

FIRE WATCH

VRFA FIRE CHIEF SWEARINGEN RETIRES AFTER A 37-YEAR CAREER



BRENT D. SWEARINGEN

Confident that he is leaving the VRFA in a good place and poised in the right direction, Fire Chief Brent Swearingen has decided to retire.

“I believe we have set a clear direction and succession

plan that will carry the organization forward. One that our employees, governance board, and the community can support,” said Swearingen.

When he accepted the position of Fire Chief in 2019, Swearingen had a checklist to accomplish. Establishing a path for the organization’s future was high on that list. With the support of the Governance Board, Swearingen engaged the VRFA in the Center for Public Safety Excellence Accreditation process. The process involved updating and implementing a five-year Strategic Plan, creating a Standards of Cover (SOC) document,

and completing a Capital Facilities Plan (CFP). With the plans in place, Swearingen set his sights on replacing an aging ladder truck and purchasing land for new fire stations. The ladder truck, a Pierce 107’ Truck Drawn Aerial [Tiller], is currently being built and set for delivery in early 2022. Senior staff is in the process of assessing available parcels of land to build new fire stations.

While setting the course for the VRFA, Swearingen also strived to achieve his most important goal; increasing trust throughout the organization. He reached out to the firefighters union, and together they identified areas for improvement.

“When I first came to the VRFA, I saw the firefighters’ union running a hot dog stand to raise funds for the Auburn Humane Society. I was impressed with their level of community involvement. I soon noticed a strong work ethic, and willingness to look toward the future of the VRFA. We have made great strides together and have a great working relationship,” said Swearingen.

Chief Swearingen was also struck by the level of support he found from the VRFA Governance Board

and the citizens of Algona, Auburn, and Pacific.

“I felt as if I had been given a ‘golden ticket.’ There were so many existing strengths to build upon. I wouldn’t have traded the VRFA for any other department,” said Swearingen.

Swearingen began his career as a firefighter with the Reno Fire Department in 1984. He moved up the ranks serving as a captain, training officer, battalion chief, operations division chief, acting fire chief, and a temporary position as Special Assistant to the City Manager. In January of 2012, he joined the VRFA as Deputy Chief of Operations.

“Chief Swearingen has led VRFA with a servant heart. He embodies the qualities of VRFA – selfless service, integrity, and grit! I have learned much from Chief and appreciate that he was willing to serve for longer than originally planned. He is exactly what the Authority needed. I will miss him, but I know he is still committed to this community, so I look forward to seeing what else he will accomplish. He is also leaving VRFA in the capable hands of a great leadership team that includes Chief Brad Thompson,” said Mayor Nancy Backus.

THE VRFA BOARD OF GOVERNANCE APPOINTS BRAD THOMPSON FIRE CHIEF



BRAD THOMPSON
DEPUTY CHIEF
OF OPERATIONS

The Valley Regional Fire Authority Board of Governance has appointed Deputy Chief of Operations Brad Thompson to serve as Fire Chief/Administrator, effective August 16, 2021.

“Deputy Chief Thompson was an obvious choice to be the next Fire Chief/Administrator of the VRFA. His dedication to the community and Valley Professional Firefighter men and women, along with his professionalism, is what our community needs for continuity in leadership,” said Auburn Mayor Nancy Backus.

After graduating from Gonzaga University with a bachelor’s degree in Business Administration, Thompson spent eight years in private industry. Although he enjoyed a successful career, he felt something was missing. When a friend introduced him to the fire service, Thompson discovered a life’s work that would allow him to apply his formal education, life experience, and foundational values. Soon after hiring on with the Auburn Fire Department in April 1999, he knew he had made the best decision for himself and his family.

Early in his career, Thompson set out to gain experience in all areas of the fire service. He joined the Public Information and Education team, the Health and Wellness team and served on a fire station design committee. After promoting to Captain in 2011, Chief Thompson served as a shift captain on the

Medical Program Specialist team and the Technical Rescue Team. He then spent three years as the Planning Captain in the Planning and Logistics Division. Thompson says, “These experiences have shown me how important every workgroup is to efficient service delivery and the organization’s overall success.”

