

Gallatin River Ranch Rural Fire District Information, 2019

The Gallatin River Ranch Rural Fire District (GRRRFD) was established by an act of the Gallatin County Commission in December, 1999. The fire district was needed to provide emergency services to the residents of GRR due to the fact that fully loaded fire trucks and water tenders could not safely cross the Nixon Bridge. As a governmental agency, donations to the District are tax-deductible under section 170(c)(2) of the IRS Code.

Five GRRFD Trustees are elected to staggered 3-year terms. Elections are held each May. Each election is publicly announced by Gallatin County; self-nomination papers must be filed with the Gallatin County Elections Office in early February. The Board of Trustees meets on the third Wednesday of each month at the GRRHOA Maintenance Building (5770 Nixon Gulch Road) conference room beginning at 6 pm. Trustee meetings are open to the public. The current trustees include: Spencer Millimen, Chair; Richard Anderson, DVM, Vice Chair; Sue Piechowski, MD, Treasurer; Barbara Mack, Secretary; Wendy Ward.

The GRR Fire Department (GRRFD) began with a paid chief and unpaid volunteer firefighters in 2000. The paid chief model proved to be fiscally non-viable and the last paid chief left in May 2017. This was a major turning point for the department. Since then, GRRFD has been an all-volunteer department with no paid members or employees. The volunteers have devoted thousands of hours in the public interest since then. Several volunteers have also paid for their own training and equipment which they donated to the department. All of these efforts have paid off by improving department readiness and solvency.

The department is led by Chief Marlin Sprow. His leadership team includes: Assistant Chief and Training Officer Ken Weskamp; and Medical Officer and Executive Assistant John Andrews, MD, EMT. Volunteer firefighters include: Jason Biggs, EMT; Wayne Langel; Anthony Powell, AEMT; and Bruce Reynolds.

There are only a few people in our community willing and able to volunteer as firefighters. The Board of Trustees established Reserve and Auxiliary membership to enable others in our community to participate in the department and extend its capabilities. Reserve Volunteers include: Julie Brown; Bruce Buccilli; Mariana de Maille, EMT; Thomas Mack, DDS; Spencer Millimen, Supervisor; Ray Rigel; Paul Sejud, DMD, EMT; Sue Wassersleben. Auxiliary volunteers include: Lucy Curran; Patti Draude; Maria and Rob Fraser; Cookie Gonzalez, RN; Stew and Kathy Levin; Barbara Mack, Trustee; Jessica Millimen, Ph.D; Mara Rigel.

The Gallatin River Ranch Rural Fire District website address is: <http://www.grrrfd.org>. This is a public website that requires no login. Trustee meetings and their agendas are announced on the website and also at the Pony Express bulletin board next to the mailboxes. The agendas, meeting minutes, monthly financials, and monthly chief's reports are publically available under the reports section of the website: <http://www.grrrfd.org/reports/>.

What the Trustees have done since the transition to a volunteer chief model in May, 2017.

The Board of Trustees worked in close coordination with Chief Sprow and his staff to rebuild GRRFD since 2017. Actions have included:

1. Taking care of its firefighters:
 - a. Establishing Reserve and Auxiliary membership.
 - b. Support for increased training and readiness activities.
 - c. Establishing a new volunteer screening process.
 - d. Establishment of a new Accidental Death and Dismemberment Insurance policy.
 - e. Approval for acquisition of new personal protective equipment.
2. Decreased its dependence on the HOA subsidy with subsidy reduction starting in 2017 and elimination as of 7/1/18.
3. Close supervision of expenditures by the department.
4. Eliminated deficits and built financial reserves for the first time in District history.
5. Establishing a closer relationship with the Manhattan Volunteer Fire District.
6. Coordination of activities with GRRHOA.
7. Repairs of damage inside the chief's house from previous residents.
8. Establishing a much closer working relationship with Chief Sprow than had been the case with the previous chief.
9. Membership in the Montana Fire District Board of Trustees Association, and participation in conferences and training to improve Board effectiveness. The trustees attending these meetings paid their own expenses; no tax dollars were spent.
10. Organizing and supporting the 2017 fall fundraiser to purchase a defibrillator/monitor.
11. Developing the grrfd.org website.
12. Changing meetings to the evening of the third Wednesday of each month, starting at 6 pm, and moving the venue to the GRRHOA Maintenance Building to improve the opportunity for public participation.
13. Co-purchasing the bulletin board at the Pony Express mailboxes with GRRHOA for meeting announcements and other information.

These efforts have improved administrative effectiveness, accountability, and transparency. The actions of the Board of Trustees are now readily accessible to the public. The district is financially solvent and is building meaningful reserves.

What has the fire department done since the transition?

