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Ushering in new era of fire safety in North Conway

Tom Eastman

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The outside of the new fire station after the grand opening ceremony in North Conway last Saturday, after the crowds clear away. (RACHEL SHARPLES PHOTO)

CONWAY — With music, speeches, food and public tours, the new \$6.7 million North Conway Fire Station was dedicated in grand style last Saturday.

The festivities began and ended with the playing of bagpipes by Davey Armstrong of Jackson, and included remarks from the state's highest-ranking dignitaries, as well as the contractors and local officials who oversaw the completion of the gleaming, state-of-the-art 15,835-square-foot building, and of course the firefighters themselves.

Several hundred members of the public accepted the open invitation to attend the ceremonies and take a look at the incredible new addition to the Schouler Park landscape in the heart of North Conway Village.

They also got to hear from their governor, Chris Sununu, and U.S. Sen. Maggie Hassan, as well as state Sen. Jeb Bradley, Executive Councilor Joe Kenney, N.H. Department of Safety Commissioner Robert Quinn, and Fire Station Expansion Committee chair Suzanne Nelson, among others.

The ceremonies took place in the wide expanse of the apparatus bay, with the five bay doors of the new station kept open to allow the fresh air to circulate.

Singing the National Anthem at the start was local vocalist Sarah Hoyt, after which the Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

At the end of the ceremonies, “God Bless America” was sung by Dallas Bell.

In introducing the governor, Nelson shared that Sununu had paid a visit to the construction site last October. Sununu said “the engineer in him” was amazed to see how the project was undertaken and completed during the pandemic year since ground was broken last July on the facility built on the site of the old station at 70 Norcross Circle on time and on budget.

“You’ve really set the model not just in creating something special for Mount Washington Valley but for the rest of the state to look at and say, ‘We want to do what they do.’ So let’s copy these guys all over the state and so the state as a whole can share that kind of success,” said Sununu.

He was followed by Hassan, who likewise saluted the North Conway Water Precinct, the North Conway Fire Department and all of the construction crews for their efforts.

Looking out at the sea of faces, Hassan commented on the joy of seeing people gathered in one place after the challenges of the past year.

“All of you are a sight for sore eyes,” she noted. “If you had told me a few months ago that we would all be together and most of you would not be needing to wear masks, that we could be celebrating such an important step forward for North Conway and the whole region, I might not have believed it,” Hassan said,

“So it’s really good to be with you, good to be home in New Hampshire and really good to be celebrating this spectacular achievement.”

Hassan said she really wanted to thank all of the firefighters of North Conway for their “extraordinary work” over the past year on the front lines of dealing with the pandemic.

“So just thank you — you all kept things going during a very tough year, for your community, for the state, for our country,” the junior senator said.

She also thanked first responders for their continuing work to fight the opioid crisis, then touched on the federal level help through the American Rescue Plan, which put \$300 million for Federal Emergency Management Agency grant programs, including assistance to firefighter grants.

“At the end of the day, it is a wonderful building that reflects not just a place where we can have a foundation for safety and response that is not only a state-of-the-art facility, but it really reflects the spirit that is at the heart of the Granite State,” Hassan said. It really reflects everybody coming together and finding a way forward during a difficult time to do what’s necessary to take care of each other,” said Hassan.

Next up was Executive Councilor Joe Kenney (R-Wakefield) of District 1. He spoke of the mutual aid and collaboration of all local fire departments in the Mount Washington Valley, as well as the volunteerism that makes the various department work. He also mentioned how departments throughout the state work with the state and the National Guard in forest fire response.

“So congratulaitons on this great occasion and dedication of the North Conway Fire Station. It’s a beautiful building and run by special people,” said Kenney.

Department of Safety Commissioner Robert Quinn followed Kenney, and saluted all who were involved in creating the brick, five-bay, two-story structure, noting: “Your new fire station brings a new kind of focus for the community. This facility was designed and built with safety as its No. 1 goal, and it is now to serve the residents and visitors of North Conway within the next 100 years.”

Like Nelson and North Conway Fire Chief Pat Preece, he described how the new structure is a safe building, designed to have separate areas to improve the safety of firefighters by having a “dirty” area of the building to enable firefighters to decontaminate their clothing, equipment and bodies from carcinogens when returning from a call.

“It takes a very special person to be a firefighter. This building supports your firefighters, and we need to support our firefighters as well. I applaud the North Conway Water Precinct voters in taking important steps to increase the safety of everyone in North Conway, especially their firefighter,” said Quinn.

State Sen. Jeb Bradley (R-Wolfeboro) of District 3 — who had also toured the then-under construction facility with Gov. Sununu last October — spoke next. He praised North Conway for its legacy as one of the “classiest ski towns in North America” and touted its scenic beauty.

“Now you have a 21st century, built-for-the-future fire station that will help this community in no small way,” said Bradley.

He also shared how he stood there as a former Little League coach whose son more than two decades ago hit a ball out of Schouler Park directly across from the station “that’s probably still rolling to North Conway” and beyond.

He closed by saying, “It really is a great honor to be with you today in the dedication of this station.”