In 2018, Thompson was promoted to Battalion Chief. While working on shift, he completed the nationally accredited University of Washington Certified Public Manager program. Thompson accepted the Deputy Chief of Operations position in 2019. He used his experience and education to improve communication and develop succession planning initiatives while overseeing emergency response, training, the JATC program, and promotional processes. “Deputy Chief Thompson has demonstrated great leadership in this role. He is the right

Article continued on page 4...



IN THIS ISSUE >>

- Pg. 2 Fire Prevention Week
- Pg. 2 Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committee
- Pg. 2 Four New Firefighters
- Pg. 3 Fire Chief’s Message
- Pg. 3 Retirements and Promotion
- Pg. 4 VRFA Gives Back
- Pg. 4 Promotions

SELFLESS SERVICE

INTEGRITY

GRIT

FIRE PREVENTION WEEK

“LEARN THE SOUNDS OF FIRE SAFETY™”

Every year the Valley Regional Fire Authority teams up with the National Fire Protection Association® (NFPA®) —the official sponsor of Fire Prevention Week for over 90 years—to promote Fire Prevention Week™. This year’s theme is “Learn the Sounds of Fire Safety™.” This campaign, which runs October 3-9, aims to educate everyone about simple but important actions they can take to keep themselves and those around them safe.

When an alarm makes noise—a beeping sound or a chirping sound—it is doing it for a reason, and you must take action. Make sure everyone in the home understands the sounds of the alarms and knows how to respond. To learn the sounds of your specific smoke and carbon monoxide (CO) alarms, check the manufacturer’s instructions that came in the box, or search the brand and model online. “Knowing the difference can save you, your family, and your home,” says Justin Erickson, VRFA Firefighter, and Public Education Specialist.

While some products may have some slight differences, here are a few things everyone should know about the sounds smoke and CO alarms make:

- » A continuous set of three loud beeps—beep, beep, beep—means smoke or fire. Get out, call 9-1-1, and stay out.
- » A single chirp every 30 or 60 seconds means the battery is low and must be changed.
- » All smoke alarms must be replaced after ten years.
- » Chirping that continues after the battery has been replaced means the alarm is at the end of its life, and the unit must be replaced.
- » Make sure your smoke and CO alarms meet the needs of all your family members, including those with sensory or physical disabilities.



If your alarm is chirping due to a low battery or some other issue, it is crucial to return the unit to full working order as soon as possible. Hearing a continuous chirp can lead some people to hesitate or ignore the warning sounds of an alarm when there is an actual emergency. Additionally, if the unit is faulty, the unit needs to be replaced as soon as possible.

To learn more about smoke alarms and fire prevention, please visit www.vrfa.org.

JOINT APPRENTICESHIP AND TRAINING COMMITTEE (JATC)



Becoming an effective and prepared firefighter requires years of training and education. Once hired with the VRFA, new firefighters enroll in an apprenticeship

program through the Washington State Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committee (JATC). This program provides guidance and helps establish the minimum industry standards required of each apprentice.

The majority of Zone-3 (South King County) departments utilize the South King County Fire Training Consortium (SKCFTC) as the centralized hub of the JATC program. This consolidation helps track the progress of apprentices and reinforces consistent expectations and minimum standards across Zone-3.

Apprentices advance from one step to the next after completing objectives and demonstrating proficiency in the requisite knowledge and skills. Firefighters must also take five classes from Bates Technical College to further their working knowledge of fire protection strategies and tactics, fire protection systems, fire protection hydraulics, building construction for the fire service, and fire protection codes.

Here is a breakdown of the steps new firefighters must complete:

Months 1-5: Fire Academy

Recruits learn and practice the skills necessary to obtain the following certifications: Firefighter 1, Firefighter 2, Hazardous Materials Awareness, Hazardous Materials Operations, EMT-B.

Months 6-9: Step 1A [Basic Firefighting]

Apprentices become proficient in foundational, practical skills and department-specific policies and procedures.

