

2008 Annual Fire Department Report

The Westhampton Fire Department had another successful year in 2008 providing emergency services to the community. The Department responded to one-hundred and thirty-two calls for service this year. These calls for service were for fire suppression, emergency medical services, hazardous materials response, motor vehicle accidents, utility wires down, residential fire alarm activations, and many more. The biggest challenge faced by emergency responders this year was the ice storm on December 11th. This storm left numerous homes without power and heat and required a number of resources to be deployed for this emergency. Department personnel went door-to-door that weekend to all of the affected areas to ensure individuals didn't need any assistance, and arranged for any needed accommodations as requested.

In addition to these emergency responses, over two-hundred and fifty inspections and permits were completed and issued throughout the year. These inspections and permits can range from smoke detector and carbon monoxide inspections, installation of oil burners and propane tanks, and issuing burning permits and fireworks display permits. The fire department has concentrated on preventative efforts throughout the community the past few years in an effort to help minimize loss of life and property and sustain a volunteer department with low operational costs.

One of the greatest challenges faced by volunteer departments across the country is the recruitment and retention of department members. Greater demands on training, increasing call volumes and the balance of a full time job and family all require a delicate balance that can minimize the number of people interested in becoming a member. The Town of Westhampton has been very fortunate over the years, given the difficulties seen by other departments, to maintain this type of department and the high level of performance and services provided by these individuals. The department currently has thirty-two volunteer members, of which three of them joined this past year. They are Tim Kortowski, Jon Long, and Keith Robbins. All three members are currently taking training courses through the Hampshire County Fire Defense Association and have completed their first responder medical training.

The Fire Department completed a number of initiatives this year in an effort to continually improve the safety of all the personnel on the Department and improve the services being provided to the community. Additionally, we are trying to slowly bring many aspects of the services provided, training, equipment procurement and maintenance up to national standards.

The department's fleet of apparatus consists of two Engines, one Water Tanker, one Brush Truck, one Rescue/Supply Truck, and one Utility/Command/Rapid Response Vehicle. All vehicles are checked by Department personnel regularly on a weekly basis to ensure a state of operational readiness and reliability. In addition, the Town's Highway Department has been a tremendous asset to the Fire Department, completing all routine maintenance and upkeep of the vehicles. The vehicle maintenance program, as established, helps to prolong the expected life-span of the vehicles and improve the safety during emergency responses. Again this year, we had both Engines professionally pump-tested to ensure adequate pump performance as determined by the manufactures. These testing procedures are also reflected in the Departments Insurance Services Organization (ISO) rating and meet the requirements set by National Standards pertaining to Fire Apparatus.

This year, the Department had all of the fire hose pressure tested to ensure adequate operational effectiveness. National Standards recommend that this is done once a year, and in addition, it is reflected in the ISO ratings that this testing procedure be done to minimize the insurance rates in Town. More important, to ensure the safety of all members utilizing fire hose during operational procedures, it is our responsibility that they are provided with equipment that is safe and functioning to the highest standards. The testing revealed that the Department did have fire hose in service that did not pass the

required pressure rating. These were removed from service and replaced with some of the spare hose that was tested and passed the requirements. These testing requirements demonstrated that this was a project that was long overdue and one that needs to be continued each year to help ensure the integrity and operational capacity of the equipment is maintained.

In 2008, the Department finally upgraded its' communications capabilities by having a radio repeater installed on Mount Skinner in South Hadley. A radio repeater strengthens the radio signal being transmitted to the receiver allowing for clearer reception and stronger signals. Prior to this repeater, communications within the Department and with other personnel, surrounding communities, and the Dispatch Center at the State Police Barracks in Northampton were at best difficult, spotty, and inconsistent. Emergency personnel had difficulty talking on a portable radio to all of these other agencies, creating a safety issue and confusion on the scene of an emergency. The Westhampton Fire Department championed this regional project, pushing it forward with the help of the State Department of Conservation and Recreation, Northampton State Police Dispatch Center, the Town of Hatfield, and the Hampshire County Fire Chiefs Association. Now, with this new system in place, the Town of Westhampton has a communications system that is much more reliable and effective, provides for duplication and backup site selection, and provides a safer communications platform in which to function during emergency responses.

Renovations at the fire station were completed by installing an interior staircase to access the upstairs. Over the years, the exterior staircase leading to the second floor has been treacherous to traverse during the winter months. The environmental elements would continue to build up with snow and ice, creating a dangerous situation for all personnel. The new interior staircase has allowed all emergency personnel to safely pass between floors during the winter months to attend training sessions, monthly meetings, and retrieve equipment and supplies for responses. This project was long overdue for the Department and all members extend their sincere thanks to the entire Town for helping to support the renovation.

