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Bush community is fired up about firefighting upgrades

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St. Tammany

The strong connection between a community and its firefighters is a way of life that just got better in Fire District 9, which recently received grants that will greatly improve its service to the towns of Bush and Sun. Through the Assistance of Firefighters Grant Program, the district procured \$310,000 for a 2016 fire engine and a reconditioned 2005 tanker truck.

"This is a big deal," Fire Chief Scott Brewer said. "I get a new truck every seven or eight years if I'm lucky. This is a celebration to the community."

The new truck, which also has a 1,400-gallon tank, replaces a manual-transmission 1992 fire engine. The 3,000-gallon tanker replaces both a 1986 tanker and a 1990 tanker, which hold a combined total of only 2,300 gallons.

"As a rural community, we do not have hydrants," Brewer said. "Tankers bring in all of our water. Having ... 4,400 gallons of water will make a huge difference to us."

Furthermore, the district received \$200,000 for breathing apparatuses, bunker gear and training. Brewer said he hopes these new upgrades will lower the station's rating from a 4 to 3, so the residents will see a decrease in homeowner's insurance.

"That's \$500,000 our community doesn't have to pay, and the community appreciates that and what we do," he said. "In return, we're going to support them."

District 9 is also investing for the future by forming a Youth Fire Corps. Though the young members do not fight live fires, they receive basic training and fire education in order to give them a head start on a career in firefighting once they graduate at 18 years old.

Brewer says that it has been difficult to recruit and keep adult volunteer firefighters, so they decided to turn to their youth.

"They are born in the community, raised in the community, so why not keep them in the community?" he said. "And it's very successful so far. We've graduated several young men and women that have gone on to become great volunteers, and, hopefully, they'll become paid next year."

The Youth Corps puts on a weeklong youth fire camp every summer that educates kids about public safety. Enrollment has quadrupled since its first year.

District 9 will be more equipped for search and rescue operations with a Humvee that was purchased by a resident who declines to be identified and refurbished by the St. Tammany Parish Sheriff's Office through an interagency cooperative agreement.

"One of our community members pays all its costs, including insurance, upkeep and fuel," Brewer said. "There's no expense that comes to the Fire Department. That's how much this community wants this Fire Department." Brewer said the Humvee will be a great recruiting tool to excite kids about firefighting, especially during the Bush Mardi Gras parade.

Brewer credits the vehicle's renovations and repairs to the Sheriff's Office.

"It's a benefit to the community. The sheriff sees that too," he said. "His deputies are helping us all the time. Our understanding is that we and the Sheriff's Department are the same. Our working relationship is great, and that makes our community stronger."

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