

Chiefs Grapple with Volunteer Declines

By Douglas Rooks

This time of year, two hardy perennials about municipal government can be expected to show up in the news. One is that town meeting is declining or dying. The other is that fire departments can't find enough volunteers. Considering that town meeting remains the form of government in a wide majority of Maine's municipalities, its prospective demise seems overblown. But a shortage of volunteer firefighters is all too real, say fire chiefs and other observers. Nationally, volunteer or call firefighter numbers stood at 822,000 in 2007 and they have declined since to less than 800,000. In Maine, overall firefighter numbers are down from 10,000 to 8,000 over the past 20 years. But those figures probably understate the problem. The real question, said Ellsworth Fire Chief Richard Tupper, is: "How many firefighters can you get to the fire and how long does it take?" By that standard, it's increasingly difficult, even in areas with a reasonable number of volunteers on the call list. Tupper said he has "26 names on the roster board," but of those, only 13 can be expected to go on calls regularly – and nine of those are full-time personnel. Nighttime calls are initially answered by just two firefighters. Ellsworth cannot meet the basic safety standard of "two in, two out," meaning that two firefighters inside a structure must be matched by two outside, prepared for a rescue if one is needed. "It's a real safety concern," Tupper said, and it can lead to pressures to go inside a structure anyway. "Nobody wants to see their home burning and be told, 'We can't go in yet. We have to wait for backup.'" After hearing Tupper's concerns, the city council recently voted to support an application to hire two more firefighters under the federal SAFER program (Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response). It's administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency and designed specifically to address the national personnel shortage. Stephen Nichols, Kennebunk's fire chief who's also president of the Maine Fire Chief's Association, is familiar with the issues. "We have 80 people on the books but only 30-35 we can actually count on," he said. RECESSIO A FACTOR The reasons vary, but chiefs say the prolonged recession has increased the pinch. "It used to be that employers were willing to let employees respond whenever there was a call," Nichols said. Now, it's more difficult with leaner staffing and because so many more people work out of town, he said. "We can still muster a large turnout for a structure fire," Nichols said. "But for what we call 'smells and bells' – smoke investigations and triggered fire alarms – it's hit or miss." Extensive training requirements also have made recruitment more difficult. Rockland Fire Chief Charles Jordan recalls that when he was asked to consider volunteering, 25 years ago, the then-chief asked whether he could handle an air pack and then invited him inside a structure the department was burning down for practice. "Flames were everywhere and you could see the fire spreading and developing," Jordan said. "I was hooked." Such an invitation couldn't be made today. "Those days are over, and probably a good thing," he said. Now, volunteers who want to fight structure fires must gain Firefighter 1 and 2 certification –180 hours of study before they ever see the inside of a building

"A lot of people lose their enthusiasm when they find that out," Nichols said. Chiefs agree with the guidelines developed over the last 20 years. "Safety has to be our biggest concern," Tupper said. "This is a dangerous profession." But chiefs also struggle to find qualified volunteers while managing ever-tighter budget constraints. That applies even to departments where volunteer levels are healthy. West Gardiner Chief Chris McLaughlin said he'd like to have 25 call firefighters; he has 22. "But we can't take much more than that and stay within our budget, which goes for training costs and equipment," he said. In some areas, shortages are pronounced. In Ellsworth, Tupper observes that Bangor is the nearest department that uses all full-time firefighters. Bucksport, Bar Harbor and Mount Desert have a mixed force of full-time and call firefighters. Other towns rely entirely on volunteers. Given that Mount Desert Island is an epicenter of Maine tourism, forces are spread thin. What's a fire chief to do? There are many options, and nearly all are in use. Federal grants, some of them continuing and some offered through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), have been useful. The SAFER grants are spread over five years. Nichols has used them in Kennebunk both to recruit and retain firefighters. The grants provide 90 percent of costs for the first year after hiring, then decline to 70 percent, 50 percent, 30 percent and 10 percent, with the municipality expected to continue the position for two years afterward. Kennebunk will receive about \$800,000 in federal funding over a five-year period.

AMERICORPS HIRES The department also hired two firefighter/EMTs through the AmeriCorps program offered through ARRA. Two female firefighters, one from Michigan and one from Vermont, have joined the department's administrative team. Both are also call firefighters. Nichols is the first to admit that federal grants are not a panacea "but for us, it's helped a lot," he said. The five-year term gives enough time for the town to evaluate needs and whether positions should be made permanent. Another approach has been used for the past 20 years in Gorham, where Chief Robert Lefebvre has integrated his firefighting staff with college and high school programs. Currently, two Southern Maine Community College fire science students live in one of the town's firehouses and work both nighttime and weekend shifts. "If they have just a morning class and the afternoon free, they sometimes hang around the station and go on calls," he said. Students benefit from real-life experience to complement their classroom work and the town gets much-needed staffing. Gorham also has an active junior firefighter program at its high school. And while SMCC students are a mainstay, others from the University of Southern Maine and St. Joseph's College have participated.

