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FEMA grant to help boost fire department manpower



Photo by Doris Bynum

The new Fire Station #4, currently being built on Pinehaven Road, is set to open late next month. The City recently received a FEMA grant totaling more than a half million dollars to help provide personnel for the new station.

By Janet S. Lee

In its October 17 meeting, the Board of Aldermen approved acceptance of a Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) grant that is designed to boost the Clinton Fire Department's ability to hire new firefighters.

The SAFER program (Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response) is a highly competitive grant that will bring \$544,788 to the Clinton Fire Department and help provide personnel for the new Fire Station #4 on Pinehaven Road, set to open in late December.

According to Clinton Fire Chief Jeff Blackledge, the department has applied three consecutive times for the grant, which other fire departments in the metro area have also sought. It is a three-year grant with a 75%/25% formula. The first two years, the grant provides 75% of the cost of firefighting personnel, with the City picking up 25%. The third year, the valuation is reversed, with the City providing 75% and the grant 25%.

After those first three years, the City will bear responsibility for paying the firefighters.

The grant covers the cost of salaries and benefits for new hires only. With salary, medical insurance, disability, holiday pay, taxes and contributions to PERS, the total for one firefighter is approximately \$49,254.

With eight individuals currently eligible for retirement, Chief Blackledge hopes to use the monies to hire and train six to eight new personnel. The hiring process has begun, with notice posted

of the positions October 18 and a closure date for applications of November 6.

Applicants will then undergo agility tests on November 28. Chief Blackledge says this is just the first step in determining the suitability of a candidate.

"About fifty percent pass the agility test, and fifty to sixty percent pass the written test, administered on December 5. When we have a pool of folks who have passed those two parts, we conduct interviews on December 27."

"We have to hire these firefighters by January 10, 2018, to receive the grant money," said Blackledge, "but we want the best people we can get. They will undergo physical as well as psychological testing, with each segment having a pass/fail grade."

"It's a process to get the right people hired and trained," he continued, "people who will fill the role we need for them to do in Clinton. Once we've hired them, we'll go through a mini-training camp here using our burn trailer, keeping them in shape to get ready to go to the fire academy, probably near the end of next year."

The Fire Chief anticipates putting nine firefighters at the new fire station, with three individuals on a shift. The grant money will be a major assistance in staffing the new station.

"The weather hasn't cooperated in getting fire station #4 built," admitted Blackledge. "But now that we're to the interior part, we're moving along. We're looking to occupy it probably the week of Christmas or shortly thereafter."