Months 10-12: Step 1B [Aid Car Driver/EMS]

Apprentices become safe and skilled on a medical aid unit practicing the evaluation and treatment of patients using King County Basic Life Support (BLS) protocols. In addition, apprentices learn about the non-suppression workings of the VRFA, including Emergency Management, Fire Prevention, Public Education, Administration, and Local 1352.

After successful completion of Step 1, the apprentice is a Firefighter 3rd Class.

Months 13-18: Step 2A [Intermediate Firefighting]

Apprentices focus on advancing firefighting skills and knowledge learned in the initial academies. They become more knowledgeable of the techniques used by SKCFTC.

Months 19-24: Step 2B [Department/Special Operations]

Apprentices learn about the specialized work done by the ladder truck, hazardous materials, water rescue companies, and fire investigators.

After successful completion of Step 2, the apprentice is a Firefighter 2nd Class.

Months 25-30: Step 3A [Driver/Engineer]

Apprentices learn the roles and responsibilities of the driver/engineer. They complete practical evolutions from the driver’s position. After completing all requirements, they perform the job of a driver/engineer.

Months 31-36: Step 3B [Aid Car/Engine Officer]

Apprentices master the skills of aid car officers and become capable of making decisions in the field and communicating effectively. They also learn the roles and responsibilities of company officers and complete exercises and mentoring activities with their company officers.

Upon completing the JATC Apprenticeship, the apprentice becomes a Firefighter 1st Class and is eligible to apply and test for specialist positions.

There are currently 11 VRFA Firefighters enrolled in JATC, including our four most recent academy graduates; Greg Bortel, Joseph Parrish, Bryan Poland, and Zack White.

THE VRFA WELCOMES FOUR NEW FIREFIGHTERS



Joseph Parrish
Firefighter Parrish joined the Army out of high school and served for eight years. During his military career, he volunteered for two fire departments in Washington with the goal of becoming a professional firefighter.



Zach White
Firefighter White has worked in customer service since graduating from high school. Before being hired by the VRFA, he worked as an EMT at AMR and a reserve with Eastside Fire & Rescue.



Bryan Poland
Firefighter Poland has a bachelor’s degree in criminology from Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas. He spent the past four years as a police officer with Mukilteo.



Greg Bortel
Firefighter Bortel graduated from Western Washington University with a bachelor’s degree in Kinesiology. He recently moved back to Washington from Dallas, Texas, where he worked as a Firefighter for Richardson Fire Department.

FIRE CHIEF'S MESSAGE



BRAD THOMPSON

My name is Brad Thompson, and I feel very fortunate to have been appointed as the Valley Regional Fire Authority's Fire Chief effective August 16, 2021. I am so excited and enthusiastic about our future that I am tempted

to dive right in and tell you all about it. And I will. But before I do that, I feel it is important to reflect, tell you how we got here and where we aim to go.

First, I would like to thank the community for the unwavering support you've shown our fire department. I know I speak for all of us at the VRFA when I note that we greatly appreciate the reception we receive every time a community member thanks us for simply doing what we are driven to do. It is our honor and privilege to serve this community. So, again, THANK YOU for your kind words and acts of support as we partner with you to make this such a wonderful community.

We have an amazingly dedicated and professional team at the VRFA. Recently retired Chief Brent Swearingen challenged all of us not to accept the status quo, but to enhance everything we do, whether hiring new staff or complete routine tasks. Under his guidance,

we set our Strategic Plan, improved many processes, and completed a much-needed Capital Facilities Plan. Chief Swearingen set the foundation that we will build on. If you would like to see our progress on these initiatives, please visit our website at www.vrfa.org for current updates regarding our performance. I know from personal experience that every staff member is dedicated to our core values of *Selfless Service, Integrity, and Grit*. Our team has been assembled and trained by many who came before me. They also understood the honor of working in the fire service and specifically serving Algona, Auburn, and Pacific communities.