INVESTMENT IN GORHAM Lefebvre sees it as a long-term investment in the health of his department, particularly since the scope of its work has expanded. It used to be just fire calls. Now it's emergency response, accidents, hazardous materials, maintenance of sophisticated equipment and public education. "The days of sitting around the station, playing cards between calls are over," he said. There are probably as many different methods to recruit and retain firefighters as there are departments in need of personnel – which is just about all of them. Some ideas work better than others. Kennebunk recently tried offering volunteers a \$2,500 retirement credit annually if they achieve a certain number of points – one for going on a call, with one subtracted for missed calls, with points offered for training. Chief Nichols said participation is light. "I wish we had this 25 years ago when I started," he said. "I would have been all set by now." There's little doubt that the biggest way of stretching staff in Maine is the mutual aid system, developed and fine-tuned over decades. In many areas, it's changed from an informal "call if you need us" arrangement into one with specific protocols for different types of fires and coverage areas. On the day Chief McLaughlin discussed the volunteer force in West Gardiner, they'd been called to a structure fire in a duplex, later determined to be caused by a child playing with matches. The mutual aid call went to Farmingdale and Pittston since it was on the east side of town. If it had been elsewhere, Litchfield or Manchester would have heard the

bell. In this case, Gardiner, the area's full-time department was also on the scene because of a report that a person was still inside. "We also ask for their help on chimney fires, when we need an aerial ladder truck," McLaughlin said. Yet there are indications the mutual aid networks may not be enough. Neil Courtney, who's studied Maine fire departments as a consultant for 25 years, first with Southern Maine Community College and for the last five years on his own, thinks Maine will have to embrace change. There simply aren't enough volunteers, and enough money, to keep the status quo, he said.

COMMON CONCERN In recent years, Courtney has done studies for Monmouth, Whitefield, Norway, Hope, Isleboro, Surrey, Hollis and Arrowsic, among other towns. He's currently doing a study in Waterboro, updating work from 14 years ago in one of Maine's fastest-growing communities. "They've really stepped up to the Water Wastewater Infrastructure Sustainable Design & Energy Conservation Offices throughout New England | 888.621.8156 | www.wright-pierce.com Serving Maine municipalities with innovative engineering and advanced technology. plate," Courtney said. "They've done a good job of following through with a long-term plan." Some of the studies have outlined tricky integrations such as in Whitefield, where three private, volunteer forces became a single, town-wide department in a little over a year. Sometimes, towns contract for services, such as Arrowsic, which ended up signing an agreement with Bath. Some municipalities have an "emotional attachment with the past,"

3 Courtney said. An ongoing study in Hallowell ended up foreclosing several options before they were examined, he said. The original Hallowell draft plan suggested looking at five options: keeping the current arrangement; joint ownership of a station with neighboring Farmingdale; merger with Farmingdale; developing a fire district with neighboring communities; or, contracting with another municipality. These decisions are never easy to make. In January, the city council voted to maintain Hallowell's fire department as a separate entity and study a new public safety building to accommodate both police and fire services. Police currently work out of city hall. The current fire station, a 200-year old building with serious structural deficiencies and poor siting, will probably have to be replaced, Courtney said. Yet, unlike the full-time police department, the fire department is all-volunteer. City Manager Mike Starn said that of the current 13 volunteers only six live in Hallowell. A public safety building would cost \$1.5 million to \$2 million, he estimated. "They have an annual budget of \$100,000," Courtney said. "How much would it cost to contract for those services?" Courtney said some departments stand out for effective recruitment and retention of volunteers because of "visionary leadership and strong-goal setting." But expecting such leadership everywhere is unrealistic, he added. The facts don't favor the all-volunteer option in an increasing number of communities. It's not only keeping a department going but providing a high level of service is also at stake, said Chief Tupper, in Ellsworth. "Everyone sees Rescue 911 and other TV shows and expects that to happen in their town." Chief Jordan in Rockland has seen the gradual erosion of capabilities in the Midcoast region, where real estate prices have tended to drive out the working class volunteers who once manned fire engines. Rockland has long relied on full-time firefighters but nearby communities such as Camden and Rockport are all-volunteer. "Can they keep going that way?" Jordan wondered. "If they had to go to full-time firefighting, it would have a huge impact on their budgets." Yet while greater cooperation might seem like a good idea to outsiders, it can be difficult to achieve. Courtney has studied the option of merging with Rockport to achieve efficiencies for Camden, where he lives. Two years later, no decision has been made, though two towns already have a joint school system, a factor for Farmingdale and Hallowell as well. The best recipe may be building trust over time. Gorham is "the gold standard for collaboration" in Maine, according to Courtney. But, Chief Lefebvre noted, such efforts go back decades, even though he

has encouraged expanded cooperation. Gorham now jointly owns equipment or, in some case, fire stations with most of its neighbors. One of those neighbors, Standish, will jointly own a station with Sebago if citizens approve the agreement at town meeting. There may be other ways to reinvigorate the volunteer network. In Ellsworth, Chief Tupper says "We haven't done a good job of promoting what we do. We're kind of taken for granted, and that may be our own fault." He envisions a vigorous round of school presentations and other public education efforts, not just to help in recruiting, but to enlist community support for steps, and the funding, that will be necessary in the future.