



## *Mount Desert Fire Department*

Michael Bender, Fire Chief

21 Sea Street, P.O. Box 248

Northeast Harbor, ME 04662-0248

Telephone 207-276-5111 Fax 207-276-5732

Web Address [www.mtdesert.org](http://www.mtdesert.org)

[firechief@mtdesert.org](mailto:firechief@mtdesert.org)

---

November 11, 2019

To: Town Manager Durlin Lunt and Board of Selectman

From: Michael Bender, Fire Chief

RE: Fire Department Personnel Analysis

At their regular Board of Selectman meeting on January 7, 2019, the Board requested a written “vision plan” for the municipal fire department. This report is to provide the Board with an assessment of current fire department staffing and operations; project future needs and services; and to provide alternative steps necessary to address those current and future delivery services commensurate with community priorities, State and Federal requirements, and emergency preparedness and response.

### **Background**

The Mount Desert Fire Department was established in March of 2001 when voters approved the combining of the four independently run, non-profit fire departments from Northeast Harbor, Somesville, Seal Harbor and Otter Creek. As part of that consolidation, a position for a full-time Fire Chief was created, approved and filled. The department had a roster of 51 volunteer fire fighters that came over from the four individual departments. Our call volume for 2001 was 101 incidents. We had four fire stations and a fleet of ten trucks. Over time, the Otter Creek fire station was shuttered and the apparatus numbers were reduced to six pieces as a result of the merging. All routine incidents and the occasional structure fire in a typical family dwelling were handled internally by our department with mutual aid requests going out to our neighboring departments on large scale or extended incidents.

In 2007, I submitted a report to the Board indicating our volunteer staffing levels had dropped to 31, and the call volume had increased to 162 incidents. In 2008, I applied for, and was awarded a 50/50 share grant from AmeriCorp to fund a second full time position (besides the Chief) within the department. The subsequent year I was able to secure the same grant which funded the same position and was filled with a different individual from our volunteer ranks. Although being awarded funding for the position for a third straight year, we could not find any one to fill the position, mostly due to the low pay set by the program. In 2011, funding through appropriations was requested and approved to continue the full time position on a more permanent basis. The fire department was staffed by these two full time positions, the chief and one firefighter, Monday through Friday, 8:00 am to 4:00 pm. This enables most of the day-to-day task to be managed by the day crew, with the more serious incidents and any other work details handled by the volunteer staff. At that time, weekday turnout by volunteer firefighters was a concern as most were unavailable because of work or other commitments.

By 2016, our volunteer numbers had dropped to 21 and call volume had increased to 188 calls for the year. By then, we were starting to see subtle signs that dwindling staffing levels were beginning to affect the department's response capabilities. These indicators were apparent when the department was unable to respond to a scattering of calls, mostly on the weekends. It was that same year that I requested, and was approved for, funding of two additional full time positions within the department. These two added staff members were scheduled to primarily to cover the weekend days. Day shifts hours were lengthen so that all four full time fire fighters (including the chief) were working ten hour a days, four day work weeks.

## **Current Situation**

Today, the Mount Desert Fire Department responds out of three fire stations with a fleet of three engines, one ladder truck, one water tanker, a mobile breathing air supply unit, one small utility boat and one pickup truck. The Fire Department relies on full-time and paid-on-call fire fighters, which is referred to as a combination department. We provide a range of responses to hazards including:

- Fire suppression (structural and wildland);
- Agency assists to Northeast Harbor Ambulance Service and Mount Desert Police Department;

- First response to technical rescues (vehicle extrication, open water, ice, low-angle, confined space);
- First response to hazardous materials incidents;
- Fulfill mutual requests and responsibilities.

The fire department also provides non-emergency related services like:

- Fire prevention, plans review, inspections;
- Issues and monitors open burn permits in the Town on behalf of the Maine Forest Service;
- Sponsors fire preventions programs at local public and private schools, as well as area organizations
- Assists the Code Enforcement Officer with chimney, fireplace and stove related compliance questions.

The Mount Desert Fire Department is well supported by the taxpayers of the community and local elected officials. The department has been able to maintain a healthy CIP which has resulted in a modern apparatus fleet and allows the replacement and/or upgrades of critical equipment such as thermal imaging cameras, self-contained breathing apparatus, personal protective gear, fire hose, extrication tools, etc. The fire truck replacement schedules are between sixteen and twenty two years, depending on the type of apparatus. Improvements and preventive maintenance are performed on the three fire stations on a regular basis in order to keep the buildings in serviceable condition.