The Fire Department, in conjunction with the Town Highway Department, installed a walkway from one of the wings at the Elementary School to a safe area, in an effort to provide for a secondary means of egress from the emergency exit away from the school during emergencies and needed evacuations. Prior to the completion of this project, there was no path of egress during the winter months. In particular was the concern that there was no way for individuals to get away from the building except for going through any accumulations of snow and ice in the back of the building, creating delays and increasing the possibilities for injuries. This project turned out to truly be a community project, due in part to all of the help and donations received from many local business owners. Hathway Construction, Steve Holt Landscaping, Norris Family Farm, and Dave Loven all made overwhelming contributions to make this project financially possible. Finally, David Blakesley and his crew from the Highway Department were instrumental from the beginning and the amount of time and labor put into this project by that Department is unmatched. This project would not have been completed if it was not for them.

The Town of Westhampton received the designation of a "HeartSafe Community" on Monday, February 4th, 2008. This designation is given to communities that have demonstrated the ability to provide exceptional emergency medical services throughout their communities. Residents of the communities with this designation have an increased chance of surviving a cardiac emergency given the criteria met by the emergency response organizations. Areas that are evaluated throughout the process include community CPR programs, Public Access AED's or defibrillators, early advanced life support treatment and interventions, and defibrillators on every first response vehicle. Westhampton is only one of a handful of communities in Western Massachusetts that has been able to obtain this designation.

The Department continues to be vigilant for any other funding sources available for Fire Departments. This past year the Department was awarded a Federal Homeland Security Grant in the amount of \$71,450 for the purchase of new personal protective clothing for each member, a washer/extractor to clean the gear, and wall mounted storage lockers to properly care for and maintain the personal protective equipment. Another Federal grant, in the amount of \$4,580, was awarded to the Department to assist with preventive efforts throughout the community and help with the continuation of training the general public and emergency responders in CPR and the use of an Automated External Defibrillator (AED). In addition, we were awarded \$3,900 from the Executive Office of Public Safety for the purchase of firefighting equipment that the Department has never had the funding to obtain. All of these grants are competitive grants with Departments across the country vying for the same funding. These awards demonstrated the need that the Department had and allowed us to increase our operational capabilities to help improve the services being provided throughout the community. Finally, the Fire Department would like to thank the Pine Island Lake Association for donating money to help purchase water and ice rescue equipment. The Department did not have any type of this equipment and relied on the response from neighboring communities during these emergencies. This equipment was not eligible to be purchased from any of the other grant opportunities and would not have been possible for the Department to procure without the help from this Association.

There are a number of capital projects that the Fire Department is going to need input and support on from the community in the immediate future. The largest of these is a need for a new Public Safety Complex to meet the growing demands of the community. The current facility is reaching sixty years old and no longer is able to accommodate the demands placed on the Public Safety Services (Police, Fire, EMS, and Emergency Management). In addition, one of the Fire Engines is twenty-two years old and has an expected life span of twenty-five years. However, no new engine available will fit in the current facility given the current parameters. Furthermore, the refurbished bread truck that has been being used as a Rescue/Support Truck is old, worn, loaded to its' maximum carrying capacity, and is being used for functions that it was not originally designed, creating operational and safety issues. The Department is also continuing to explore grant opportunities to replace the current Water Tanker that has also met its' useful life span and develop contingency plans if this goal is not met. We will continue to explore all available funding options to minimize the financial impact on the community, but the conversation needs to begin now in order to plan and prepare for vehicles and equipment for the next ten to twenty-five years and a facility that will continue to meet the service demands for the next fifty plus years.

The members of the Westhampton Fire Department continue to do much more than respond to emergencies. Throughout the years, they continue to clean residents chimneys each fall, hang the flags on the utility poles in the center of town when needed, get involved in community sponsored events such as the Halloween parade, fill residents swimming pools, and put up house numbers for residences to help emergency responders find the proper location and decrease response times. The Westhampton Fire Department is one of the few healthy and vigorous volunteer departments left in the region, and all of the members are very dedicated and proud to serve the residents and community.

We would all like thank our fellow residents for your continued support throughout the year in helping to make our job easier. We strive to improve our knowledge and services to help make Westhampton a safer community to live in. Through our members values of professionalism, honesty, integrity, compassion, and dedication we will continue to meet the needs of the residents and remain "Committed to the Community". Have a great year and stay safe.

Christopher W. Norris, Fire Chief