



## New county fire stations planned for 2016

By Cody Hooks

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If there's a fire on the outskirts of the county, volunteers get called from their homes, rally at a station and then make their way to a fire. But to shore up the response times, Taos County is planning to build three new stations and staff them with a cadre of paid firefighters who are at the ready 24 hours a day.

Joaquin Gonzales, fire chief and EMS director for Taos County, told *The Taos News* in an Aug. 17 interview he'd like to see at least two of the stations online by late next summer.

"It's still a work in progress," he said.

Gonzales said the volume of emergency calls, as well as response times to get to those in need, are both on the rise. He called the increase "clearly evident," a noticeable trend warranting a major change to how first responders are dispatched to the county's many dispersed communities.

"Our number-one goal is better services and better response times," he said. The three new fire stations is how he plans to achieve it.

The Northern district would cover San Cristbal to the Colorado border; the Southern district would cover the areas in and around Pe-asco; while the Central District would cover the west side of the county.

Each station would need at least nine full-time firefighters, with three people per shift and three shifts per station, according to best practices in the firefighting industry.

"Two or three people can't hold a structure fire on their own," he said, noting the 13 volunteer fire districts would still be operational and dispatched to back up the primary, paid responders.

Of anything that could hold up the plan, Gonzales said staffing and retention could be the most apparent challenge.

The EMS-Fire Department at the county currently has 40 employees, he said. Half of the staff needed for the new stations would come from his department, he said, with folks getting their firefighting certifications to make the transition. The other half, or about 14 people, would need to be hired from outside the department.

"We are competing with a lot of other towns who can pay their firefighters a lot more than we can in Taos," he said. Even still, Gonzales said "we'll be okay," adding he hopes to attract some volunteer firefighters to the paid positions.

The plan for 24/7 firefighting services comes in conjunction with an administrative change at the Taos County government. Gonzales was already the county's EMS director when he was hired as the fire chief in March. After assuming both roles, he petitioned the Taos County Board of Commissioners to combine the departments, which they did in July.

That move allows the county to utilize its fire excise tax for getting the plan off the ground. The tax generates roughly \$560,000 a year, Gonzales said.

Three brand new fire stations would put the county on the hook for about \$4 million in debt service.

The county government must pay off about \$200,000 every year. "It's not like the money isn't there," he said.

Still, to get money in-hand by November, the plan must pass muster before the New Mexico Department of Finance Administration.

If all goes well, land surveys and architectural schematics will be finished throughout the winter. Ground could be broken as early as spring.

Of the three stations, Gonzales said the northern district would be built first, with the southern station to follow.

The county is currently in negotiations with the village of Questa about the possibility of absorbing the village's fire and EMS department into the county.

Even if that acquisition doesn't come to fruition, Gonzales said the county has land in Questa on which to build a new station.

The county also has property adjacent to the Old Armory near the U.S. 64-State Road 150 junction and in Pecos for the other two stations.

Even while paying off the stations' debt there will still be fire excise tax revenue to spare, which is set to be distributed to the county's 13 volunteer fire departments to remodel or replace some of the oldest and shoddiest fire stations.

Gonzales said the volunteer fire departments in Amalia, Latir, and Cerro will likely get rebuilt, with some expansions planned for the Chamisal and Rio Fernando fire stations.

"The [volunteer] fire districts have healthy budgets," Gonzales said.

Those districts can and have been saving money from state funds and the fire excise tax, meaning there is some modicum of cash on hand to help renovate the aging fire stations.

The 24/7 fire service plan complements changes already underway in the department. With a medical director and pharmacist on hand, all but two of 13 volunteer fire stations can now administer life-saving drugs, such as those for overdoses, as well as provide advanced EMS care.

"Taxpayers need to see the fire protection they deserve," he said.