Currently, we have an on-call force of sixteen members, of which six live either part time or primarily outside of the Town of Mount Desert. Seven of the sixteen on-call members have been with the department since its formation in 2001. Our on-call fire fighters are paid per call (two hour minimum) and paid for training, work sessions or special details they attend, at an hourly rate. Of the sixteen on call firefighters, seven are on the roster of one or more other fire departments. Although we do not discourage this practice, it does lower the number of additional personnel available for multiple agency events.

We have a minimum staffing ‘policy’ of two fire fighters per day shift, 7 am to 5 pm, seven days a week. This includes the department head (fire chief) working a four day

shift and responding to calls on and off duty, which is not unheard of, but not a typical command structure setup. It should be known that although two firefighters in-house during daytime hours are adequate to respond to calls with one or two apparatus, their ability to conduct fire suppression operations at working fires are extremely limited. In fact, Maine Bureau of Labor laws prohibit fire fighters from entering a burning or smoke filled building without a minimum of two additional firefighters on scene to act as backup. The only exception to this is if it is a life safety situation. In today's environment, fire service leaders consider staffing of any less than four fire fighters per engine unsafe. This typically includes one fire officer who is in charge of the crew. As this may be impractical for most communities, we are seeing more and more combination departments in Maine moving towards this protocol. A typical working structure fire usually requires a minimum of twelve fully trained fire firefighters on scene to conduct operations safely. And this would certainly necessitate several personnel multi-tasking and/or filling dual roles. If the incident happens to be outside the hydrant district, then additional manpower will be required as water will need to be shuttled in by truck.

Vacations, comp time off and sick days for full time staff are filled with on-call members when available. If none are available these open shifts are filled with overtime hours worked by the full time staff. Presently, there are not any requirements for full time firefighters to reside within a specific response area, which is sometimes the case in other area fire departments. When initially hired, all full time staff lived within the Town. Now two of the four full-time staff live outside the Town of Mount Desert and are generally not available for responses outside normal duty hours.

Over the last few years, mutual aid agreements with our neighboring fire departments have been strengthen and expanded to meet the demanding needs of small to large scale incidents. Multi-agency trainings have also increased so that area departments and personal can become more familiar with each other and work seamlessly together when involved in mutual aid events. Two years ago, all four MDI fire departments (Southwest Harbor FD, Bar Harbor FD, Tremont FD and Mount Desert FD) developed and implemented automatic alarms protocols that are being used today for incidents which required multi-agency responses. The program has proved to be very successful, and we began to see a noticeable decrease in mutual aid response times, while, more importantly, we were able to ensure the appropriate resources were notified with correct assignments. At this time, we are the only fire departments in the Hancock County that are utilizing this system, although I expect others to follow our lead in the not so distaste future. We are also working with the Hancock County Regional Communications Center and the Hancock County Sheriff's Office to implement a CAD (Computer-Aided Dispatch) software program for fire/EMS responses in the towns of Bar Harbor, Mount Desert,

Ellsworth and Bucksport. CAD software will help our public safety dispatchers quickly gather the data that could be used for route recommendations, pre-fire plans, and information on hazardous materials. Once the software is up and running, it will be offered to the rest of the County on a cost-share basis.

Recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters within the Mount Desert Fire Department has been in decline for years, for a variety of reasons. In fact, the volunteer fire/EMS service in North America is in a major and measurable crisis. Not gonna be in crisis...but is in crisis. Nationally, there are multiple common factors contributing to the shortage of new recruits. Increased certification requirements, added training hours, increased call volume, less personal time to give to volunteering, two income households, increased cancer risks and documented PTSD occurrences have made it difficult to attract new recruits. Locally, the lack of affordable housing, population aging, and the ever increasing shift to a more seasonal-only community all have impacted our ability to find and attract new members. In the past five years, we have had six new on-call firefighters join the department, one of which is a full-time fire fighter for the City of Ellsworth. In that same period of time, thirteen members have either resigned or retired. More individuals leaving than joining has been the trend over the last several years.

Within the next five to eight years, I would anticipate the retirement/resignation of around four to five on-call members due to “aging out”. With the possible addition of one or two new members over that same time, I would project our on-call staffing level to drop to around ten to eleven members. This also may result in no available on-call firefighters in the Seal Harbor/Otter Creek area of town to respond with apparatus from the Seal Harbor fire station. If this overall trend holds true, then staffing levels for the Mount Desert Fire Department will have reached what I believe is a critical point by 2025. I would dare say that by then, the department’s effectiveness to provide fire and life protection to the Town on a consistent basis can be questioned.

