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Stratford's firefighters are 'Home at last'

By: Tristram DeRoma , Editor

Fourth District Councilman Angelo Stavola said it best: "It's a heck of a building for \$6 million."

He said this of course at the dedication of Stratford's new firehouse, which other officials at the event also hailed as a tribute to public safety and technology.

"In light of the disaster happening in New Orleans right now and 9/11 in 2001, the public can now be sure that Stratford's fire department is now equipped with a state of the art headquarters that can better help in protecting us," said Mike Henrick, R-10. Henrick is also the last chair of the Building Needs Committee that helped guide the project to completion.

According to officials, the drive to get a new headquarters started in the late 1970's, then started gaining momentum as the town's needs grew and the department's original headquarters became smaller, obsolete and decrepit, according to those that worked there.

Built in 1940, the last major addition to it was made in 1960. As the department grew, the town's fire marshals found themselves in trailers in the buildings parking lot. As roof leaks and equipment breakdowns became more prevalent during the last ten years, the campaign for a new building began picking up speed, a movement that was spearheaded by the late fire chief John Connell whom the new building will be named after.

Momentum for the new house really started picking up around 1999, as previous Councils started fine tuning the plan's final points, such as whether or not to include Stratford's volunteer EMT Services in the building. Plans started to really pick up in 2001, after it was decided the building should only house the fire department headquarters. The EMT service still works out of the basement of the Stratford Police Department.

The choice was a crushing blow to many on the Town Council at the time, but of the few to come see the building open up this week, they are glad to finally see all their hard work come to fruition.

"I'm very happy to see this finally happen," said Chris Silhavey, who served as 8th District Councilman from 1999-2001 as well as chairman of Building Needs

"Although I remember being disappointed that we couldn't find a way to keep EMS and the fire department in the same facility, I'm sure that will be one of the things Stratford's next mayor will try and fix."

The building, which is located across the street from Town Hall, has two floors as well as a basement, and room for crew shifts as well as all of the departments heads. It's also equipped with a kitchen, as well as a dispatch center. It also has four large bays to store department trucks, as well as a meeting room.

The dispatch center will, for the first time ever, will allow dispatchers from all of Stratford's emergency services be in one place, according to Stratford Fire Chief Ronald Natrass.

"The new building is going to allow us to do our jobs better as far as serving the public is concerned," said Natrass.

A centralized dispatch system will improve communication between services, and the four large engine bays will contribute greatly to keeping the department's trucks in running order, Natrass added.

Though the building is twice as large as the department's old headquarters, Architect **Paul Antinozzi** hopes the public will accept the new building. He said his firm, Paul Antinozzi and Associates, went through great pains to match it to Town Hall's colonial style exterior, but not overpower it.

"It's a large building, but we made sure the scale didn't challenge Town Hall," said Antinozzi. "It's style is also derived from colonial times, around the time of the American Revolution."

Jack Connell, John's eldest son, thanked everyone involved in getting the building built. He called the building as a monument to "the integrity and spirit of Stratford's firefighters."

As for what it means to his late father, Connell said he must be very proud, and "is probably looking down at all of us here with the keen eye of a USMC drill sergeant."

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New fire headquarters dedicated

Stratford honoring late chief with completion of \$6m facility

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STRATFORD — Jack Connell remembered his father's last ride past the old fire headquarters on Main Street more than five years ago. His father, former Fire Chief John Connell, received a stirring tribute from a colleague during his February 2000 funeral procession, his son said Wednesday. "As his funeral went past the fire station, one firefighter quietly tapped his heart and mouthed the words, 'We will not forget you,' " Connell said. The town dedicated the new fire headquarters — located next door to where Connell's office once was — Wednesday afternoon. The building has been named in Connell's honor. Town Council member Angelo Stavola, D-4, spoke Wednesday for fellow Councilman Raymond S. Voccola, D-5, who could not attend due to illness. "We're here before a building that is state-of-the-art and magnificent, and will hopefully serve us for 50 to 75 years," he said. "In short, we have a heck of a good building here."

Connell, a Korean War veteran, served in the department from 1964 to 1992, and was chief from 1987 to his retirement in 1992. He died in 2000.

Connell proposed the 27,000-square-foot, \$6 million fire headquarters nearly two decades ago.

His son said Wednesday that his father would have enjoyed seeing the new firehouse dedicated. "Back in 1987, this building was just a dream of my father's," he said. The Town Council last month approved having A. Secundario & Son, of Branford, the building's contractor, finish the often-delayed job instead of sending work on the building's dispatch center back out to bid. The station will also contain the dispatch headquarters for the Police Department and town Emergency Medical Services. The vote sped up completion by at least a month, town officials have said. Council Chairman Joseph G. Crudo, R-at-large, admitted the pace of construction tried the patience of many town citizens.

"I bet this is a day that some of you thought was never going to come," he said. "Just less than 30 days ago, we dedicated the town's World War II Memorial. "This is another notch towards making Stratford a better town."

Fire Chief Ronald Natrass said he was overwhelmed by the opening ceremony and the plaque he received from the local firefighters' union. "It's a great day," he said, adding that the department will begin moving in next week, with portions of the dispatch center to follow in December and March. "We're going to get right in there."

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