

**Volunteer Fire Companies in Northern New  
Jersey and the Feasibility of an  
Orange Volunteer Fire Company**

by

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## **Volunteer Fire Companies in Northern New Jersey and the Feasibility of an Orange Volunteer Fire Company**

The state of volunteerism in northern New Jersey appears to have changed little in the past three decades. Pure volunteer fire departments in which no remuneration is available (like the defunct auxiliary supplement of the Orange Fire Department) tend to attract kids and old men. In a city like Orange, these organizations tend to top out at about 15 active members. The problem remains the fact that in a robust economy, the best men and women in the 20 to 45-year age range tend to be locked into child-rearing responsibilities and the time-consuming demands of a career. Let us accept the proposition that persons in the 20 to 45-year age range have the best combination of physical fitness and mental maturity which are necessary on the fireground.

Success in addressing this problem appears to be a function of the remuneration available to volunteers. For example, Ridgewood F.D. gives volunteers accident insurance and pays up to \$600.00 per year for alarm and drill attendance. While a plumber could earn more than \$600.00 in two days, this token amount will help to quiet spouses, friends and relatives who will otherwise ask, "And you go to all those drills and charge into burning buildings for nothing?" Still, the Ridgewood volunteer force has topped out at 14 members and appears unlikely to increase significantly.

On the other hand, the Fort Lee F.D. depends exclusively on volunteers and pays them accordingly. A member of the Fort Lee F.D. who is in good standing receives an annual clothing allowance, life insurance, medical coverage, and up to \$7,000.00 per year for attendance at drills, alarms, and working fires. At this point, being a volunteer fireman/firewoman takes on the characteristics of part-time employment. Seven thousand dollars becomes a welcome addition to the family budget and goes a long way

toward quieting the mother-in-law who will tell a man that he should be doing more to provide for his family.

Such a stipend, while significantly less expensive than a paid fire department, does not come cheaply. Chief Richter stated that the stipends for the 136 member Fort Lee F.D. cost the taxpayers of that municipality about \$1 million annually.

Fort Lee has significant advantages which a city trying to emulate its fire suppression organization would lack. The volunteer fire department was founded in 1888 and never evolved into a paid department when the other medium-sized municipalities across the Hudson from New York City were doing so. This history has allowed it to maintain an officer-development program in which kids evolve into seasoned firefighters. The best of the seasoned firefighters who demonstrate continued enthusiasm and leadership potential become officers, and the best of the officers become chiefs. A mature hierarchy such as this requires many years. It is facilitated by a legacy custom, in which sons and daughters follow their fathers into the fire service because it has become family custom.

In spite of the above, Fort Lee F.D. has no waiting list. All of its four engine and ladder truck companies have vacancies in spite of aggressive advertising for new members. Recruiting of new volunteers has not been helped by the training requirements of Firefighter I and other certifications.

When I started as a volunteer firefighter in 1965, training was minimal. My first instructions were that I was to dress in turnout gear and stand on the tailboard of Engine 7. When the engine arrived at the scene of the alarm, I was to stay out of the way until told to do something useful. It was a seat-of-the-pants way to train rookies but it did

work. Within a couple of months, I could fetch tools, back up a nozzleman, and assist in raising a ladder. In the meantime, I had developed a love for the fire service which remains an obsession to this day.

The current training requirements have changed that. The potential recruit of today has no opportunity to ride an engine or ladder truck through the city with red lights flashing and siren wailing. There is no opportunity to smell the smoke and steam of the fireground and to observe the purposeful operations as experienced firefighters responding to the orders of their officers bring order out of chaos and save (or lose) a house or other building. The potential recruit is denied the "fire high" as the experienced volunteers return to the station, put the rigs back into service, and then enjoy the camaraderie found only among firemen who know that they have once again vanquished the "red devil."

Instead, the potential recruit is shown a training manual the size of a telephone book and which contains chemical equations which would challenge a university student. He is told that he must master this while attending Firefighter I classes over an 18-week period and then maybe he will be allowed to respond to an alarm. This can be a rather daunting experience for a young person from a blue collar background who was relieved just to survive high school.

While it is difficult to argue against education in fire science and training with the tools of firefighting, we must recognize that the requirement for the completion of the 18 week Firefighter I course before a recruit can experience the satisfactions of the fire service does not enhance volunteer recruitment.

