

May 7, 2009

Jeff Jensen, Fire Chief
Award Nominations Chair
Tacoma Fire Department
901 Fawcett
Tacoma, WA 98402

Dear Chief Jensen,

On behalf of the commissioners and staff of North Whatcom Fire & Rescue (NWFR), I would like to nominate Fire Chief Tom Fields for the award of WFC Fire Chief Dan Packer Fire Chief of the Year. His many contributions have set a new standard of excellence for Whatcom County Fire Districts and have created an innovative and value-driven fire district.

In 2005, Chief Fields became Fire Chief of the District and coordinated the merger of Whatcom County Fire Protection District Nos. 3 and 13. The consolidation transformed two dysfunctional districts into one prospering district built on integrity and quality service. In less than two years, the District's reputation has changed from embarrassment to pride because of the hard work and enthusiastic vision of Chief Fields.

District Nos. 3 and 13 have a tarnished history of sub-standard performance, poor leadership, and a horrible lack of financial accountability. Chief Fields has established new and effective standards of operations, response, and performance and has motivated crews to a higher level of professionalism. Chief Fields strives for NWFR to be a value-driven organization in which individuals are motivated not by rules, but by what is right. This was evidenced by the call in 2007 in which an elderly gentleman suffered a cardiac event while pouring concrete steps in his yard. The crews that responded not only restarted his heart and transported him to the hospital, but finished pouring his concrete, cleaned up his tools, and put everything away before leaving.

NWFR has also seen significant operational changes as a result of Chief Fields' leadership. In the past year, he hired 24 new full-paid firefighters. The District is now able to staff 3 stations 24 hours a day. As a result, the District has seen a dramatic decrease in average response times in just one year from 10 minutes 7 seconds to 8 minutes 5 seconds, a nearly 20% decrease, and the NWFR community is receiving a significantly higher level of service.

When Chief Fields took over the leadership of NWFR, the financial status of the District was in chaos. Prior mismanagement resulted in a Washington State Audit finding of a lack of internal controls over financial transactions and reporting. Since then, Chief Fields has set-up new accounting practices, safeguards and controls which have resulted in the resolution of all past findings. In addition, the District is now in complete compliance with state laws and the state auditor has found the District's internal controls sufficient to safeguard public assets.

In 2006, Chief Fields began to question Whatcom County's approval of new developments without adequate fire and emergency response services planned or in place. These concerns regarding concurrency resulted in appeals of the County's approval of developments in urban growth areas, despite the Fire District's protest that they could not provide an appropriate level of service. Despite public criticism, Chief Fields persevered in the appeals, and the courts recently ruled in favor of the fire district. As a result, Whatcom County is reconsidering its approval process and is working with the fire district to provide a fair and equitable means of providing the capital requirements funding resulting from the affects of new development. This decision is being closely watched by fire departments throughout the state and the results could set a precedent for the consideration of fire district service levels in future growth management decisions.

As a leader in the concurrency issue statewide, Chief Fields worked diligently in 2007 to pass House Bill 2110. The bill would provide impact fee authority to fire districts, thereby providing a solution to the population growth and service capability issues confronting NWFR and all Washington State Fire Districts. Although the bill did not pass in 2007 or 2008, Chief Fields remains committed to seeing the bill pass in a future legislative session. His efforts demonstrate his motivation to go above and beyond his call of duty to better the system's ability to provide quality emergency response.

Finally, Chief Fields is a strong advocate of the efficiencies of fire department mergers and consolidations. Not only was Chief Fields instrumental in coordinating the merger of Whatcom County District Nos. 3 and 13, but he continues to look for ways of cooperatively utilizing the strengths and resources of other neighboring districts. NWFR has recently combined efforts with Whatcom County Fire Protection District No. 7 by implementing an Automatic First Response Agreement. This joint effort provides for the automatic dispatch of the crew who can respond the quickest within either district. Chief Fields is currently working closely with District No. 7 to discuss the possibility of a future merger. The District has already seen the impact of the first response agreement in a dramatic way. NWFR was recently called to an unresponsive, unknown if breathing 18-month old. Average response time for a guaranteed NWFR response to this location is about 12 minutes. By contrast, District No. 7 personnel arrived on scene in just over 2 minutes, thus demonstrating the effectiveness of cooperative agreements in providing the fastest possible emergency response.

The affects of Chief Fields' leadership are seen not only in the transformation of NWFR, but also in his involvement in Whatcom County, the state legislature, and through saved lives. For all of his work within the organization and the fire service community as a whole, I would highly recommend Fire Chief Tom Fields for the WFC Fire Chief Dan Packer Fire Chief of the Year.

Sincerely,

Henry Hollander
Assistant Chief