

All borough villages to have fire protection soon

"It's happened quicker than I thought. The Mayor really jumped on these things." That is how the Chief of the new North Slope Borough Fire Department, Tom Opie, describes recent actions that promise fire protection for all North Slope Borough villages.

The quick sequence of events began when the Borough Assembly passed an ordinance in February creating a Borough-wide Fire Department. Tom Opie was appointed Chief of that Department and Dave Baumgartener became his assistant.

Then the Borough Public Works Department selected a contractor to construct firehouses in all the villages with a completion date set for the fall. Next, Opie put the firetrucks and firefighting equipment that will go into those firehouses on order.

The lack of village fire protection has been a concern for some time. Already this year buildings have burned to the ground in Nuiqsut, Kakto-vik and Wainwright. Officially, Opie has been working to bring about a Boroughwide Fire Department since last October and unofficially long before that. He found Mayor Eugene Brower offering more than just sympathy for his concerns.

"One life saved is worth a great big push to get adequate fire protection in our communities," says Mayor Brower. "I'm making a push to get adequate firefighting equipment to all the villages by November. That's what we're shooting for."

The new Fire Department will depend solely on volunteers. "It will be strictly volunteer," says Chief Opie. "It should be something that people want to do for the satisfaction of helping someone else. We hope to build pride in the village departments like we have in Barrow."

Opie helped organize the Barrow Volunteer Fire Department in 1970 and has served as its Chief ever since. Today, the 35 Barrow volunteers provide fire and ambulance service from two stations. According to Opie, improvements in the Barrow force over the past decade came with an outpouring of local support. "We have always had really good support in the Barrow community."

As the new Chief of a Boroughwide force, Opie sees the biggest task ahead as training village firefighters. "Most of the villages already have some kind of organization or will have soon. What Dave

(Baumgartener) and I will be doing most of next year will be training them on the new equipment." The Chief and his Assistant plan to make four or five training visits to each village over the course of the year.

Training for village fire chiefs and their assistants may begin as early as this spring. Opie hopes to have one new firetruck shipped into Barrow by then so that the village chiefs can come to town and train on it. He says the other trucks will not arrive in the villages until the firehouses are done. "I don't want those new trucks sitting around in the open."

The Chief is looking for at least ten reliable volunteers in each village to handle the primary firefighting duties. But, he adds, the more the merrier. "There is a lot more to firefighting than squirting a hose and going into a burning building. We can use just about anybody. We will need a good mechanic, someone to take calls, other people to just help out in any way they can. It takes all kinds of people to make a good department."

As Opie points out, in the end, the North Slope Borough Fire Department will only be as good as the volunteers in it.



PHOTO BY ROBERT W. HARPER

Tom Opie, the Chief of the New North Slope Borough Fire Department, is seen here on the left with his Assistant Chief Dave Baumgartener on the right.