



Robin Hartill

Deputy Chief Lee Whitehurst and Chief Byron Teates are responsible for preparing the East Manatee Fire Rescue District's response to the area's booming growth.

# Fueling the fire district

As East Manatee Fire Rescue Chief Byron Teates prepares for retirement, Deputy Chief Lee Whitehurst is ready to lead the district.

ROBIN HARTILL | CONTRIBUTOR

**E**ast Manatee Fire Rescue District Chief Byron Teates and Deputy Chief Lee Whitehurst started in the district 32 and 33 years ago, respectively — back when the department consisted solely of volunteers and there was a single East Manatee fire station.

Since then, the district has grown with the community it serves: It has six stations and 71 employees.

Now Teates, 59, who has been chief for 13 years, is preparing to retire by the end of 2016, and Whitehurst, 52, is preparing to take on the role of chief.

*LWR Life* sat down with the pair to see what the future holds for the rapidly expanding district.

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**What did the area look like when you started working for East Manatee Fire District more than 30 years ago?**

**Teates:** Woods. Pastures...

We had one restaurant, the YumYum House, at the intersection of Lorraine Road and 64.

**Whitehurst:** We had no traffic lights, maybe a dozen fire hydrants... Braden Woods was just starting, and it was the Braden Woods project that stretched us. We'd respond to Linger Lodge from that one station at State Road 64 and I-75. Our district was 100 square miles from day one for the most part.

**How does the district approach planning for the future?**

**Whitehurst:** Our 2010 Census said we had over 52,000 people in this district. We've been trying to get a more accurate number at the halfway point but have not been successful. We could get a regional estimate, but the problem is, it's based on ZIP codes, and we've got three different ZIP codes here ... We added a couple thousand parcels to the tax roll this year.

We do a lot of regressive analysis where we go back five years. Since we've been past the economic downturn for several years, we have the basis for some good numbers to use as we forecast.

**Teates:** We have a very good board that looks into the future, and we've bought two parcels of land for two more stations. We're debt-free. We're one of the few governmental agencies that can say that. Whether that's three years, five years down the road, we have the land for the stations.

**What is the time frame for building the stations on the parcels (one located just west of The Concession and another just west of Panther Ridge) the district purchased in 2012?**

**Teates:** It really does depend on how fast the developers continue east.

**Whitehurst:** Right now, there's no road service, no water service, sewer service. It really has to



Chief Byron Teates and Deputy Chief Lee Whitehurst say the East Manatee Fire Rescue has been adding units to keep up with growth, but eventually it will need to add new stations.

grow to the point where the services are provided before we can continue with those stations.

**Does the district have the resources to cope with growth?**

**Teates:** I think so. The greatest cost — and the greatest resource — you have is the firefighters. What we have to look at is at what point the growth will sustain a fire station.

**Whitehurst:** Compared to the other (Manatee) fire districts, we're not as busy. But we've increased our calls for service. So far this year, our calls for service are up 17%. For us, it's mostly about distance. As the streets are added and stop signs and stoplights and things like that are added, it slows our response down. Back in the day, you'd get on State Road 64 or 70 go wherever it is you're going, and you'd never have to stop for anything. Our response has slowed, our calls for service have increased.

As this area grows — you have Lakewood National and Del Webb coming out of the ground, and the Lakewood Ranch Country Club going out east — that pulls units away, and it will make sense to put a unit out there. We're not there yet, but we're getting there.

**What was the impact of the recession?**

**Whitehurst:** We tend to err on the side of caution when we're trying to forecast the future and be conservative with the numbers until it's realized that maybe we did a little bit better than what we forecasted. We'd much rather it be that way than the other way around ... In 2007, we had a five-year plan

we were following and had looked at adding a couple stations and adding a person at each station. We were able to achieve all of the stations in spite of that. We were still able to build the station (in front of the East Manatee Fire Rescue Administration Building) in 2010. We delayed it — mind you, it had been planned for 2008 — but we were still able to build that.

**How is the department involved in the planning process for new communities?**

**Teates:** The fire marshal and the county review all plans for new subdivisions and make sure we've got all the required access, turnarounds, that we have the ability to get into gated communities. There's pretty good relations and communications.

**Whitehurst:** The fire code in all the districts spell out things like the width of streets and the size of cul-de-sacs even down to the landscaping so that they're not planting in front of hydrants. The fire marshals for all of Manatee are part of the review process.

**To Whitehurst: What's your vision for the department five years from now?**

**Whitehurst:** I don't see the department looking much different than it does now. We've been pretty steady with the philosophy of pay-as-you-go — that's why we have no debt — with this district and chief that certainly came in handy during the recession. As we grow, it's simply about adding a station or two over the next five to 10 years.