Local liaison Chuck Henderson of Conway next read a statement from U.S. Sen. Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.), saluting the new North Conway Fire Department, and saying, “I wish I could join you in person for today’s grand opening of North Conway’s beautiful new fire station. Thank you, Suzanne Nelson, chair of the fire expansion committee and members, project manager Allan Clark (of REI Service Corp. of Concord), Ricci Construction and the team of architects and contractors for coming together to design and build a facility that came in on budget and ahead of schedule.

“In a community where scenic beauty is a core part of your identity, this facility combines a historic firehouse look with the most modern functional features,” Shaheen wrote.

Also reading a statement was local representative Victoria Laracy on behalf of U.S. Rep. Chris Pappas (D-First District).

“New facilities like this are crucial in providing necessary training facilities and to provide for those who put their lives at risk to keep our community safe,” the congressman said.

“I congratulate the North Conway Water Precinct commissioners and all those involved in the planning and construction of this facility,” wrote Pappas.

Laracy was followed by Chief Michael Sitar, president of the N.H. Fire Chiefs Association, Tilton and Northfield.

“I’m here to congratulate you and Chief Preece today and the North Conway community as a whole on this very momentous occasion,” Sitar said.

“I know all the hard work it takes to make a success story like this ... What a great achievement. I was very happy to hear that the space was built with firefighters’ safety in mind,” he said.

“As you can see, it has features for decontamination, equipment and personnel. These are things that firefighters need every single day to train. You’ve done a great job.”

Nelson — who served with chair John Santuccio and fellow water precinct commissioner Bob Porter — next provided a history of the project, giving an overview of the growth of the precinct and of the needs of the department.

Like others, she praised the design and construction team, as well as voters for approving the 20-year bond at 2020 annual precinct meeting by a vote of 45-3.

She saluted the Fire Expansion Committee that included Assistant Chief Chad McCarthy, Deputy Chief Tim Anderson, former NCWP Commissioner Jim Umberger and NCWP Superintendent Jason Gagnon, David Swirk, Conway Scenic Railroad and Doug Dugrenier, North Conway Country Club.

She singled out project manager Allan Clark and architect Cris Salomon of Samyn-D’Elia Architects of Holderness for their expertise and commitment of the project.

“Allan was hired as project manager in June 2019, and his force of will — and we have all seen it — put the project on the path of success. Cris Salomon of Samyn-D’Elia understood our vision, and he quickly put forth a rendering that we can all get behind,” said Nelson.

She said despite the pandemic, while challenging and a negative for the country and state, the project moved forward within budget and on time.

“Ten months later, voila!” said Nelson to much applause.

She thanked local, state and federal officials. “Your work to support funding partnerships has helped a small precinct with less than 5,000 residents build a robust public infrastructure that supports as many as 30,000 people per week during the height of the tourism season,” said Nelson.

Preece was last to speak, thanking his department, precinct voters and the general public for their support.

Preece, 53 — who was hired as chief in 2001, succeeding then acting chief/current Deputy Chief Tim Anderson — praised Anderson for being there from the beginning of the project, dating back to 2006 and through the process that led to the opening of the new station this past Saturday.

He spoke passionately about firefighters being a special breed, and eloquently of the need to protect firefighters from carcinogens.

Preece also said the new building will also serve as a training facility, with components built into the building, including upstairs windows that allow for practicing forcible entry and a multi-purpose hose tower that can be used for repelling and find space rescue.

He thanked architect Salomon for his work to take the committee’s vision to make the new structure complement the architecture of the village.

He said the station will efficiently serve the community for years to come, with LED lighting, motion sensors, state-of-the-art boilers, garage bay doors that open in 7 seconds that are guaranteed for 1 million cycles. “A firehouse is the heart of any community — and that is what we were always driven by ... We’re here to serve you. We thank you very, very much,” Preece said.

He praised the construction team of project manager Allan Clark of REI Service Corp. of Manchester and Sugar Hill; general contractor Ricci Construction of Portsmouth (John Ricci, president and job superintendent Robert Silva); Stan Sztela Masonry of Glen; Gordon T. Burke & Sons, North Conway; White Mountain Oil and Propane, North Conway; Portland Glass; Conway; Giguere Electric, Laconia; Chadwick Mechanical, LLC, Laconia; Pope Security Systems, Conway and S.L. Chasse Steel, Hudson.

Others involved with the station included Crystal Laliberte, executive vice president of REI Service Corp. of Manchester and Sugar Hill and Krista Goodson of Northway Bank, project financial partner.

Firefighters, fire expansion committee members and commissioners were then called up to dedicate the station, with a bronze plaque.

“We dedicate this new station in honor of our proud history of the North Conway Fire Department and the community it serves,” said Preece.

Tours of the facility were given by personnel after the presentations.

After the ceremonies, an enormous array of food underwritten by the North Conway Firefighters Association was served by Big Dave’s Bagel & Deli owner Dave Hausman and staffer Jasmine Kemp. A nice touch: The Big Dave’s staff had carved the sandwiches to spell out “NO CO FIRE.”

Interviewed this week, Clark, the project’s manager, praised the dedicated team of individuals involved, saying they overcame the challenges of the pandemic and other issues to complete the project on budget and on time, echoing a common theme among all interviewed.

“It was a great team ... This was a pretty big accomplishment that certainly will be a landmark in North Conway for a long time to come.”

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Reporter