

The New Salida Firehouse

By: Chief Doug Bess

The City of Salida was formed in 1880. Six months later, the Salida Hose Company No. 1 was created. In 1892, after a second fire destroyed the downtown, business owners pledged money to create a paid fire department which became the Salida Fire Department. In 1902, the department moved to 124 E Street which is still our location after 121 years. The 1911 Kissel fire truck resides in the original bay that it operated out of from 1912 to 1942. Due to space constraints, this is the only fire truck that is housed in the city's fire department building.

The South Arkansas Fire Protection District was created in 1953. The fire district boundary is a two-mile bubble around the city of Salida and extends east on Highway 50 to Rincon. In 1980, the district purchased the property located at 120 E Street. This property was formerly a service station and indoor car wash. All the city fire trucks and some of the fire district's fire trucks are housed in this building. Due to the low ceiling heights, our 1997 ladder truck had to be custom built to fit into the old car wash. We are unable to raise the cabs indoors due to height constraints, so routine maintenance and emergency repairs must be done curbside on a busy city street. We do not have the space to house all the fire apparatus in our current location. Staff are required to travel 3 miles to a location outside of the city where additional fire apparatus and a HazMat trailer are kept. There is no outdoor space to conduct fire training safely because we are located on a busy downtown corner.

In 2021, the fire department completed a three-year staffing plan which added one firefighter per shift creating 4-person shifts. With this upstaffing, we had to create additional sleeping quarters in a portion of the area that was a designated training room. None of the sleeping areas are gender specific and offer little privacy. We currently have three bathrooms for up to five firefighters on shift. When returning from a fire, staff must wait for an open shower to clean up.

Cancer rates have increased in the fire service due to firefighters being exposed to carcinogens and other products produced in fires. We do not have proper decontamination zones in our firehouse to prevent these contaminants from spreading to all areas of the building. Our current gear washing room is in the office space. Our current training room is on the second floor of our firehouse. The training room is not ADA accessible and there are no public restrooms.

After serving 18 years mostly as a Fire Captain, in 2012, I was promoted to Fire Chief. Having firsthand knowledge of the deficiencies with our current firehouse at that time, I knew that at some point we would have to look at building a new facility. In 2014, I was approached by the city administration and asked if a parcel of land that may be coming up for sale would work for a new firehouse. Unfortunately, this land never came up for sale, but the city administration realized there was a need.

Beginning in 2017 and until 2020 I began stressing the need for a new firehouse during our annual budget creation and included it in the City's Capital Improvement Plan. On March 9, 2020, the City Council hosted a retreat. At this meeting, during the council's priorities session, staff were directed to proceed with a Facility and Needs Assessment for the Fire Department. Due to COVID-19, the request for proposal was not published until August 28, 2020, and a contract for services was not awarded until October 2020. From 2020 to present we have purchased property, contracted with a design-build firm, held weekly design and systems meetings, tested for geothermal, received grant funding and begun the process for issuing Certificates of Participation. A full timeline of steps taken can be found on our City Projects website.

A key element of the City's investigation of the proposed fire station has been to model its short and longer-term effect on the City's finances in the context of a financial management plan (FMP). The FMP forecasts the City's operating and capital funds – including debt to be issued for the fire station – for the next 10 years. This planning model provides a comprehensive perspective on the City's ability to afford the fire station while also continuing to satisfy its many other needs and priorities.

The city and its fiscal consultants developed the FMP using generally conservative estimates of future City revenues (estimating low) and expenses (estimating high), and of future borrowing costs (also estimating high). The model demonstrates that the city can afford to complete and pay for the fire station within this conservative set of assumptions, and without cutting back on current operating service and capital improvement levels.

The City currently plans to issue debt for the fire station this fall and to repay principal and interest in 2027 through 2051. This 25-year repayment term is shorter than many entities use for fire stations and other major facilities with very long useful lives. In addition, the debt is structured around other high-priority capital investments the City is scheduled to fund with cash in 2024 through 2026, all as part of its multi-year capital improvement plan (CIP).

The new 20,345 square foot firehouse will incorporate apparatus bays that are sized to hold all the current Salida and South Arkansas fire apparatus including a new Type III wildland engine that is currently being built. The bays will be pull-through which will eliminate backing of the larger apparatus. Each apparatus will have large aprons to allow staff to safely walk around it without the challenges of conducting work on a busy downtown city street. . The proposed ceiling height will finally allow staff to tilt the cabs indoors during inclement weather.

The critical need for onsite training will be addressed with a three-story hose/training tower that will allow staff to simulate current and future rescue situations. The new facility will also incorporate a 40-person training/community room that will be ADA accessible.

The living quarters will offer individual sleeping and shower rooms, a commercial grade kitchen, laundry room, day room and a fitness room.

Enhanced firefighter safety will be addressed by creating decontamination space which will protect firefighters from toxic particulates and lower cancer risks by utilizing hot/warm/cold zones within the building to prevent toxins from spreading into the residential space.

After over one-hundred years of service, the city's existing fire station no longer meets the needs of a modern fire department. The new fire station has undergone extensive planning, design and financial review. The project has been a high priority topic of city analysis and discussion for a long time. The city's financial management planning model provided a comprehensive perspective on the city's ability to afford the fire station while also continuing to satisfy its many other needs and priorities. The new fire station aligns with other similar projects around the state as it relates to cost. With all this being said, the new fire station will be a tremendous asset to our community's public safety and the long-term health and viability of our fire department and the men and women that serve it.