This writer hopes he will be forgiven for a bit of cynicism if he observes that overly strict requirements for education/training and licensing/certification at entry level are often used to restrict the number of persons entering a particular occupation or field of endeavor. Could there be an effort by career firefighters' unions to discourage potential volunteer firefighter recruits?

One method of staffing a fire station is that used when this writer was a student at Oregon State University in Corvallis, Oregon. Students were allowed to live and study in the fire station and in return would respond to alarms. Today, this program in the Corvallis Fire Department has been improved and expanded. With Seton Hall located in South Orange and University Heights located just four and one half miles away in Newark, we certainly have the higher education infrastructure available for such a program. Students are usually 18-23 years old, in excellent physical condition, intelligent and highly motivated. ROTC cadets, in particular, tend to come ready-made with the discipline and sense of duty which is needed on the fireground.

Once trained, the better ones tend to stay for three to four years. Once we include a \$7,000.00 stipend, I believe that we would have an excess of applicants, enabling us to pick and choose. This enables immediate full staffing of all engines and ladder trucks at night with partial immediate staffing during the day followed by delayed response as students on campus return to the fire station after being notified by pagers.

On the downside, student firefighters tend to return to their out-of-county homes during Christmas and Spring breaks. Also, there absolutely must be a mature officer in the firehouse 24/7 who will enforce a zero-tolerance policy regarding drugs, alcohol, wild

parties and unauthorized persons staying past closing time. Corvallis F.D. would also allow well-screened non-students to live in the fire stations under this program.

If the Orange City Administration were to authorize a residential firefighter program such as that described above, I would confidently predict that I could have both Orange fire stations staffed to capacity (primarily with college student firefighters) within a year. Please note that while the above addresses firefighter staffing, it does not address officer development.

I would recommend a specialization option with any proposed volunteer force. For example, a small woman who might not want to suit up with breathing apparatus and drag hose might prove quite capable helping with communications, keeping track of who is on the fireground and where they are, getting refreshments, etc.

At the request of the Fire Director, I have checked out the CERT program. This is a new version of the old civil defense program from World War II and the Cold War. It is designed to teach civilian citizens the skills they would need to help themselves and others in the event of a catastrophe which might overwhelm emergency services. The section on fire explains basic fire behavior and the use of common fire extinguishers but it is not designed to train volunteers to operate the tools and equipment necessary in suppression of a working fire. Therefore, while the CERT program has proven successful in East Orange and could certainly help our disaster preparedness in Orange, I believe it would not be appropriate as a vehicle for recruiting or training volunteer firefighters for Orange.

I have been able to locate no sources of State funding other than the grant which funded the study with Montclair last year (it is available again) and a program which

gives 2% loans to volunteer fire departments. The conventional wisdom is that volunteer fire departments are funded by tax money from the municipalities they serve.

### Conclusions

The start-up of an Orange Volunteer Fire Company will not be easy. It will face determined opposition from the New Jersey State Firemen's Benevolent Association, FMBA Locals #10 and #210 (which just happens to have a member who is an attorney specializing in labor law), many currently serving career firefighters and their officers, and various other politically-active entities.

If the aforementioned opposition can be successfully addressed, I would recommend that Orange follow the example of other Northern New Jersey fire departments and offer volunteers life insurance and a stipend of up to \$7,000.00 (depending on attendance at drills and alarms).

I would recommend the Corvallis, Oregon, model starting with a consolidated fire district of two or more municipalities. The new career fire suppression organization should have enough personnel to handle all nuisance calls (water leaks, trash fires, alarm activations, etc.) and to staff a reasonable first alarm response.

Upon indication of a working fire, either by the initial phone call or by the first arriving unit, the volunteer organizations would be activated. Residential student volunteers would immediately man apparatus and respond while community volunteers and residential volunteers who are away from the firehouse would be notified by pager. Community volunteers would include both city employees who have become volunteers as secondary part-time employment and also citizens of Orange who wished to join and have been accepted and trained. Assuming a successful officer development program, we

could staff the fire scene with a well-trained fire suppression force and we could do it quickly.

A volunteer fire-fighting force can be recruited, trained and placed in service to help protect the City of Orange against the dangers of fire. There remain two questions for which I have no answers:

- 1) Are we willing to adequately fund such a force?
- 2) Can we successfully deal with the political and union opposition?