

50 Years of the North Saanich Volunteer Fire Department: A Chronological Summary

*Adapted from Gary Wilton's "Summary of History of NSVFD. 2016.
Edited by David Spencer. 2022*

Fire Protection before 1972:

In 1946 a population boom following World War II, produced a community with the desire to modernize and advance their fire protection service. Thus, the North Saanich Fire Protection District was registered to meet this need and cover the northern part of the Saanich Peninsula. Firefighting was conducted under this name for only seven years. One year after the Village of Sidney was incorporated, in 1953, the name of the Fire Department was changed to the "Sidney and North Saanich Fire Department."

In 1965, the population continued to grow around Sidney, and the municipality of North Saanich was incorporated. In order to provide the increasing North Saanich population with appropriate fire coverage it was proposed to create a new firehall at the corner of West Saanich Road and Wain Road. And so, this property was purchased from the Bushby family in 1969 for \$8500. The "Deep Cove Fire Station" was built by Paul Sparling and completed in 1970.

However, the move to build a satellite hall had been met with opposition. The "Sidney Fireman's Association" objected to providing service in North Saanich. A Fire Committee was formed for which North Saanich resident and Councillor George Aylard was assigned chairman. But, after a 5-year battle involving courts and the Minister of Municipal Affairs, in 1971 North Saanich and Sidney parted ways and formed independent fire services.

The 16 Volunteers who wished to serve North Saanich were trained directly by the Fire Commissioners Office and under recommendation of the Fire Commissioners Office and by motion of Council in June of 1972, The North Saanich Volunteer Fire Department was officially deemed operational.

The Early Days of the North Saanich Volunteer Fire Department:

Volunteer and Life Member George Hartshorne recalls flipping coins to determine badge allocation and the first role of chief in 1971. George received badge number 3; Ron Evans was assigned badge number 2; and badge number 1, along with the assignment of Chief was issued to Doug Jack.

George and Ron flew to Montreal that year to purchase the first fire truck, a Thibault, purchased for \$35,000. Their historic drive home from Montreal is immortalized in the photograph of their arrival with the truck; the picture still hangs on the wall of the main entrance at North Saanich Hall #1.

The 16 members of the North Saanich Volunteer Fire Department in 1971 formed the North Saanich Volunteer Firefighters Association under the Societies Act in order to provide volunteers with a means of further helping the Fire Department and the community. All North Saanich Volunteer Fire Department members are members of the Association, and all members act on behalf of both at all times - a tradition that continues today.

The formation of the Association provided a means to organize charity events, recruit and retain new members, collect and preserve the department's history, provide basic insurance to volunteers and more.

In 1971, the volunteers were alerted for any emergency call-out by contract to a company called the Telephone Answering Service (TAS), located in Victoria. Emergency callers would dial TAS's phone number (there was no "911") and TAS would set off a siren on the roof of the Fire Station and set off radio signal monitors located in the homes of the volunteers. On arrival at the station, the first arriving volunteer would phone TAS to get the details of the call.

In addition, a few members' wives had radio signal monitors and they had a fan-out list to telephone members who hadn't been issued monitors to ensure they received the call in case they were out of the hearing range of the siren.

The siren, that was such a memorable sound and acknowledgement of the call to volunteer was silenced in 2006 following community pressure.

Growth: The 70's and 80's

North Saanich Hall #1 at Wain and West Saanich saw its first addition in 1974 when a double-story bay was added to the West side of the building to accommodate new fire trucks. The members renovated the upstairs in 1976.

In 1975 the massive Dean Park Estates was starting, comprising of 782 new lots. Prior to this, part of the negotiations in splitting North Saanich and Sidney Fire Departments included the agreement that Sidney would provide fire service to the Southeast area of North Saanich. However, this new development prompted Sidney to demand North Saanich buy them a new Fire Truck. When North Saanich found this unreasonable, they set out to construct a second fire hall to service the south end of North Saanich.

The first site proposed was at the corner of East Saanich and McTavish. But at the time, it was deemed Agricultural land, and the second option, McTavish and Cresswell, was chosen. This land belongs to the Town of Sidney and is leased at \$1.00/year. North Saanich Hall #2, was completed in 1983 for a cost of \$249,000.