Currently, we are looking for ways to enhance how we can serve you, our community partners, to meet your expectations and life safety needs. As is true for all of us, we are challenged by current events, specifically COVID-19, to continue to provide the level of service you deserve. We've taken careful steps to protect the health of our staff to the best of our ability so that we can continue to provide these essential services. Despite setbacks, such as the Delta variant, we will continue to serve and endure this pandemic, having done our very best to deliver on our commitments to you. Please know we have taken the necessary steps to continue to meet your life safety needs, and you can feel confident we are ready to deliver.

We see a bright new leadership team set on a solid foundation of previous successes as we look toward our future. Soon, industry

professionals from the Center for Public Safety Excellence will visit our department to validate the progress toward becoming a nationally accredited fire agency. This three-year self-assessment has helped us look at every division of the VRFA under a powerful microscope to evaluate our current practices and where there are opportunities to improve. Very few fire agencies take on this arduous self-improvement exercise, but I believe this process will provide the road map to best serve our communities now and into the future. We are confident in the work we have completed, and I look forward to sharing the results of their evaluation soon.

I would be remiss to not specifically thank our Board of Governance [BOG] for the direction and support they provide to all of us, and specifically to me, as they have appointed me to the role of Fire Chief. The BOG has continually provided the oversight and direction we greatly appreciate as we grow together in our community. I would also like to thank IAFF Local 1352 for their enduring dedication and perseverance as we navigate unprecedented challenges both now and into the future. Our civilian staff has also rolled up their sleeves to help our members on the front lines. We could not do it without their professionalism and hard work. Once again, thank you for the amazing level of support we enjoy from you, our community members who we are proud to serve. Yes, indeed, the future is bright!

CAPTAIN DAVE BERG AND FIREFIGHTER NEIL PEDERSEN RETIRE

The VRFA is grateful for the significant contributions of Captain Dave Berg and Firefighter Neil Pedersen. We wish them well in retirement.



DAVE BERG
CAPTAIN

CAPTAIN DAVE BERG

Dave began his career as a resident firefighter at Pierce County Fire District 7 in Spanaway in 1989. Three years later, he was hired by the Auburn Fire Department [AFD], now VRFA. He became a Firefighter/Public

Information and Education Specialist in 1994 and promoted to Captain in 2012.

Very early in his career, Dave set out to make a difference in the lives of children. He taught fire safety and injury prevention to countless students over an 18-year span on the AFD and VRFA Public Information and Education teams. Known as "Firefighter Dave," he never failed to elicit smiles and laughter during his classroom visits.

In addition to teaching, Berg organized softball tournaments and other events to raise funds for child burn survivors. Dave also assisted with the Toys for Kids drive, providing holiday gifts for struggling families. For these outstanding community outreach efforts and excellent job performance, Dave received the 2004 City of Auburn Employee of the Year award. Berg also consistently received nominations for both Firefighter and Fire Officer of the year.



NEIL PEDERSEN
FIREFIGHTER

FIREFIGHTER NEIL PEDERSEN

Neil Pedersen began working for the Auburn Fire Department on Oct. 1, 1984. Less than one year after he was hired, Pedersen earned a Medal of Merit for bravery and ingenuity during

a water rescue incident on the Green River. Shortly thereafter, he was selected to serve on the first specialty water rescue team. This team evolved over the years to include hazardous materials response, high angle, and confined space rescue. Today it is known as the VRFA Technical Rescue Team [TRT]. Neil served on the team for 29 years.

Pedersen received many accolades and awards during his career, including Firefighter of the Year for 2016. Whereas most of his awards related to outstanding performance on emergency incidents, this award recognized Pedersen's vast and capable mechanical skills while working on an administrative shift assignment. He was an invaluable resource, converting an ambulance into a specialized TRT apparatus for the water rescue team, self-engineering brackets and shelving to accommodate tools/equipment for a new fire engine, and providing equipment repairs and general maintenance services for the VRFA.

