

The Austerlitz Fire Company needs your help

The Austerlitz Fire Company has occupied its present site since the early 1950s. But with the building that houses trucks and equipment in disrepair and with insufficient space for vehicles, they have begun a fundraising effort to build a new station and they need the community's help.

By Jesse DeGroot

Running water is a good thing. Unless, that is, it develops this nasty habit of running through your place of operation. And then, to compound the effects of Mother Nature's more interesting moments, there's the added burden of simply having outgrown your space.

For these reasons and others, the Austerlitz Fire Company has undertaken a fundraising campaign aimed at the erection of a new firehouse for which company officers hope groundbreaking can take place in the spring of 2015.

"The existing firehouse has flooded out on at least three occasions. The Green River is right next to it," said fire company President Dave Savage. "And it's an old building and it's in poor condition."

"The truck bay doors are very low," added company treasurer Rich Nesbitt, Sr. "We need to replace our main fire engine – it's scheduled for replacement within two years. The new one won't be able to fit into the existing firehouse."

Over the course of summer 2013, the land – purchased from the Town of Austerlitz – where the new firehouse will stand was elevated "upwards of two-and-a-half feet," said Savage. The site, adjacent to the current firehouse on West Hill Road, is "prepped and ready to go."

Fundraising

Savage and Nesbitt estimate the cost of a new firehouse will come in at around \$800,000. As of mid-February, donations totaled \$262,000, with another \$100,000 committed. "The response to fundraising efforts has been enthusiastic so far. People have been doing things like hosting fundraising events at their house," said Nesbitt.

"The existing building was paid for and constructed in phases over four years by the members – there was a lot of hard work done by the old timers back then," Savage said.

"They raised money through ham dinners, chicken dinners. Once upon a time, there were a lot of functions held there. We've occupied that site since the early 1950s."

"We're building to take care of our needs. It won't be the Taj Mahal," Nesbitt said, hastening to add that the company has taken great care to assure that the new structure will adhere to the building style of its Austerlitz surroundings. "It's important to us that the design of the building fit in with our town. We really took our time with this. We had different designers come in, and wound up interviewing five architects. We chose Shaun Batho of TSB Consulting in Pittsfield. We knew he had really listened to what we were saying. We were impressed with him – he put our ideas into the design."

Historically correct design

Nesbitt and Savage added that they were happy that the design for the new building has earned the support of the Austerlitz Historical Society, and have seen the willingness of community members to step in and lend their "different areas of expertise to the project. People have really stepped up to help."

A new building would also "be good for morale," Savage said. "I think it would really help us with recruiting new members."

One must have reached age 18 to become a member of the Austerlitz Fire Company, the two officers said. The process includes a formal application and the need for two sponsors, then passing a physical which is paid for



An architect's rendering of the new station with a design that fits its historical location.

Credit: Richard Wilson

by the district, after which the prospective member is interviewed by company officers and the district directors. Assuming the company votes in favor of admission, the training process begins.

Firefighters, Savage explained, fall into two categories: Interior firefighters, or those who are qualified to enter an involved structure, and scene support, which consists of "everything except going into a burning building. That could mean anything from getting hoses off the truck, to traffic control." There are 90 hours of training that go into becoming a Firefighter 1, or interior firefighter, said Nesbitt.

Up and down hills

The Austerlitz Fire Company, thanks to its idiosyncratic geography, which combines its elevation above sea level and very rural nature, faces challenges not necessarily found on a regular basis down in the flatlands. "The elements" factor heavily into the ongoing preparation and planning by the company's membership of 20 men and two women, Savage said. "When you're in a truck, you're either going down a hill or up a hill," Nesbitt added.

Overall, the company's territory extends from the Taconic State Parkway to the Massachusetts state line, and from the Green River nearly to Interstate 90. That's a total of 62 miles of town roads and a population of 1,654, and approximately 600-plus homes, said Nesbitt.

"We're a small fire company, and there's only one tanker in the district. If there's any kind of structure fire, we immediately look for mutual aid and other tankers," Nesbitt said.

"The same goes for us. And we'd rather be called out than not be there on time."

That mutual aid arrives from Hillsdale, Red Rock, the Chatham Fire Company, Ghent Fire Department, and Alford, West Stockbridge, Egremont, and Richmond in Massachusetts, among others, Savage and Nesbitt said.

Nesbitt said it was important to keep in mind that although Austerlitz and Spencer-town are separate fire companies, "we're in the same fire district. Both companies respond whenever an incident is occurring. We depend on each other."

Nor is it just fires that get the attention of the Austerlitz Fire Company, said Savage.

"We respond to auto accidents and things like hunters lost in the woods. We cover a considerable amount of state land. There are a lot of accidents on Route 22 and the Taconic State Parkway in our area."

Nesbitt has been spearheading the development of dry hydrants available to the company, Savage said. Where once there were none, within the past "six-seven years we're up to 14 dry hydrants, and two live hydrants. Rich has really pushed this."

Meanwhile, fundraising efforts will continue until the new firehouse goal is met, Nesbitt and Savage said.

Visit austerlitzfirecompany.org to volunteer or donate. The phone number is 392-3839, and the company email address is avfireco@gmail.com. The company mailing address is P.O. Box 35, Austerlitz, New York 12017. ☺