1975 was also the time when the Fire Department's first career (paid) position was created. At first, a short-lived Fire Inspector worked for the building department. But later that year the position was adjusted to fall under the Fire Department's direction. In 1979, one of the volunteers, Ed Banas, was awarded the position and reported to the Fire Chief. Ed Banas was inspector for 20 years and the position has since belonged to Ron French, Joe Ferrie, Steve Knapp and currently, Kurt Barner.

The 1980s saw major changes to the site at Hall #1. In 1985 BC Tel and the District came to an agreement for a 99-year lease of part of the Fire Hall property to install a switching station. The District used those funds (\$37,000) to purchase the immediate corner at Wain and West Saanich from the Pratt family, because it housed the former community hall. The community hall was then used for firefighter training until it was deemed unsafe and demolished in 1994. A group of citizens had tried for three and a half years to relocate the old community hall but were unsuccessful.

By 1988 the Fire Department had dramatically grown in the number of calls and number of volunteers, and it was decided to expand Hall #1 again. This time a 15-foot addition to both floors was added to the entire north side of the Fire Hall.

This was also a period of growth in identity of the North Saanich Firefighters. Members hosted island-wide activities like Tractor-pulls and mud-bog-trials at the Sandown site, led by member Albert VanWyk. Similarly, Steve Morton developed car rallies, and he and other members took part in planning and participating in firefighting competitions. These types of activities showcased many of the skills required of firefighters while making connections abroad and creating a sense of pride at home.

Major leaps: The 90s and 2000s

An aging tanker at Hall #2 used to service the airport and areas without hydrants was replaced by a new tender; a purchase aided by a donation from the University of Victoria of \$20,000. At the time, the University of Victoria owned the Dunsmuir Lodge and were property-tax exempt.

Demands on firefighters continued. Call volume increased, as did the expectations of the community for the services firefighters could offer. So, in 1994 North Saanich added the medical First Responder Program to assist the BC Ambulance Service with medical calls. This service has continued, uninterrupted, until present. The program is still viewed by residents as an important and valuable service.

Similarly, one year later in 1995, the Fire Department began responding to vehicle crashes and rescues. The first set of hydraulic tools (the Jaws of Life) were purchased, and the subsequent training was achieved within that year.

Also, in 1995, fire hydrants were installed in Ardmore, our last major neighbourhood to do so.

With the growth of the Fire Service came a growth in the role of Chief. In 1995, lobbied by the North Saanich Volunteer Firefighter's Association, a competition was held for position of Career Fire Chief.

Gary Wilton, a long-time volunteer, was awarded the position and became the first Career Fire Chief in 1995.

The latter half of the 90's is dominated by advancements in area-wide emergency response. Following the disastrous "Blizzard of '96," the Peninsula Emergency Measures Organization (PEMO) was established and managed by the three Fire Chiefs on the Peninsula (North Saanich, Sidney and Central Saanich.) This, the first major step towards establishing multi-agency, large-scale emergency responses, has helped pave the way for the pooling and sharing of resources, shared training and the creation of extra-agency specialized teams.

In 1999 the North Saanich Volunteer Firefighters Association conducted their first annual Dean Park Christmas Fire Truck Food Drive. Now, over 20 years later, Sidney and Central Saanich have joined the cause and conduct food drives simultaneously: a single event that provides thousands of dollars and thousands of pounds of food to the Saanich Peninsula Food Bank each year.

Most notable about the early 2000s is staffing changes to answer current demands and prepare for the future. Both the Fire Chief's and Inspector's offices were moved from the Municipal Hall

to Hall #1 in 2002. Then, in 2003, our first Administrative Assistant, Jennifer Provan, was hired and worked at Hall #1. Jennifer retired from the position, after nearly 20 years of contributing both to the Fire Department and (mainly through volunteering extra time) the Firefighter's Association.

Anna Trelford became the first female firefighter in North Saanich in 2001. She had come from Sidney Fire Department and went on to a career firefighting and as an officer with the Victoria Airport Authority.

