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Waterloo Fire Chief Mark Yeager Stepping Down

By Bethany Prange
THE INDEPENDENT

Whether he is getting credit or taking blame, a fire chief is only as good as the firefighters he leads.

Longtime Waterloo Fire Chief Mark "Yogi" Yeager, for instance, is quick to point out that despite all his accomplishments as chief, the firefighters and the fire department will go on long after he is gone.

"I think fire chiefs get a lot of credit when things go good and they get a lot of blame when things go bad," Yeager said. "But it's not one individual. If all 30 guys aren't going in the same direction then the organization is probably not going to be very good. If you put a person in a situation to succeed and they do, then it makes you look good."

This month, Yeager will step down as fire chief, leaving the Waterloo Fire Protection District in the capable hands of newly-elected chief Brett Wiegand.

Yeager, 57, joined the Waterloo fire department in 1981. He was elected fire chief in December 1998 when longtime chief Darrell Gaitsch decided not to run for another term.

"I'm more of a leader than I am follower and it was an opportunity," Yeager said. "I went and talked to Darrell and he decided he did not want to run. So I ran unopposed."

Yeager took over the department in January 1999. Firefighters have voted to re-elect him chief every year since.

Though he is incredibly modest about his accomplishments as chief, Yeager has seen a lot of positive changes in his 16-year tenure.

"The biggest thing since I've gotten on is the amount of training and the commitment that's involved," Yeager said. "When I got on in 1981, it was more of a social club. It was a night out - the guys got together and drove fire trucks and that was the deal. Now the training and the commitment and dedication are such that it's unbelievable. That's been the biggest change."

Over the years, Yeager has also seen the equipment improve dramatically.

"When I got on we did not have our own gear - we shared coats and boots and helmets," Yeager said. "If you were lucky enough to get there first you could find a pair of boots that fit you. But if not, you might be at a house fire and if you wore size 10 you might be in a size 8 or a size 13."

Now, each new firefighter is custom fitted for a coat, pants, helmet, boots and gloves - a vast improvement for the sake of safety and comfort.

"It's been a Godsend because number one, it's for your safety - there's nothing worse than your shoes are too big and you're fumbling around at the scene," Yeager said.

In 2003, Yeager led the fire department as voters approved a ballot issue to create the current Waterloo Fire Protection District, a combination of two separate entities - the City of Waterloo Fire Department and the Waterloo Rural Fire Protection District.

Yeager is extremely proud of the fire prevention efforts the department has put in place. Roughly 1,000 children come through the fire house every year, learning fire safety practices that can save lives.

Most recently, Yeager has been at the helm as the new Waterloo fire station was built on the site of the old Monroe County Nursing Home.

"The new engine house is something the fire department and the community can be proud of," Yeager said. The best thing I can say about my tenure is that I think we left the department in a great standing with the community. I think we're very well-respected out there."

Now that the engine house is complete, Yeager said he is ready to take some time for himself and his family.

After he steps down as chief and goes to active honorary status on Jan. 29, Yeager won't have to respond to every call or attend every meeting.

"We're at a very good point," Yeager said. "We just completed the new engine house and I'm at the point in my life where I'm starting to get tired. I want some time for me and my wife. If I don't want to get up at 3 a.m. for a carbon monoxide call, I won't have to."



Mark Yeager

Yeager said he is grateful for all the years of hard work and dedication from his firefighters, and for the outpouring of support he has seen from the community.

"We get a lot of thank yous and a lot of pats on the back," Yeager said. "It's not that we really strive for that, but it's nice to see. The community has been really good."

Yeager's wife, Gail, has been his biggest supporter in his years as fire chief. Still, she is looking forward to having him around more too, he said.

"That's one thing that is so critical to the success of the fire department and most organizations - you have to have a commitment and the backing and support of your spouse," Yeager said. "You don't get to do the things that you do if you don't have your wife or husband encouraging you to do it."

Yeager said he will still be around and plans to go to the major fire calls. But he's looking forward being able to finish a meal without having to run out to attend a meeting.

"I won't miss missing family Christmas and anniversary dinners," Yeager says with a chuckle.

As his tenure comes to an end, Yeager is happy with the state of the department, but doesn't like to take much credit.

"A lot of the older retired guys say, 'You still put the wet stuff on the red stuff. The department will be there long after we're gone,'" Yeager said.

Yeager is a longtime employee at Waterloo Lumber.