Fire chief: Station to give Oconee near full coverage

BY STEVEN BRADLEY
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SENECA — Upon completion of a substation in the Bountyland area of Seneca, 97.9 percent of the roofs in Oconee County will have fire coverage within 5 miles of a station, according to Fire Chief Charlie King.


King

The average coverage in rural counties in South Carolina is about 70 percent, King told The Journal prior to speaking at an Oconee Economic Alliance business forum Thursday.

The 5-mile coverage area is essential for lower Insurance Services Office ratings in the county, King said, because anything outside that range is considered unprotected.

"It's not if you live 5.1 miles (away from a station) that we ain't coming," he joked.

King spoke on the county's fire plan, which he credited county administrator Scott Moulder for authoring in 2011 and which has seen six substations built across the county in the past six years. Oconee recently closed on land for the Bountyland substation, and a final substation is planned for the Village Creek area of Mountain Rest.

The chief noted that emergency services do not generate revenue, so their avenue to showing a return on the investment of the taxpayers who support them is through lowering their ISO rating and, in turn, their insurance premiums.

King said prior to the implementation of the 2011 plan, fire protection "was really just sporadic at best across the board in the county."

ISO ratings are based on three components, according to King — fire department operations, ability of communications for responding to 911 calls and water supply system.

Oconee was graded independently in 17 fire districts across the county, including the stations in municipalities and special tax districts — from the city of Seneca, which had the county's best ISO rating of 2, to rural areas such as Cleveland and Long Creek — during an inspection in the spring of 2014.

As a result, effective Jan. 1, 2015, Oconee achieved an ISO rating of 4, which King said was the lowest countywide rating in South Carolina or North Carolina at the time.

But rather than pushing to lower the rating further, King said the county chose to keep its ISO rating at 4 "because we changed the way we deliver our water system."

Rather than a city government that provides hydrants throughout its system to put water access within 1,000 feet of every home, Oconee chose to not be evaluated on hydrants, but instead incorporate a hauled water system, King said.

The average home in Oconee is 2.2 miles from a hydrant, and only 26 percent of the county's homes are within 1,000 feet of a hydrant, according to King, so it made more sense to "take the hydrants out of (the ISO rating process)."

"We built, constructed, trained and were evaluated on a system of us delivering water with tanker shuttles," he said. "We have 14 apparatuses in the county, and their sole mission is not to pump water but to take it out of the fire hydrant and deliver it to the fire."

In order to meet ISO requirements, however, the county must have an engineered, evaluated and approved water system that is tested annually and flow-tested on a five-year basis, King said.

"So what we sat down and did is took all the boat ramps, river access that we could drop a hose in, water points, swimming pools that held more than 40,000 gallons, and we made those water points," he said. "We hired an engineer to come in and evaluate them on a 50-year drought study, and we submitted those as the Oconee County Water Department, with me as the director.

"It's not really pencil-whipping them; we took what resources were available to us in the county, had an engineered study and it came out as an incredible benefit to the county."

Councilman Julian Davis, who operates a local insurance agency, said the county's work in lowering its ISO ratings had directly impacted his customers' premiums.

"Anything 5 and below is pretty much the same from a residential standpoint, so to get the best that you can for your customers on residential Insurance Service Office score is pretty awesome," he said. "I know from a commercial standpoint you can get down to a 2 and 3, and it helps a little bit, but for the majority of Oconee County residences, the 5 is the best that they have. So y'all are to be commended for that.

"The average savings for a lot of people was somewhere in the $200 range, so you got to stick it to your insurance guy a little bit."

Councilman Paul Cain noted that the county's nearly 400 volunteers were also to be commended for saving the county an estimated $7 million in annual operating costs, or about $92.10 per resident, for their service.

"That's what the volunteers are saving this county every year," Cain said. "So, to that point, please support your volunteers."

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FIRE: 'Support your volunteers'

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