In 2005, after decades of hosting a Halloween Bonfire with the dropped-off yard waste of residents, the tradition finally outgrew the space. The Fire Department created the Municipal Pit Drop-Off for burnable yard waste, making a substantial positive impact on the environment. The management of this successful program was transferred to Public Works and is still in operation. Fortunately, the volunteers have kept the traditional Halloween Bonfire alive by hosting a smaller bonfire and maintaining the fireworks, open house, snacks, beverages and decorations that are enjoyed by the community - a tradition nearly 50 years old.

A new career Fire Department position was created in 2007 to meet the demands of increased training. Instead of relying on a volunteer Training Officer who would often volunteer to provide training 3 or more days per week, this role would fall under the newly created Assistant Fire Chief responsible for training and safety. After a competition, John Trelford who had been the Volunteer Deputy Chief was the successful candidate.

2010 to Present:

This period started off with a proud and historic event at Hall #1. To honour those who had helped establish the Fire Department as a beacon of community spirit, initiative, and high standards, and those who will continue to do so in the future, in 2010, on the site of the old community hall, a life member's memorial park was dedicated to the District residents. Dignitaries that attended included the Lt. Governor of B.C., Fire Commissioner of B.C., the local MP, local MLA, and District officials. The park was a project of the Volunteer Firefighters Association who managed the project, solicited donations of time, materials and funds. The park cleared up the unsightly corner of the Fire Hall property and today is used as a resting spot for many walkers and cyclists. Spear-heading this initiative was NSVFA President Shaun McCumber, Greg Smith, Steve Knapp and several other long-serving members.

To date, the modern history of North Saanich is one of growth. Thus, in 2006, after a space-needs-analysis recommended seismic upgrades to Hall #1, bigger trucks, a training tower, operational safety changes and additional staffing, the Fire Department requested a major addition to Fire Hall #1.

After 7 years, which included an approval of \$1.6 million, a referendum with 70% in favour and a lengthy construction process, the new renovations and additions were completed in 2013.

However, this budget fell short of fully renovating the existing structure to cover the many operational needs of the growing department. Of note was the need for a training room that met modern standards. It was the North Saanich Volunteer Firefighters Association that proposed a \$50,000 project to construct the training room split between a \$25,000 contribution from the District matched with an equivalent sum donated by Association members of cash and services. Once the volunteers had completed the training room, the District paid an additional \$10,000 so the volunteers were not out-of-pocket for the remaining amount.

An immediate benefit to the Hall expansion and training improvements was the Fire Departments ability to train for multi-level residential buildings, which have since been constructed in North Saanich. It also allowed North Saanich to host firefighting courses for other departments, which serves to both reduce the cost and wait times for the training of North Saanich Firefighters, but it also helps to make connections and build on the expertise of other departments. As well, within the year the expansion was completed, the Fire Department organized a confined space response team staffed jointly with volunteer firefighters and District staff.

There was an immense, Provincial-level change to firefighting in 2014, when the Office of the Fire Commissioner produced a document called "The Playbook." The Playbook established new operational standards for all fire departments. It meant that the North Saanich Fire Department would be held to the same standard as any full career fire department - the highest standard. The volunteers met the challenge with countless hours dedicated to coursework, training and sourcing new equipment; in only 18 months they had brought North Saanich to the leading-edge of firefighting.

In 2016, after 41 years in the fire service and 21 years as Career Fire Chief, Gary Wilton retired. The successful candidate to replace Chief Wilton was our very-own Chief John Trelford who had been the Career Training Officer, Volunteer Deputy and had volunteered in North Saanich since 1996.

The new assignment of Chief made the position of Deputy Chief/Training Officer vacant. The successful candidate was Steve Knapp who had been an officer with North Saanich for nearly his entire career.

For years the most invaluable training we had was the donation of homes destined for demolition to use for training. This training often included "Live Fire Training," which was fighting actual fires in a safely prepared building using the guidelines of NFPA 1403. However, in 2016 the requirements for preparing a building included asbestos remediation and it no longer became a cost-effective form of training, nor was it safe: removing wall, roof and flooring materials made the firefighting unnatural and fire spread was unusually fast. From this period on our Live Fire Training would take place outside of the District in purpose-built facilities like the one at Otter Point.

