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Fire Department increases effectiveness to community

Cindy Eisen, Editor

The Clearcreek Fire Department is "keeping its promise to the community" in a big way.

A recent, independent, Insurance Services Office, Inc. (ISO) evaluation for Fire Public Protection Classification (PPC) has dropped the department several classifications, showing a huge increase in effectiveness and service to the community.

In September 2005 the ISO visited the fire department to evaluate the effectiveness of its fire operations, communications capabilities and water supply.

The PPC survey is used by the ISO to filter statistical and actuary information to the property/casualty insurance industry in the United States.

Within the rating system, a Class 1 is the best and a Class 10 is the worst, with the understanding no one is perfect. The fire departments that typically have the best ratings are in large cities, handle a small area, and are well staffed.

The Clearcreek department handles 50 square miles. It handles both areas incorporated by the city, hydrant areas, and non-incorporated areas, non-hydrant areas. With this audit, the department was able to drop from a Class 6 to 9 rating to a solid Class 4 rating.

That means the community's fire suppression services are improving in the face of the demands of a changing environment. With up front planning, predictions, and analyzing trends, the Township Trustees, the watchdog for the Clearcreek Fire District, were able to place and activate two new fire stations in Clearcreek, improving response time. This new triangular pattern of stations placed on major roads, has allowed the department to more effectively serve all residents of the area.

The ISO has extensive information on 44,000 fire-response jurisdictions. The Fire Suppression Rating Schedule (FSRS) they use is designed to help all departments across the country in planning and budgeting for facilities, equipment, and training. By securing lower fire insurance premiums for communities with better public protection, the PPC program provides incentives and rewards for communities that choose to improve their firefighting services.

Clearcreek residents voted for a levy in 2001 which permitted the department to build and open the two new fire stations which have helped improve their ISO rating. The department was rated by the ISO the last time in October 2000. At this time the areas rating a 9 were the farthest from the only fire station, located on South Main Street. The other areas, although rapidly being developed, could only rank a meager 6 due to issues like response and training, as well as equipment, staffing, and water.

Now, with the voter's money, the department is one of the very few, if not the only nearby department which trains every day, has an excellent employee retention rate, is able to more effectively serve the changing needs of the community with better equipment like the ladder truck and thermal imaging cameras, and has developed a faster response time.

The Clearcreek Fire District will keep its promise to the voters and not go back on the ballot until 2010, yet still maintain this heightened service level. At some point in the far future stations may need to be added, depending upon the influx of people to the area. The only areas possible for additional stations would be near Pennyroyal or Patricia Allyn Park. Neither of these options has even begun to be discussed. Instead, the department and township are basking in the glory of what is an outstanding accomplishment, the change of rating points by 5 points in some areas. This may some day equate to lives saved.

How did they rate and improve with this ISO survey? The department received a 152.63 percent increase in their effectiveness of receiving and handling alarms or calls since 2000. They received a 58.31 percent increase in the actual services and equipment available to the fire department. They also received an increase of 1.98 percent in water supply, again noting several outlying areas that are not hydranted.

Since these surveys only are planned every 15 years, and the Clearcreek Department was evaluated in 2000 it should have not been reviewed again until 2015, but the rating received in 2000 was unacceptable to some, so changes were made, the community stepped in with its support, as did the Clearcreek Township Trustees, and voila- a lower rating. Still, Clearcreek Fire Chief Bernie Becker had to ask to be re-reviewed in the minimum special case allotment, five years. With his updated reports, every two years, keeping the ISO aware of the constant increase of services in the area, the department was able to receive the new audit and thus the new rating. When the drop is more than 2 classes, as it was (from a 6/9 to a 4), a double audit is required. Both were passed. Although the rating was not the 3 the personnel had hoped for, the change is significant.