

A Talk with Chief Tom Jamison of East Lake Fire Rescue

Whenever we see and hear an East Lake Fire Rescue fire truck go by, lights and sirens on, we usually think it is on its way to a fire in a residence or business, a brush fire or a traffic accident. It may well be headed to a fire, but the fire trucks also respond to 911 calls when someone takes a bad fall, suffers a stroke, heart attack, or simply “feels poorly” and is frightened. In fact, **a startling 75 percent of all the calls that bring out the fire trucks – 3,400 total calls in 2017, almost 10 a day – are for medical issues!** “When the emergency is medical, minutes count,” says Fire Chief Tom Jamison, a trim, easy going man who has been Fire Chief of our three-station Fire District for nearly seven years. “The fire trucks almost always get to the scene first, before the ambulance, because the fire stations have been positioned for rapid response and there are more fire trucks than ambulances in the county. Every fire fighter is also a paramedic or an EMT (paramedics have had more training, provide advanced life support and carry and administer certain life-saving pharmaceuticals). Their main role is to assess and stabilize the patient until the ambulance arrives and a decision is made about whether to transport the patient to a hospital. Also, the fire department has the equipment, such as an axe or ladders, to break into a house, if need be.

But that is not all that our local Fire District does.

- East Lake Fire Rescue gives weekly educational sessions on how to administer CPR.
- Its staff visits private homes to assess fall or fire risks.
- It now has its first boat and, thanks to a generous private donation, **the first Wet Team and Rapid Diver Program in Pinellas County!**
- It plays a vital role in emergencies such as hurricanes and floods.
- And the fire trucks take Santa Claus to visit more than 1,000 children during the three weeks leading up to Christmas.

How the fire department is structured, how it works with the County, the privately owned Sunstar ambulances and the regional Emergency Response Center, as well as how it cooperates with other fire departments in Pinellas County is an interesting story, one that Chief Jamison tells well.

What a lot of us don't know is that East Lake Fire Rescue is actually an independent government entity, with the power to levy taxes. Governed by a five-member Board of Commissioners elected by the citizens of the District, **it covers 33 square miles of unincorporated land in North Pinellas**, including 80 percent of the Brooker Creek Preserve and all of Lake Tarpon. Officially called the East Lake Tarpon Special Fire Control District, East Lake Fire Rescue has three fire stations: Station 57 on Tarpon Lake Boulevard in Palm Harbor (near Lansbrook), which is the District headquarters, Station 56 at East Lake Road and East Lake Woodlands, and

Station 58 on Keystone Road in Tarpon Springs. The Fire District is bordered by the Pasco County line to the north, Hillsborough County to the east, Tarpon Springs and the west side of Palm Harbor to the west, and Tampa Road to the south. Of the 18 fire departments in Pinellas County, most are municipal (such as Clearwater), but there are also three Special Districts besides East Lake: Palm Harbor (west of the lake), Pinellas Suncoast (unincorporated beach communities), and Lealman (near St. Petersburg and Seminole).

“Everyone trains to the same level and follows virtually the same operating procedures, and the borders are seamless,” states Chief Jamison. To make this work, there is one Public Safety Access Point, or PSAP, in North Pinellas. All 911 calls are routed through the PSAP. The dispatchers send the closest fire truck. If one truck is out on a call, the dispatcher sends the next closest one. And of course when there is an especially serious fire, accident or other emergency, several fire trucks and even multiple departments may be summoned to the scene.

East Lake Fire Rescue has 39 fire fighters, including two *female* driver engineers/paramedics. Most are dual-certified as paramedics, the remainder as EMTs. The District also has a full time public educator, a training chief, an operations chief and finance/administrative staff (the District’s annual budget is just short of \$7 million). Three or four fire person crews are stationed at each of the three fire houses in the district, manning fire engines equipped with advanced life support equipment. East Lake also has several special purpose vehicles: a water truck or tanker, which carries 2,000 gallons of water and 500 of fire suppressing foam, a brush truck and a command vehicle, which has a pickup truck body with a siren and emergency lights.

And the boat? That came about with \$150,000 of the money that Pinellas County received from BP after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill and is the only rescue boat in the county that can operate in shallow water. It is also the only rescue boat for Lake Tarpon. The Rapid Diver Program and the Wet Team have been funded by a generous philanthropist, prompted by the tragic death of a woman who drove into a retention pond. “A passing motorist saw the rear lights under the water and called 911,” explains Chief Jamison. “But by the time we could get a team into the water, it was too late for her. With our Rapid Diver Team, we are now in a far better position to rescue people who are in a boating accident or are at risk of drowning.” Today there is a trained scuba diver on every fire truck that leaves one of the District’s stations.

How East Lake Fire Rescue works with the Sunstar ambulances is another story of cooperation and fast action. Sunstar, which is privately owned, has a contract with the County and subcontracts with a company that supplies paramedics. There are three starting points in the county for the ambulances, but they never just sit in those locations waiting for a call. Using an algorithm based on the history of ambulance calls and current conditions, Sunstar positions ambulances all over the county. “That’s why we often see a Sunstar ambulance waiting in the

parking lot of The Shoppes at Boot Ranch or somewhere on East Lake Road. The paramedics work 12-hour shifts. It is hard work,” comments Chief Jamison.

