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NORTH PORT

North Port expanding fire services

New hires, equipment and stations are on the horizon for the growing city.

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Published: Wednesday, June 29, 2016 at 7:47 p.m.

NORTH PORT — When Bill Taaffe took the helm of North Port's fire department in 2003, the city had just two fire stations.

The population was soaring, but North Port had budgeted to add only one station every five years. Taaffe knew that would not be enough.

So North Port called an audible, buying more emergency vehicles and over three years building three temporary fire stations — each consisting of a doublewide mobile home with a metal canopy to house emergency vehicles — instead of a single permanent one.

Since then, two of the temporary stations have been replaced with permanent structures. A \$3.1 million construction project to replace the final temporary station with a hurricane-resistant building at the southeast corner of Biscayne and Ponce de Leon boulevards is slated to begin later this year. It should become operational after another eight to 12 months and could last for 40 years.

Even though North Port's population is expected to nearly double over the next 20 years, Taaffe said the city now has plans in place so that it may never have to return to temporary stations.

"In the future, we're hoping to forecast properly when we need those fire stations in the growing areas and to have the funding to do it at that time," he said. "It takes time to build up that kind of reserve. It's not something you do overnight."

North Port's Capital Improvement Program lists three new fire stations in North Port's future, with locations spanning from the city's western half to near Interstate 75.

The infrastructure expansion is anticipated to cost more than \$13.2 million in construction and purchases of new fire engines and ambulances.

But Finance Director Pete Lear said the city is ready to endure those costs because the city budgets for such expenses years before the city has to cut a check. The funding comes from a mix of surtaxes, fire impact fees, fire rescue district assessments and developer contributions.

"It's designed as a planning tool," Lear said. "The things we can foresee over the next five years, we do start saving money and allocating money as it comes in."

Another fire station is expected to sprout in the next five years, this one in the West Villages area in western North Port, to replace a county-run station.

The West Villages Improvement District will donate the land and initially front the more than \$4.7 million required to build the fire station and purchase a new

ambulance and fire engine.

“It’s almost like they’re loaning the city the upfront cost of the fire station,” Taaffe said. “And over time they’ll be paid back the loan through impact fees, whether it be in 10 years or 20 years,” without interest.

For that station to be operational 24/7, North Port will have to hire 18 new fire department employees before it opens.

Also in the works is an interlocal agreement with Suncoast Technical College to erect an already-funded \$755,000 training tower for police and firefighters at the college’s new campus at Toledo Blade Boulevard and Interstate 75.

The city is already planning for its seventh fire station. This one located in the area north of Interstate 75 at North Toledo Blade Boulevard and costing an estimated \$4 million for the cost of construction and purchasing land. That station will also need its own ambulance, fire engine and personnel. The vehicles should cost at least \$1.3 million.

For the immediate future, Taaffe has asked for seven new fire department employees in the preliminary budget that city commissioners began considering this month.

The fire chief said that his first responders are seeing a shift in the emergencies to which they respond. As the city’s population grows, there are more reports of house fires, car crashes and medical events.

“We’re seeing a change in the dynamic of the types of calls and that goes with the changes in our community,” he said.

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