

Butler Eagle

Effort seeks to hike ranks of firefighters

Organizations start \$500,000 fund drive

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BUTLER — Several organizations are partnering to raise \$500,000 to help recruit and retain more volunteer firefighters in Butler County.

They want to do that by covering the costs for those volunteers to attend Butler County Community College under the condition that they take a firefighter certification course and commit to two years of voluntary fire service.

The effort is being undertaken now because most volunteer fire departments are struggling to find members.

County Commissioner Bill McCarrier said at a news conference Tuesday at BC3 that Pennsylvania in 1970 had about 300,000 volunteer firefighters, a number that has dwindled to about 50,000.

McCarrier, a former fire chief in West Sunbury, added that about 95 percent of all firefighters in the county are volunteers and warned that action must be taken now to help recruit members.

That's why the county is partnering with the Cranberry Township Community Chest, BC3 and other organizations to raise the \$500,000.

About \$130,000 of that will go to buy a new fire emergency training trailer as an educational and recruitment tool for departments. The trailer will be donated to the college's fire academy and will be available for use by any of the 31 fire departments in the county.

Officials said the fire academy is one of the best in the state, and they pointed out firefighters from nearly 30 counties use the facility to train annually.



From left, Butler County Commissioner Dale Pinkerton, Butler County Community College facility director Kip Deleonibus, Bruce Mazzoni of the Cranberry Township Community Chest, and county Commissioner Bill McCarrier at Butler County Community College Tuesday announced a joint effort to boost the ranks of volunteer firefighters.

The rest of the money will go to fund up to 20 scholarships at BC3 to provide an incentive for firefighter recruitment. Those scholarships can be used to support any course of study.

Bruce Mazzoni, chairman of Cranberry Township supervisors and treasurer of the community chest, said the \$500,000 initiative is the 2015 Community Project of the Year for the community chest.

This is the first time the community chest has spearheaded such an ambitious project, Mazzoni said, and it is the first time the group is taking its efforts outside of Cranberry.

“The Cranberry Township Community Chest can't do it alone,” Mazzoni said. “We need countywide support. This project isn't just for volunteer firefighters. It's truly a self-serving issue that impacts every business and resident in the county.”

Mazzoni said a number of businesses and organizations have already donated to the initiative. The Alcoa Foundation has pledged \$20,000 while the Butler County Tourism Bureau has donated \$5,000, among other organizations.

In addition, money raised next week during Cranberry's Community Days celebration will be donated to the initiative.

If all goes as planned, Mazzoni said the group should have about one-third of the \$500,000 raised by mid-July.

McCarrier said he has faith in Mazzoni and his efforts to raise the money.

“When Bruce comes up with an idea and follows through with it, I've never known him to fail,” he said.

After the news conference, John Stokes, president of the county Fire Chiefs Association, said that the decline in volunteers has hit the county hard in recent years.

He mentioned the merger of several departments, including Valencia and Mars to form the Adams Area Fire District and Greenwood Village, Meridian and Lyndora to form a new department in Butler Township, as efforts to cope with this problem.

“The statewide statistics on firefighter decline have pretty much been on point with what we've seen here locally,” he said. “A couple of local departments are going in the other direction but as a whole we're seeing the statewide stats are very representative of what we have here in Butler County.”

Kip Deleonibus, the director of public safety training at BC3, praised the firefighter initiative.

“It's an opportunity for us to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters in Butler County, but it also gives them an opportunity to attain a college degree, much like I did as a very young volunteer firefighter,” he said.

Ruth Purcell, executive director of the BC3 Education Foundation, said the foundation is involved in setting up the scholarships.

It's a big undertaking, she said, but one that can be accomplished by everyone working together for a common goal.

“There are challenges involved here but what a great opportunity it presents,” she said.

The two other county commissioners attended the news conference as did fire officials from around the county.

The \$500,000 initiative is an effort among the county commissioners, the Cranberry Township Volunteer Fire Company, the county Fire Chiefs Association, BC3 and the community chest.

How to Donate

There is an effort by several organizations to raise \$500,000 to help recruit and retain more volunteer firefighters in Butler County.

If you want to donate to this firefighter initiative, you can do so by mailing a check to the Cranberry Township Community Chest, attention Fire Fund. The address is 2525 Rochester Road, Suite 450, Cranberry Township, PA 16066.