RICK OLSON PROMOTED TO DEPUTY CHIEF OF OPERATIONS



Congratulations to Rick Olson, recently promoted from the position of Battalion Chief to Deputy Chief of Operations. Olson began his career as a firefighter in 1999 with the Auburn Fire

Department, now VRFA. After seven years, he moved into the position of Captain and took on several challenges. Olson developed and maintained a wildland firefighting program for the VRFA, served in the role of Planning Division and EMS Training Division Captain, and was awarded 2014 Fire Officer of the Year honors. In 2019, he was promoted to Battalion Chief, and two years later, he became the

Deputy Chief of Operations. He has served on the committee to select engines, aid units, and most recently a new ladder truck. Olson is also a part of the Zone Three Wildland Training and Incident Command Committee and holds a Bachelor of Science in Fire Administration from Columbia Southern University.

THE VRFA GIVES BACK

Valley Professional Firefighters Union, Local 1352, and its members are continuing to seek out new and unique ways to give back to our community and charities alike. In 2021, the Local 1352 benevolent fund contributed over \$6,000 to South King County Relay for life, Auburn Valley Humane Society, and Auburn's Terry home.

On October 3, 2021, Captain Jeremiah Mushen will participate in the London Marathon, raising awareness and funds to support Parkinson's research. Captain Mushen has been with the Valley Regional Fire Authority for 15 years. He has participated in fifteen marathons and three Ironman competitions. The London Marathon is one of the world's six "major marathons" and is Captain Mushen's 4th "major marathon." His goal is to raise \$7,500 to donate to the Michael J. Fox Foundation. We are proud of Captain Mushen for supporting such a great cause while inspiring fitness and leadership for the Valley Regional Fire Authority. Good luck Jeremiah!



CONGRATULATIONS TO ALL OF OUR RECENTLY PROMOTED MEMBERS!

We are excited to see what they will accomplish in their new roles.



**BATTALION CHIEF
STEVE ZEHNDER**



**BATTALION CHIEF
MATT KINNEE**



**CAPTAIN
JIM ALLENBAUGH**



**CAPTAIN
TYLER ELIASON**



**CAPTAIN
DAVID REPLIK**

Board Appoints Brad Thompson from cover continued...

choice to serve the communities of Algona, Auburn, and Pacific," says Pacific Mayor Leanne Guier, "I look forward to working with him in his new role."

Thompson believes it is essential to develop collaborative relationships within the fire service and the community to create a safe environment to live, work, and visit. As deputy chief, Thompson worked on local and statewide health initiatives and is the current King County Operation Chiefs Committee chair, working alongside neighboring agencies to streamline regional processes. "The residents of Algona are excited that Deputy Chief Brad Thompson is the next chief of the Valley Regional Fire Authority. He brings an understanding of the culture and community that will be invaluable in the service of our city," says Algona Mayor Dave Hill.

Chief Thompson is a member of Auburn's Blue Ribbon Committee, working to make Auburn the healthiest city in Washington. He has three adult sons and lives with his wife in Tacoma.

Congratulations, Chief Thompson!

WWW.VRFA.ORG



VRFA Services

The VRFA provides CPR and First Aid classes, complimentary blood pressure checks, fire station tours, custom-fit bicycle helmets, custom-fit life jackets, smoke alarms, child car seat inspections and more.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

call **253-288-5800** or
go to **www.vrfa.org**

VRFA Administration

Brad Thompson

Fire Chief/Administrator

Rick Olson

Deputy Chief of Operations

Dave Larberg

Deputy Chief of Technical Services

Mark Horaski

Chief Financial Officer

Board of Governance

Dave Hill

Chair, City of Algona Mayor

Nancy Backus

Vice-Chair, City of Auburn Mayor

Members

Larry Brown

Auburn City Council

Claude DaCorsi

Auburn City Council

Kerry Garberding

Pacific City Council

Leanne Guier

City of Pacific Mayor

Troy Linnell

Algona City Council

Lynda Osborn

Algona City Council

David Storaasli

Pacific City Council

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VRFA HEADQUARTERS

North Auburn Fire Station 31
1101 D Street NE, Auburn, WA 98002
253-288-5800

Business Hours 8 a.m. – 5 p.m.
www.vrfa.org



The VRFA is committed to our mission:
WE SERVE THE WHOLE COMMUNITY