In 2018 we began to see incidents where no one was available or willing to respond to incidents during the overnight hours. In the fire service, these are sometimes referred to as “scratched” calls. For that year, there were six unanswered calls, obviously all when full time staff was off duty. So far this year we have had 5 “scratched” calls. Fortunately, all of these have been false alarms caused by various reasons. On every one of these calls, a Mount Desert dispatcher had to contact the Bar Harbor Fire Department to request a crew to respond. In my opinion, this is a troubling trend in which we are not only starting to see unanswered calls in our jurisdiction, but also witnessing increases in response times, and the need to allocate resources from neighboring towns to cover our own calls.

As I mentioned in the fire department budget presentation earlier this year, these “scratches” are usually considered “red flags” that a department may be approaching a point where its ability to fulfill its mission is in doubt.

## **Alternatives**

I believe that if we are to continue to maintain trucks in our stations, then our residents should safely assume that when they call us for help, qualified personnel (and enough of it) will come quickly. If that is not the case, then it is up to us to be honest with the public. Today, thanks to scientific studies and technology, it is very predictable that fires grow at an expectable pace. If we have a fire department that cannot respond with a rapid and adequate turnout, then we are setting ourselves up for what could be a significant loss, or worse. Research shows that thirty years ago, occupants had about seventeen minutes to get out of a house fire. Today, that time has been reduced to three to four minutes due to modern construction techniques and materials, the shift to more open floor plans in residential structures, and the introduction of more petroleum-based furnishings in today’s homes. Simply put, we need the right amount of qualified and able firefighters toned out and turning out to quickly mitigate emergencies. Our community must identify the necessary level of protection it needs based on its own unique circumstances. Once these performing standards are established, a community can assess its own performance and determine if current resources support the desired level of service.

For fiscal year 2020/2021, I will be submitting an operating budget which will include a request to raise the pay rate for those on-call firefighters that can fill open day shifts. The propose raise will be equal to the beginning pay for a full-time firefighter. There will also be a request to fund a plan to offer a stipend for those firefighters who are willing to be on-call outside normal full time staffing hours. This is intended to reduce the number of “scratched” calls. I do not believe this is a long term solution but rather a stop gap measure until a more permanent resolution can be implemented. Emphasis will remain on recruiting and training new on-call members to strengthen our ranks.

Beyond that, it will be up to the taxpayers and elected officials of Mount Desert to decide the amount of fire protection the Town is willing to support. Initially, I would recommend that consideration be given to assure the Town has sufficient fire protection coverage outside the present full-time staffing hours. This may involve the hiring of additional firefighters to work either overnight or for twenty-four hour shifts. If hiring additional staffing is chosen, then expanding the existing fire station(s) or constructing a

new one to provide overnight quarters will most likely be necessary. Since historically the village of Northeast Harbor is where close to sixty percent of the fire calls are and has the majority of commercial buildings, it would make the most sense to explore expansion/construction options there. If the Town were to choose 24/7 coverage, two firefighters per shift would be the minimum staffing that should be considered. To meet that minimum staffing level, three additional firefighter positions would need to be funded to provide around the clock coverage at two per shift. 24/7 coverage would definitely handle a majority of the day-to-day calls. On duty fire personnel could also be made available to assist the Northeast Harbor Ambulance Service (NEHAS) when needed, or perhaps provide non-transporting EMS service in conjunction with the NEHAS. The major incidents such as structure fires, wildland fires, motor vehicle extrication, etc., would still need to be augmented by on-call fire fighters and/or mutual aid departments, as staffing an all career department may be fiscally impractical, or at the very least years away from a reality.

Another option to consider is regionalization. Although this has been talked about for years, to fully regionalize would be challenging, but in my opinion, not impossible. If this was to be explored, island-wide regionalization would be the most logistical sense. But, differences between department staffing, call volume, station locations, labor union membership, EMS provider level, appetite for funding, mechanism for funding, etc., are all challenges that would need to be overcome. There can be disadvantages to regionalizing too. In 2001 when the four Mount Desert departments combined, many volunteer firefighters resigned feeling that the sense of “helping your community” was lost in the consolidation. On-call firefighter losses should be considered and measured if this option is to be contemplated. Loss of local control is another factor that can have a negative impact. It is my belief that regionalization should not be viewed as a short term solution to staffing woes, but rather a way for our local fire departments to combine and share resources while providing the necessary level of fire protection to the entire island.

## **Conclusion**

Like many communities of similar size in the United States, the Town of Mount Desert struggles to balance service delivery objectives for public safety, and budgetary constraints. The Mount Desert Fire Department is seeing a declining level of response to calls during off duty hours. This has been in steady decline over the past several years. The obvious resulting policy choice to resolve this is: either increase on-call staffing and mandate higher level of response from paid-on-call personnel (unlikely to be successful) or look to increase full time staffing to address current shortfalls in coverage.