

Groveland Fire Department Implements a Reserve Firefighter Program by Fire Chief Shane Warner

Public agencies statewide are struggling to keep balanced budgets with limited tax dollars, while the cost of providing services increases. The Groveland Fire Department is always looking for more economical ways to deliver the services you expect while holding the line or even reducing costs. In 2007 the Fire Department responded to a record 602 calls, which is an eighteen percent increase over the total calls in 2006. It was time for us to think outside the box.



In June of 2007, the Assistant Fire Chief Jim Burdick and I went to a GCSD budget committee meeting with an idea that would increase Fire Department staffing at a reduced cost by hiring part-time (non-benefited) employees. Another thought behind the program was to utilize college-age students looking for experience to apply what they have learned in local fire academies. It was agreed that hiring twelve part-time firefighters to fill a third position on each shift was more cost effective than hiring one full-time firefighter. In July 2007, the GCSD Board of Directors approved the funding for a Firefighter Reserve program for the Groveland Fire Department.

Prior to implementing this program we had three rotating shifts with only one fire engineer and one firefighter on duty each shift. Our staff consisted of three full-time fire engineers and three full-time firefighters to cover the Big Oak Flat/Groveland area twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. This staffing level did not allow for vacations, sick leave or training. Also, our recently completed Fire Master Plan suggested that a third person on each shift would provide a much higher levels of service. The Reserve Firefighter program was developed to add this third firefighter to all shifts and to cover for planned and unplanned time off for our full-time staff.

With Board approval of the program, we interviewed potential candidates for the Reserve Firefighter program, requiring them to have First Responder certification and a State Firefighter 1 certificate. We had an overwhelming response, including some of our volunteer firefighters who were able to work occasional shifts.

Having a third person on duty has broadened the scope of what the Fire Department can do on initial attack in fire situations, vehicle accidents, medical emergencies, public service assists, and the day-to-day operations of the fire station. Another problem the Fire Department has faced for many years is that volunteer firefighters are not always available for emergency calls or Fire Department training because they work out of the area or are busy with their regular jobs. Training standards and required hours make it challenging for some volunteers to stay current with their certifications.

We are fortunate to have a committed staff, twelve dedicated volunteers, and now, a strong reserve program with twelve firefighters. The citizens in the Big Oak Flat/Groveland area can be proud of their dynamic Fire Department that is increasing in size to keep up with the rise in emergency calls but holding the line on the cost of that service.

A special thanks is due to the GCSD Board of Directors who agreed to try something new and different to meet the needs of our community. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank all of the Fire Department staff, volunteers and reserve firefighters for their dedication to training, special projects, responding to emergency calls and for another safe year! In future articles I will be introducing you to the Groveland Fire Department personnel.