



COLUMNS

Notes from SEFD: Firefighters form union



by Eddie McArthur
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Acting Capt. Tim Hart of the [Sonoita-Elgin Fire District](#), the newly elected president of the United Firefighters of Sonoita, says formation of the new chapter of the [International Association of Firefighters](#) was driven by a need for advocacy for full-time firefighters and increased unity and cohesiveness among the members.

“It’s a special relationship,” Hart said. “We basically both live together and work together.”

Hart emphasized that unionization was not driven by conflict between the firefighters and management, citing a great relationship with SEFD Chief Marc Meredith.

Retention of firefighters has long been an issue at SEFD, as it is with other small, rural agencies. Hart said the union membership hopes to address this problem, in part by solidifying the chain of command. A problem or complaint from a firefighter will first be brought to that firefighter’s captain. If the captain is unable to resolve an issue, only then will the issue be brought to the chief. The hope is that a more formalized plan for conflict resolution will bring both clarity and cohesiveness among the firefighters.

The new union went through a rather long process to obtain its charter from the International Association of Firefighters. Participation in that larger organization gives local members access to numerous benefits that could not be obtained locally.

Political advocacy supporting issues like mental health, cancer prevention and additional training are now possible. In addition to Hart as president, Local 5597 has elected Mike Terzich as vice president and still looks to fill the secretary/treasurer position.

While previous attempts to unionize failed, this one succeeded because “it was just the right time,” Hart said. The union has 10 members. New hires will hopefully increase that number. When a new hire comes from another agency with firefighting experience,



Acting Capt. Tim Hart is the newly elected president of the United Firefighters of Sonoita. Photo by Eddie McArthur

they are eligible immediately. For those new to fire service, there is a 90-day wait.

Future plans for the union include possible fundraising for improvements to the Sonoita-Elgin Fire Station and increasing pay rates, which could enable some firefighters to live in the area. At present, none of the firefighters live in the district, mainly due to housing costs.

Along with fundraising, the group is contemplating adopting a local charity. The new Union Local 5597 creates a foundation for further development of professionalism and stability among our firefighters.

Eddie McArthur is a member of the Sonoita-Elgin Fire District Board of Directors.