

'You have to commit with your soul'

Volunteer firefighters work for 'the ultimate team'

by Lynn Easton

editorial@thenownews.com

When Sasamat fire Chief Larry Scott was first coerced by friends and neighbours into joining the fledgling volunteer fire department more than 25 years ago, he was handed not much more than a pager and a pair of boots.

"That was just about it," the long-time chief says with a chuckle. "And, oh yeah, somebody showed me how to drive the truck."

Despite fond memories of the Sasamat Volunteer Fire Department's early beginnings back in 1978, Scott is quick to point out that things have changed — for both the fire department and the once-sleepy villages it serves.

In the past decade, larger and more expensive homes began springing up throughout Anmore and Belcarra. And while the communities continue to grow, with more than 100 new homes expected this year, Sasamat remains the only fully-volunteer squad among the mainland communities of the Greater Vancouver Regional District.

"That's one of our challenges," Scott says of the quickly growing community. "Guys have to go around on their own and keep up to date on where the new homes and developments are. The local governments are great, though. We understand each others' problems and needs."

That's probably because many of them are neighbours. And in Scott's case — co-workers — since in his day-job he is head of public works for the Village of Belcarra.

There are about 1,200 people in Anmore and 700 in Belcarra and that means that even some politicians have been members of the fire department — and know the value of having a well-trained and well-funded crew ready to help if their home tucked away in this highly wooded community should catch fire.

Over the years, the department has managed to become extremely well-equipped. It has five vehicles, paid for through taxes and casino funds, including a new rescue truck and a couple of tankers that together can hold up to 4,000 gallons of water. They sometimes come to the aid of nearby communities that don't have such large water capacity for rural and forest fire prevention.

Scott has made sure the level of expertise has gone up, too. He's demanded that all recruits become certified first responders for emergencies and meet new provincial standards.

"We've raised the bar," he says. "There's always been the will to train. It gives us more confidence."

Since Maple Ridge became a fully-professional, paid operation, only Bowen Island rivals the local department for bragging rights to the honour of



Sasamat Volunteer Fire Department Chief Larry Scott, who has been on the job for more than 25 years.

being completely run by volunteers.

Scott seems torn between his pride for the extra dedication and drive it takes to commit to a volunteer squad and his pride at the level of professionalism they've managed to reach with that dedication.

"You have to totally commit. First, you have to work around your family, then around your job. Then everything else you can squeeze out of yourself goes into the department," he says.

The department responds to about 65 calls a year and about 35 per cent of those are for fires. Medical emergencies make up about 40 per cent and car accidents — predominantly during busy summer months when people travel to Sasamat and Buntzen lakes — make up about 10 per cent.

Sasamat firefighters are paid a stipend for each time they answer their pagers and head out on a call.

But it doesn't compensate for the missed work when firefighters are exhausted after an overnight call-out, or for those self-employed members who subsidize themselves to head to one of the many car accidents, blazes or late-night false alarms.

And no one is compensated for heading to an hours-long, once-a-week practice — each week of the year.

As Scott explains the importance of volunteers and their dedication to the place, Jim Roberts strolls into the fire hall to say hello and check on his handiwork from earlier in the day, when he worked on the brakes of the tanker truck.

Roberts is part of a poster-family for Sasamat's department, one of four members of his family who have joined up.

He started when a couple of buddies "kept bug-

ging him" in 1989. Roberts is the equipment officer for the department and his son Jamie is a training officer, as was his daughter Ginny.

His grandson Steve is the latest recruit to put on the uniform. But when asked why they give up their spare time for what amounts to a second job, Roberts is stumped.

"I never really thought about it," he says. "I guess it's kind of uplifting. There's a sense of accomplishment and camaraderie."

Scott has thought about it, but won't tell the numerous funny fire hall stories of camaraderie and doesn't want to dwell on the difficult stories.

He will only say emphatically that, "It's the ultimate team sport."

There are 34 members wearing Sasamat's team colours, and the department can suit up to 42.

Recruiting techniques haven't changed much in 30 years. Firefighters eye neighbours and friends. Haul them to the hall. Sign them up.

Not that they'll take just anybody.

Scott changed that policy early in his tenure as chief and now has strict criteria that hopeful recruits must meet. Besides being 19, living in the community and being willing to commit for five years, Scott demands a little something else, too.

"You have to commit with your soul," he says as he stands outside the Anmore fire hall and waves to half the people on their way to Buntzen Lake who know him as their friend, neighbour and fire chief.

The other half have no idea that he has indeed committed his own soul to making sure they make it home safely. And that's just fine with him.

"Like I said, this is the ultimate team sport. You just do the best you can not to let down your team."

Kyle Hoobin