

Wednesday, February 20, 2008

Worthington Fire District breaks ground on its new \$4.3 million station in Norton Commons
As dirt is turned for 'Commons' firehouse, opinions are mixed

By Chris Otts

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The Courier-Journal

Jon Jarrell knows what a firehouse means to a small town.

As a kid, he remembers petting the fire dog and climbing on the trucks at his neighborhood fire station in Ashland, Ky.

Jarrell, who now splits time between Ashland and his new home in Norton Commons, was one of about 100 people who recently braved stinging winds to witness the Worthington Fire District break ground on its new station in Norton Commons.

"A community really becomes a community when they have a firehouse," said Jarrell, who was a firefighter for 26 years in Ashland.

The fire station will be an important addition to Norton Commons, which eventually aims to be a 600-acre small town with residences, offices, schools and businesses, developer David Tomes said.

Work on the fire station, which should be complete in a year, signifies "a year of civic building" in Norton Commons, he told the crowd at the Feb. 10 ceremony. Tomes also pointed to the day-care facility that is about to open, a planned Catholic school and other yet-to-be-announced projects he said are in the works for Norton Commons.

Judy Kalmey, who lives across the street from where the firehouse will be built, joked that she could cancel her homeowner's insurance once the station is finished.

She said the possibility of siren noise and truck traffic doesn't bother her. She and her husband, Ed, moved from a 15-acre property in Oldham County to Norton Commons to be closer to businesses and other people, she said.

But not everyone is happy about the fire station.

Barbourmeade resident David Williams, a former volunteer captain in the Worthington department, criticized the station's \$4.3 million price tag and said the project could wait a few years, especially given the housing slump.

Williams is one of a group of former volunteers behind www.worthingtontruth.com, a Web site critical of the department's decisions.

He said that instead of building the Norton Commons station, the district should put money into staffing its Goose Creek station with paid firefighters around the clock, rather than relying on volunteers for the evening hours.

Worthington Chief Gary Yurt has previously said putting a 24-hour paid crew at that station would be unnecessary because few runs are made during the night, and he defended the cost of the station because of its amenities: a fitness center, offices, a community meeting room and a training room.

The department will save money in the long run, he said, because it will no longer subsidize memberships to the Louisville Athletic Club on Westport Road so firefighters can put in required gym time.

The fire district's board recently approved a \$5 million bond issue for the fire station, which also includes about \$400,000 for a new truck and professional service costs for the project, Yurt said.

Moody's Investors Service gave the district a high bond rating, noting it ended fiscal 2006 with a \$244,000 surplus, and may add a \$350,000 surplus this year. Plus, it has a relatively wealthy tax base of about 30,000 people, which has grown by about 8.6 percent a year.

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COVER STORY: Assistant fire chief Steve Dellis set out hard hats before the groundbreaking.