How we respond to calls changed in several ways over the years, but never as much as it did in 2017. Our dispatching service changed from Saanich to Surrey. The move meant that Surrey would not only field our 911 calls and pass us the information but would also serve as our dispatcher. This meant we no longer had to dispatch for ourselves, this freed up an additional firefighter. Furthermore, as cellphones were being more often relied upon, an app called "Who's Responding," was adopted and supported by Surrey to provide dispatch information right to the phones of all responders.

By 2019 volunteers were being trained for and called upon for emergencies that included, but are not limited to boat and marina fires, hydro-pole and power line emergencies, structure fires, natural gas emergencies, medical aid, motor vehicle accidents, hazmat, confined space, wild land-interface fire suppression and technical rescues. Annual call volumes exceeded 700 calls, and some firefighters were volunteering in excess of 20 hours per week. In 2020, with many volunteers having completed fire service education with equivalent credits to a Master's Degree, the North Saanich Volunteer Firefighters' Association agreed to request the Fire Department

adopt a Paid-On-Call (POC) structure to off-set the time commitment and to place more representative value on their professionalism. This model was accepted by Council and took effect in 2021. North Saanich was among the last fire departments of similar size and make-up in the Province to adopt the POC model.

To keep up with advancements in the fire service, the addition of two career firefighters joined the staff, one each in 2021 and 2022. The same time saw the retirement of Deputy Chief Steve Knapp, and the successful applicant, Chief Aaron Kary, from Sidney to replace him.

Then and Now:

Chief Doug Jack was issued badge #1. Today our latest issued badge is 230 with five recruits currently in training. There were 16 volunteers in 1971, and we now maintain 39 volunteers. The increasing roles of firefighters, the increasing demand on their services and increasing populations will almost certainly be met by an increase of firefighters, resources and a demand for volunteers as our history continues.

Before the first Career Fire Chief, there had been 7 volunteer Fire Chiefs. To date, 8 North Saanich Volunteers have gone on to become career Fire Chiefs in BC communities and abroad. Two have gone on to become the BC Fire Commissioner and Deputy Fire Commissioner. At least 16 volunteers have been offered Career Firefighting positions around the Province (one in Ontario). All of this is testament to the dedication and professionalism of both our training programs and of the volunteers themselves.

The dispatching of emergency call-outs is now conducted by the Surrey Dispatch Centre, and firefighters are notified by a combination of portable pagers and through a smartphone app. Thanks to the combined work of our dispatchers, the app designers and our own Fire Prevention Officer and program, the information received by a firefighter for a call-out can instantly include, a road map, road angle picture of the incident site, pre-fire plan of the structure involved, fire hydrant locations, relevant past history of the address and any or all details pertaining to the incident at hand. It speeds our response time and equips our volunteers with information to help them proceed effectively and safely.

Early on joining the department was as easy as coming with the right attitude, physical ability and technical know-how. Now, the training to become a volunteer firefighter is the same as a career firefighter anywhere else in the province. It requires an intense year (sometimes two) of both written and practical training often taking place two or three days per week and travelling outside of the district for many courses. All volunteers are now trained to the highest standards in firefighting.

The Fire Department's operating budget in 1971 was \$20,000 serving a population of under 5,000. Today, the budget is \$1.3 million, serving a population of 12,200. North Saanich's efficient fire service, built on the back of volunteers, is among the least expensive per resident amongst comparable (and non-comparable) fire departments.

Closing:

It cannot be overstated how important the Volunteer Firefighters are to North Saanich. We provide a complete and effective fire service at a fraction of the financial burden of other municipalities. The Volunteers are your friends and neighbours and that establishes an openness and connectedness between the Fire Department and the community which is

evident in the thousands of people who have passed through our doors during open-houses or who have come to support our community-centred fundraising initiatives.

Fifty years of growth for the District of North Saanich is characterized by modernization, diversification and expansion all while holding true to community values, connectedness, and tradition. The same holds true for the North Saanich Volunteer Fire Department; fifty years of firefighting in North Saanich represents a similar growth, expansion and diversification and our values of dedication, professionalism, drive, compassion, duty and volunteerism will continue, as they have in the past, well into the future.

Thank you to all who have stepped through our doors, whether to volunteer or say “hi” and show your support. It is both the support of the community and those who choose to volunteer that maintain this central beacon of our community and is why we have and will continue, with pride, to serve the North Saanich Volunteer Fire Department.

Here's to the next fifty years.