Clearwater approves new fire station for the central part of the city



Clearwater Fire Station 47 at 1460 Lakeview Road will be replaced soon with a new station nearby at 601 S Hercules Ave. The City Council approved the purchase of the new site in June and the station is expected to open in 2020. [Google Maps]

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CLEARWATER — After more than four years of searching and unsuccessful negotiations with land owners, Clearwater Fire & Rescue will build a new fire station in the center of the city.

The City Council has approved up to $705,300 for Fire & Rescue Chief Scott Ehlers to proceed with the purchase of 1.5 acres at 601 S Hercules Ave. The land, owned by Church of Christ at Clearwater Inc., is across the street from Clearwater High.

The new station — to be built sometime in 2020 — will replace the present Fire Station 47 near the corner of Highland Avenue and Lakeview Road. It will be seconds south of Gulf to Bay Boulevard and just a few blocks east of Keene Road, giving emergency crews quick access to other parts of the city, Ehlers told the council at its June 17 work session.

Council members approved the new station three days later.

"This location provides good coverage for the community it serves, but also provides easy access to major north-south and east-west corridors," Ehlers said at the work session, adding: "It allows for modern fire station amenities, as well putting the city's single squad into a more central location."

He said he and previous fire administrators have spent years searching for a new location for Fire Station 47, which was built in 1974. The single-story facility provides response coverage to a large residential area that borders the Largo Fire Rescue fire district to the south. It hosts one engine company and one Advanced Life Support rescue unit.

"It's been several years now we've been trying to find a viable location that's large enough to accommodate a fire station," Ehlers told the council. "We looked at sites just outside the city limits in the county, and that neighborhood didn't like it, and we looked at additional sites near Keene and Gulf to Bay, but they wanted us to lease it from them. We looked at another site near the high school, and there were flooding issues with several properties there."

Mayor George Cretekos asked Ehlers whether the new site will have good response times, noting that those numbers play a role in the city's emergency services ratings.

The fire department analyzed time-to-scene when determining the best site, Ehlers told him. City fire stations try to beat a 7-minute, 30-second total response time from when the caller dials 911 to fire engines arriving at the incident.

"We need to (reach) a 90 percentile, 9 out of 10 times we have to meet that response," he said. Travel time — the time it takes the engine to leave the station and reach the fire — should take no more than 5 minutes, he said.

Clearwater Fire & Rescue's eight fire stations, numbered Station 44 through Station 51, fought 64 structure fires in 2018, Ehlers said. That doesn't include trash, car or brush fires.

The Pinellas County 911 dispatch center, which handles emergency calls for Clearwater, has an interactive map that lets fire chiefs key in a potential location for a fire house and see response times based on distance and traffic, much like the GPS navigation feature does on smartphones.

"You can take a station and put it on a piece of property to see how it meets that travel time," Ehlers said. The location of the new station, he said, "puts it in a real good spot where it doesn't exceed that travel time."

The new station also will solve the problem of "tremendous" overlap that the existing Station 47 has with Station 45, which was moved east out of the downtown area in recent years, Ehlers said. Building the new station, he said, is also less expensive than continuing to operate the existing one.

Fire officials, including Ehlers, met with residents and businesses on Hercules Avenue to determine their willingness to host the fire station.

"None of them had any negative comments; they are all receptive to the idea of putting a fire station there," he said.

Erica Galicia, who works at Florida Subs and Gyros at Hercules and Gulf to Bay, said in an interview that she welcomes having a fire station just down the block on Hercules.

"That will be pretty convenient to us," Galicia said. "The closest fire station I know of is toward Clearwater Beach, and it will be better to have one over here. Gulf to Bay is pretty dangerous."