The details of each month's activity since the transition can be found in the Chief's Reports posted on the grrfd.org website. Hardly a week has gone by without notable improvements.

1. Taking care of firefighters:
 - a. Recruitment of new firefighters, especially adding ones who bring prior fire fighting and medical experience and expertise to the department.
 - b. Development and implementation of a plan to purchase new personal protective equipment for firefighters including self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA).
 - i. Manhattan FVD donated four older SCBA packs and air tanks.
 - ii. Two new SCBA packs and air tanks purchased. GRRFD is participating in a regional grant for the purchase of six more new SCBA systems.

- iii. Fit testing of self-contained breathing apparatus masks, equipment flow testing, and training in the use of SCBA systems.
 - iv. Rapid Intervention Team equipment and training with Manhattan to enable firefighters to participate in interior attack.
 - c. Training, training, training; internal and with neighboring agencies.
 - d. Building a new brand, with a new look and attitude with a new logo and revived team spirit.
 - e. Recruitment and training of Reserve Members to extend the ability of the department to respond to emergencies.
2. Complete administrative reorganization:
 - a. Cleaning of the chief's office and station with file-by-file inspection and reorganization. This alone was a big job.
 - b. Scanning of all important files.
 - c. Establishment of a computer filing system prior to G-Suite; then
 - d. Establishing a Google G-Suite account to create a cloud-based computing system.
 - e. A new economical computer was purchased for the Chief's office.
3. Quick Response Unit (QRU-11) and medical equipment upgrades. These, along with the addition of John Andrews, MD, EMT, Paul Sejud, DMD, EMT, and Anthony Powell, AEMT to the staff, enabled the department to upgrade its EMS license to a Non-transporting Basic Life Support with Authorization for Advanced Life Support agency. This is the only department in Gallatin Valley with doctoral-level medical members.
4. Improved vehicle readiness and safety:
 - a. Establishing a policy of yearly DOT inspections of all apparatus except Brush-11.
 - b. Establishment of monthly vehicle inspections.
 - c. Completion of all deferred maintenance.
5. Department inventory.
6. First-ever hose cleaning, inspection, pressure testing, and inventory.
7. Completion of a federal multi-agency grant supporting confined space rescue training with Three Forks, Willow Creek, Harrison, and Manhattan. This grant allowed the department to purchase a new multi-gas detector and two self-contained breathing apparatus.
8. Assistant Chief Weskamp made extensive modifications and upgrades in a Kubota side-by-side utility vehicle obtained from the department of defense. This is Utility-11, which is kept on the west side of the ranch and adds to the department's off-road capability. Weskamp undertook this at his own expense.
9. Complete cleaning of the single vehicle bay at the chief's house and redesignation of that as Station 1.
10. Extensive cleaning of the building and grounds at 650 Equestrian Center Loop Road and redesignation of that building as Station 2.
11. Outreach activities with neighboring departments and participation in combined training activities. Hosted a multi-agency wildland fire fighting exercise 7/23/19.
12. Increased medical services engagement with AMR, and at the County and State level.
13. Creation of many new standard operating procedures.

Where are we going from here?

The new Nixon Bridge will change the district and department. The GRRFD will be able to enter into a closer relationship with Manhattan VFD, which may include an automatic aid agreement. Benefits of this include the opportunity for more training and experience for GRRFD firefighters and medical personnel, and improvement in emergency services on GRR.

The new bridge will remove the barrier to mutual aid in the event of a fire on GRR. This should ultimately lead to improvements in service and in some insurance ratings.

The alliance with Manhattan VFD may lead to closer integration of the departments, but there are many details to work out and no way to accurately predict how that picture will look in the end.

GRRFD's use of Station 2 is temporary. Ours is the only district in the state without a legitimate fire station. This is a critical component for every fire department and an issue the District and Department are addressing. More specific ideas and proposals should become available later this year.

Nearly every rural volunteer fire department suffers from underfunding and must make up the difference with fundraisers and grants. Grants for a small, low-volume department like GRRFD are very difficult to get. The next fundraiser in the Fall of 2019 will be devoted to raising funds to build a fire station.

The goals of GRRFD and GRRFD are to provide our customers with the best services possible within the constraints of our size and budget.

CALL 911 FOR ALL EMERGENCIES. This includes all calls for medical care or assistance, fires, rescues, and other emergency services. Please do not call Chief Sprow or individual members of the department for emergency services.

If you wish to contact the department, email at info@grrfd.org or contact Chief Sprow. You can also leave a message on the department phone: 406-284-4380, but please be aware that nobody is stationed at that phone and call backs can be delayed.

We need more firefighters! If you are interested in learning more, please email: grrfdtraining@gmail.com, or admin@grrfd.org.