form a committee to help pass the assessment. They knocked on doors, passed our yard signs, made phone calls, and held meetings. But in the end, the voters didn't buy the plan, and turned the assessment down.

With O'Sullivan's retirement nearing, and Hewitt's in the not too distant future, the District began the recruiting process to find a new Fire Chief. While O'Sullivan had laid some of the ground work, there was still a great deal to do if TFD was to continue to serve its community under increasingly challenging circumstances.

Templeton's Fire Department was at a major crossroads, and the District had a very serious decision to make in hiring the next Fire Chief.

TCSO had three choices.

The first, find a Fire Chief who agreed with O'Sullivan's approach, wait out the recession, and then try again to pass an assessment – hoping that the department could field and keep enough trained volunteers under increasingly challenging circumstances. But knowing that some significant rate increases in water and wastewater were on the horizon,

the question was whether or not the town could or would absorb both those fees and an assessment for TFD. It was very doubtful.

The second option was to consider folding Templeton's Fire Department into a local city or county department as other entities in both the county and the state have successfully done. But a cursory look at the costs coupled with the knowledge that Templeton would be up in arms if the District even considered the possibility, immediately shut that door.

That left a third and last option – find a candidate for Fire Chief who had the education, experience, background, and working knowledge in both transitioning and combination fire departments; one who would come on board at a lower salary than state averages; and one who would have a different vision to accomplish what was needed to overcome the challenges facing TFD.

The District went with the third option and hired Jim Langborg.

As only the second full-time paid Fire Chief in TFD's history, it would be his job to solve the challenges facing a department whose culture was steeped in tradition and had been led by the same Chief for almost a decade and a half.

- **In Part 3** of this editorial, we'll take a look at what Langborg envisioned for the department, why, and what progress he was able to make during his tenure (to be published mid-to-late June 2013)
- **Part 4** will be the conclusion to this year-long project

ABOUT SOARING EAGLE PRESS

Templeton's "Almost Daily" is published by Soaring Eagle Press and is made possible through a team of local sponsors. The publication serves the greater Templeton area throughout the school district boundaries and provides a central clearing house for community information and other items of interest.

Its Mission Statement is "First and foremost to let readers know what's coming up so they can remain informed and involved, secondly to highlight our youth's achievements because they are both the focus and the future of our community, and finally, deal with the adult shenanigans when there is time and space."

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