

# Avra Valley fire chief proves to be a spark plug

By Chip Warren  
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Shortly after he became chief of the Avra Valley Volunteer Fire Department last July, Fred Tryon got some unsettling news.

One of the department's tanker trucks was regularly being driven to Picacho Peak to fill up with diesel fuel. Aside from such trips being more than 10 miles each way, Tryon was worried because it meant at least one on-duty employee had to leave the district temporarily, thus reducing the available manpower in the event of an emergency.

"I scratched my head and thought: 'That's kind of ridiculous. There's got to be fuel closer than that.' So we checked around and pretty soon found a place that will actually deliver the fuel right to us for just about the same cost," he said.

A small feat? Perhaps. But in a sense it typifies the way Tryon, during the past nine months, has overhauled what had been a fairly old-fashioned and frequently inefficient department, transforming it into a modern, highly competent unit.

Gone are the days of the old fabric fire hoses that used to mildew and rot. Tryon has begun replacing them with the new Angus brand, made of a special material that doesn't need to be washed or dried, he said.

No longer is there just one member of the department certified by the state as an emergency medical technician. At Tryon's urging, six individuals have completed the five-month course and five more are enrolled.

"What I would like to see is that with the size of our district (roughly 107 square miles), we eventually have five stations with five personnel at every station on every shift," he said.

Tryon, 52, conceded that such a lofty goal may take a while to attain, especially since the department has operated for years with only two stations — one on Trico Road, the other on El Tiro Road — and a handful of paid employees. But judging by what he's achieved, it isn't beyond the realm of possibility.

# Neighbors

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Probably the most dramatic improvements have occurred at the Trico Road facility. Recalling the first time he saw the building, Tryon said: "I'd like to have died. The roof leaked, the windows were broken and there was no heat." In addition, a "jumbled-up mess of cars that had rusted out" was scattered all around.

"Everything in general was just kind of like, 'Well, it's OK the way it is.' That's the impression I got," he added.

By the early part of 1983, however, not only had those problems been rectified, but work had started on a two-bed dormitory where firefighters can rest during the night. When the remodeling is finished, Tryon said, there also will be a full kitchen, a dining area and a training room.

"We don't have it all fixed yet, but we've done wonders to this point," he said.

A host of similar changes have accompanied Tryon's brief tenure. After noticing that some employees seemed unprepared to handle certain crises, he beefed up the training sessions from one to four meetings a month. Meanwhile, a new operations procedure, listing regulations for all personnel, and a test to decide which firefighters will be promoted to captain, are being compiled.

Each of the ideas Tryon is implementing was gleaned from his experience with three other fire departments. From 1957 to 1963, he was a firefighter in Fontana, Calif. He then moved to Palm Springs, where he served until 1969. In 1972, after helping form a fire district in Kachina Village, outside Flagstaff, he became its first chief, a position he held for seven years.

Between 1979 and 1982, Tryon was an auto mechanic — "the only other thing I know anything about," — in Glendale, because his wife had a heart problem and needed to live at a lower elevation. By last year, he had all but given up hope of working for a fire department again because "chiefs' jobs just aren't out there hanging on trees." But Don Boyd, the head building inspector for Pima County and a longtime friend, notified him of the Avra Valley opening.

Since then, Tryon said, the chance to resume "my first love" has proven to be very satisfying, even in the face of opposition from some members of the department and the fire district board who thought he was changing too much too fast. That resistance gradually dissipated, though, once people got over the "initial shock" of a new chief, Tryon said, and volunteer support, as well as morale, have both subsequently improved.

Still, Tryon added, there is much to be done.

"Our response time is terrible right now," he said, pointing to a map that shows how far the two stations are from the extreme southern end of the district. By plotting on the map all the places from which the department receives calls, he hopes to determine where future stations would best be located.

Together with his assistant chief, Bill Miller, Tryon said he also wants to reach out to the community more and make residents "aware of the positive aspects of a fire department." As an example, he cited a recent instance in which a teen-ager needing a local service project to fulfill his Eagle Scout requirements was offered the opportunity to design the training room at the Trico Road station.

"It's really worked out great," Tryon said, noting that the department benefited by not having to pay for a professional architect.

In a district like Avra Valley where finances are particularly tight, such money-saving measures take on added importance. And they fit in perfectly with Tryon's basic philosophy about how a fire department should be run.

"It isn't my money or the firefighters' or the board's (that is being spent) — it's everybody's in the district," he said. "That's why we have to give them the best possible service we can."