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Fire Chief to Retire; Search Underway for Replacement

After 38 years as a professional firefighter – 11 at the helm of the Oak Park Fire Department – Fire Chief Gerald A. Beeson says this will be his last year of public service. Beeson’s final day on the job in Oak Park will be Dec. 17 and his retirement effective the following month.

“It is with regret that I will soon say goodbye to an individual who has contributed much to the effort to improve public safety in our community,” said Village Manager Carl Swenson. “Chief Beeson has proven himself time and time again to be a great asset. His experience and leadership will be missed, but I understand and accept his decision to retire.”

A search for Beeson’s replacement already is underway, according to Swenson, who said he would look closely at the current command staff as well as nationally for suitable candidates to fill the vital municipal post.

Swenson characterized Beeson as invaluable in the effort to refocus the Village’s fire and emergency medical services programs around a model emphasizing advanced life support.

“The Oak Park Fire Department has become one of the most progressive, best equipped and trained in the area thanks to the chief’s dedication and persistence,” he said.

Under Beeson direction, the number of licensed paramedics among Oak Park firefighters has increased, the latest in advanced life support vehicles deployed and a technical rescue team created to better respond to difficult situations, such as high-angle, trench and confined space situations.

Beeson also worked diligently to get citizens involved in emergency care. The fire department’s automatic external defibrillator (AED) and CPR training programs saw steady growth in participation during his tenure. He also led efforts to add technology to his department’s tools, such as mobile computers that now give firefighters on-site access to the layouts of many of the Village’s commercial and public buildings.

“Oak Park is a great place to be in my profession,” Beeson said. “The support of the manager, the Village Board and the citizens has just been outstanding. To me it goes without saying, but I will say it anyway – the men and women I command are dedicated and well-trained professionals. I leave knowing that the Village is in very good hands in any emergency situation.”

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**Beeson to retire
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Beeson's career as a firefighter has spanned most of his adult life, beginning in his hometown of Peoria, Illinois. Just returned from a hitch in the U.S. Navy, he applied to be a firefighter, admittedly not really expecting to land such an important job. Two weeks later he would begin the career that would become his life's work.

"Life seems to have a way of taking you where you need to be," he said. "Once I got a taste of what it meant to be a firefighter, I knew that is where I belonged."

Working his way up from the bottom of the ranks, Beeson would go on to a distinguished career that would include stints as fire chief in both Inglewood, Colorado and Yakima, Washington, before coming to Oak Park in 1993.

Oak Park offered the resources and management backing to create an effective, performance-oriented modern fire department, he said, as the role of fire fighter evolved beyond the traditional one of putting out fires. Today, nearly two-thirds of emergency calls relate to providing medical services, he said, a trend that requires candidates to possess greater skills and be involved in more sophisticated training.

"The term firefighter doesn't even begin to describe the range of skills and responsibilities the job now requires," Beeson said. "The number of certified paramedics at the Oak Park Fire Department has more than doubled over the past 10 years, to about 75 percent of sworn personnel. One hundred percent is likely in the not-to-distant future."

Among his most significant accomplishments in Oak Park, Beeson cited maintaining the Village's high ranking with the firm that provides information used by insurance companies to set property owners' rates; earning accreditations from industry groups that assess capabilities; and implementing an agreement with neighboring communities to automatically lend aid in emergency situations.

He said he also was proud to have been instrumental in the creation of the West Suburban Consolidated Dispatch Center and the decision to train its staff to provide medical advice to callers while emergency vehicles were en route.

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