On a call, the ambulance usually gets to the site after the fire truck. The paramedics confer and sometimes the patient is transferred to the ambulance to be taken to the hospital. If the patient is stable, the ambulance travels to the hospital alone. But if the patient is in critical condition, the fire department’s staff accompanies the ambulance all the way to the hospital to assist in patient care.

Education and Outreach Programs

Chief Jamison is justifiably proud, too, of the educational programs and outreach activities of the district, such as CPR, fire prevention classes and the annual Open House, this year held on April 9. In partnership with Safe Kids Coalition at the Johns Hopkins All Children’s Hospital in St. Petersburg, the district provides water safety classes and information about how to keep an infant in a crib safely. Then there are the annual pre-Christmas visits by Santa, which need to be pre-arranged by residents (usually block parties) because demand far outstrips the time and staff available. The district also has a website (www.elfr.org) with tips on lightning, pool alarms, brush fires, and storm surge zones, as well as newsletters, an annual report and more. Additionally, the District has an active social media presence: Facebook, Twitter, etc. On October 20, the District will have its fifth annual 5K race to benefit the Children’s Burn Foundation of Florida and Joshua House, which provides a safe place for abused and neglected children under the care of the State.

The Good and Bad News about House Fires

Chief Jamison gets serious when discussing the risks the district is trying to lessen through its educational programs. “Because of all the electronics and synthetic materials in today’s houses, a house fire doubles in size every minute if it has the right ingredients such as oxygen and fuel. And these fires create four times more heat and toxic smoke than fires decades ago. That’s why we have such a dense grouping of fire stations. The good news is that there are fewer fires these days, mostly because the building codes are stiffer. “

How We Can Help

Calls to 911 in Pinellas County are increasing, says Chief Jamison. There were 185,000 calls in 2015, 195,000 in 2016 and 203,000 calls in 2017. A growing population and tourism are partly to blame. But some people are using 911 for primary health care. “When our engines with their paramedics respond to a call, there is no charge to the patient,” he emphasizes. “Of course if the patient is transferred to a hospital by ambulance, there is a charge for the ambulance. But the Fire District never charges for a response. “When 911 is used for non-emergencies, the cost

is borne by the taxpayers,” he adds. “And when we are out on a non-emergency call, we will not be available to respond to a true emergency. That’s why many of our public information messages focus on when people should call 911 and when other options should be considered.”

Interestingly, East Lake Fire Rescue was not started by the County or other government entity but by a group of concerned citizens who lived in the Anchorage community near Station 57. “It was the mid-1970s,” says Chief Jamison. “North Pinellas County was mostly citrus groves and cattle ranches.” The District hired its first full-time professional fire fighters in 1981. The current Station 57 was built in 2007.

Chief Jamison also has advice for decision-making during emergencies such as Hurricane Irma last fall. “If you have foreknowledge of the emergency, are in harm’s way and have the means to leave the area, by all means do so,” he emphasizes. “There are not enough emergency shelters to accommodate everyone who needs to leave his or her home if they don’t evacuate. As we saw in Irma, demand exceeds supply.”

Explaining the District’s role in emergencies, he says that when the State of Florida declares a State of Emergency, Station 57 becomes an Emergency Operations Center, coordinating with the Regional Emergency Operations Center in Largo. Under normal circumstances, staff work 24 hours, then go home for 48 but during emergencies switch to 12-hour work periods, with all personnel remaining on station until the need is reduced. At such times, there are two to

three times the usual number of staff in each station. The District also has an important role in helping people who need transportation in emergencies although it is the County and not that Fire District that actually transports people with special needs. “A special needs list evacuation database is managed by the Pinellas County Department of Health,” notes Chief Jamison. “But if someone needs to be added or removed from the database, people can call us at 727-784-8668, and we will make sure the list is updated. We call the people who are in our Fire District annually. “

The Privilege of Being a Fire Fighter

“I’m grateful to have had the opportunity to have this job,” Chief Jamison concludes. “It’s a blessing to know that you make a difference in obvious ways, such as saving a life, “and in not-so-obvious ways, such as helping people live safer lives.”

We in Quail Forest are grateful in turn to Chief Jamison, his team, the outreach activities, the frequent training all the team undergoes and, of course, for responding so quickly and with such skill and efficiency when things go wrong unexpectedly.



Fire Chief Tom Jamison



One of two statues of Dalmatians at Station 57. The station does not have a dog because fire fighters are often out of the station for many hours at a time, "but we often talk about getting one," says Chief Jamison.



Children aboard the East Lake Fire Rescue air boat at this year's Station 57 Open House. It is the only rescue boat in the county that can operate in shallow water. Sometimes you can see members of the Wet Team practicing with the air boat on Lake Tarpon or Philippe Park. You can also see them with their scuba equipment in the retention pond adjacent to Station 57 on Tarpon Lake Boulevard.



A youngster pretends to be a firefighter in this tanker, which is positioned permanently at Station 58 on Keystone Road because there are so few fire hydrants in the area.