

Fire District 1 looks ahead, inward to improve

Self-assessment - Staffers tally the agency's strengths and weaknesses

Thursday, September 18, 2008

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Special to The Oregonian

MILWAUKIE -- It's one thing to hear criticism from others. It's something else to look at yourself critically.

Since early spring, Clackamas County Fire District 1 has been working on a new strategic plan. As part of the process, district officials have been hearing from hundreds of people -- businessmen, homeowners, elected officials, concerned citizens -- about what's right about the department. And what's wrong.

After months of surveys, focus groups and meetings, the time came last week for the department to turn the critical eye inward.

For two days, nearly three dozen members of the department, including chiefs, administrative assistants, EMTs and line firefighters, gathered in the conference room of the Mount Scott station house on Causey Avenue as Riley Caton, a consultant from Portland-based Emergency Services Consulting, led them through a series of workshops.

The goal: determine the department's strengths and weaknesses and what opportunities and obstacles it faces.

"This has been so important," said Kyle Gorman, the department's executive officer. "It has been a chance for people across departments, across ranks, from different parts of the district, to get together in one room and learn from each other."

Karen Streje, who works in administration, agreed.

"There's a cross section of the department here," she said. "And that provides us an opportunity for communication that we just don't have on a regular basis."

"Internal communication needs to be improved," was the No. 1 suggestion from within the department, according to a survey that Battalion Chief Ken Horn did as part of the development for the new strategic plan. "Line personnel would like to have more contact with the chief."

Fire Chief Ed Kirchhofer agreed.

"It's hard to see everyone, to have the contact that everyone would like," he said. "But it's important and something that can be improved."

The meetings went a long way toward addressing another concern that came up in Horn's survey: "a perception exists that suggestions for improvements are not always heard or followed through on."

Gerard Kerney, 71, a volunteer for the department, said the meetings made him feel appreciated. "The fact that I am here, that I am being listened to, taken seriously, shows how committed the department is to getting better," he said.

Caton, who said he has conducted similar workshops for more than dozen other departments, said Clackamas is one of the best he's ever worked with. "This is a damn good group," he said. "They are right at the point where, as good as they are, they are ready to become that much better."

When Caton asked the group about threats facing the department, hands flew up. Participants identified threats ranging from complacency to generational differences in the work force to an economic downturn threatening the department's finances.

The same thing happened when Caton asked about the department's strengths and weaknesses.

People brought up issues ranging from the technological -- internal e-mail is limited in its capabilities -- to leadership. People said there's no long-range succession plan and that promoted personnel often don't get the training they need.

Firefighters, volunteers and administrative personnel all spoke about the department's greatest strength being the "get things done" attitude most employees have.

"We are constantly working on making things better," said Deputy Chief Scott Weininger. "As a department, we are aware of the dangers of complacency and are always striving for new solutions."

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