

Fire officials envision new public safety center in Keizer

- **LES ZAITZ - KEIZERTIMES**
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A new siren used to summon firefighters is mounted on the original Keizer fire hall in 1959. The three-bay structure was built in 1949, a year after the agency's founding. The fire district opened its current station in 1996. (KEIZER HERITAGE MUSEUM)

Some Keizer firefighters are sleeping in what used to be a storage closet.

A fire rig designed for brush fires is parked in rented space instead of at the Chemawa Road fire hall.

And training for firefighters sometimes takes place in school parking lots.

Such issues have Ryan Russell, Keizer Fire District chief, on the hunt for money.

He envisions an additional public safety building to house not only some Keizer crews but those from Marion County Fire District 1. He sees sharing space with police agencies and emergency managers.

“I wish we started this project 10 years ago,” Russell said.

He’s working with Kyle McMann, Marion County fire chief, in exploring the concept.

“We’re pretty early in discussions,” Russell said.

“It’s conceptual,” McMann said. “This shows good stewardship with interagency cooperation and being fiscally conservative.”

The two agencies now share space in a Clear Lake station built 25 years ago, while Keizer’s main fire station remains on Northeast Chemawa Road.

McMann said the population and housing is growing north in Keizer and the Brooks area. It makes sense to consider when and where to locate a larger, centralized building.

The fire chiefs have no specifics in hand – no drawings, no cost estimates.

None of that would matter without sources of money.



Russell and McMann have met with state Rep. Kevin Mannix, a Republican representing Keizer, and state Sen. Bruce Starr, Republican leader in the Oregon Senate. They also have met with representatives of U.S. Rep. Andrea Salinas, who represents the Keizer area, and U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden.

Russell has been updating the Keizer Fire District Board in the past couple of months. That board includes Colleen Busch, Louis Risewick, Kevin Clark, Betty Hart and Corri Johnson.

Russell said he's learning what state and federal funding might be available.

"Our only real opportunity is through federal or state grant money or asking voters for more money," Russell said.

With the current climate, he doesn't imagine voters approving a new tax levy anytime soon.

"You could have the best plan there is and it likely wouldn't pass," Russell said.

He said the chiefs decided to check on money sources after the Legislature's 2025 session. In a special funding bill, legislators gave state money to communities for new fire stations. Gresham got \$8 million, for instance, and the McMinnville Fire District got \$3 million.

"That kind of opened our eyes about what's possible," McMann said.

The Keizer Fire District has grown significantly in staffing, equipment and calls since moving into the current station on Chemawa Road in 1996. The district started as a volunteer agency that opened a three-bay fire hall in 1949.

Russell said the station is out of room.

He said sleeping quarters were built for 10 firefighters. Staffing now averages 15 people a shift and as high as 18. He said two storage rooms have been converted for bunk space and a curtain now hangs down the crew dorm to create better sleeping arrangements.

"We're over full," he said. "We're doing the best we can."

He said the district now has to pay to store two fire rigs, including the district's original 1948 truck.

"We're doing all of our training in the parking lot or a school parking lot," he said.

And circumstances aren't ideal for the Clear Lake fire station, built in 2004 and operated by the Marion County Fire District. The station now houses crews from both fire districts – a role not envisioned for the building.

McMann said the station sits on "a very tight piece of property," limiting expansion. He also said there are safety concerns – crews have to pull across traffic lanes on Wheatland Road to back equipment into the bays.

Russell said the needs for a new building should come into sharper focus as his district crafts a new strategic plan over the next six months.

McMann said bringing together several agencies for such a public safety building would "produce economies of scale and partnerships."

Besides, he said, "When a big event happens, we're all going to be working together anyway."

