

## State and Local

# Fire protection leader sees division in 'era of change'



Battalion File Photo

Firefighters at the Brayton training school go to work and practice putting out a fire.

By Carolyn Garcia  
Staff Writer

Fire Protection Training, the division of the Texas Engineering Extension Service that manages and operates the Brayton Firemen's Training School and field, is facing an era of change.

Charles L. Page, division head of Fire Protection, said advancing technology and the increasing need for "hometown" instruction are serving as catalysts for most of the change.

"We're living in a time of 'future shock,'" he said. "Technology is multiplying very quickly. We're having to keep pace with that and it's not an easy task."

Diversification and high-quality instruction are the tools Fire Protection will use to build a secure financial future despite the state's budgetary woes, he said.

Texas city and volunteer fire departments need to be kept informed of new techniques, equipment and procedures, Page said.

"Our mandate for state funds requires the money go into free training of Texas firemen," he said. "That revenue (\$500,000) is only 18 percent of our budget, but if we suffer a cutback in state funds, we would not be able to reach the number of firefighters we do."

Fire Protection is doing everything it can to provide the most training for the money, Page said. The division has stationed instructors in regional areas to cut down on travel expenses.

Last year Fire Protection trained 11,520 firefighters throughout the state, 11,460 of which were trained at the Brayton Firemen's Training School at Texas A&M.

"Chances are that at least half of the firefighters in Texas have been touched by something we've done," Page said. "We may even touch those who have their own training facilities, like Houston and Dallas, indirectly through their instructors."

Although many firefighters attend programs in College Station, Page said, a lot miss out on valuable training because they can't leave their cities unprotected — especially those firefighters in small, rural, volunteer fire departments.

"We hope to be able to reach small

fire departments across the state with at least one 15-hour extension course for professional development, introducing the latest technology or whatever specialized training they need," he said. "In five years there will be 2,000 fire departments in the state — two-thirds of which will be volunteer departments."

Establishing more extension courses and fire schools in other areas where interest is indicated is a goal for TEEX, Page said.

Even though extension courses are shorter, they touch more people — people who would have to give up their vacations or take leave-without-pay from their jobs to come here for a week, he said.

Despite the oil crunch, Page said, the division's industrial program is "holding its own," and the marine firefighting program is anticipating a boost.

The boost is expected to come in the form of increased enrollment in various marine classes for training Coast Guardsmen. Under the Coast Guard's new licensing requirements, seamen are required to take additional firefighting courses, he said.

More on-board ship firefighting training for coastal cities in Texas also are planned, Page said, as well as more diversification and expansion in the handling of hazardous material.

"The Superfund requires training for anyone who works at a hazmat (hazardous material) site or anyone who might respond to one," Page said. "The engineering extension service is submitting a proposal to provide this training through its Oil and Hazardous Materials Division, and Fire Protection would provide training to the emergency personnel, and OHM would train the industrial personnel."

These requirements fall under the 1986 Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act, he said.

Page added that he hopes the expansion plans also will go beyond the borders of the state.

"Through our fee-based courses — the other 82 percent of our budget — we are not only going to reach out throughout the United States, but the whole world," he said.

"We're trying to establish continual training in Saudi Arabia and we're working to get a major petrochemical company in Egypt to train its firefighting instructors here.

"We're trying to locate municipal departments in developing nations. We're looking for sources to (financially) bring personnel from these countries to be intensively trained. Right now we're talking with a federal agency that underwrites worldwide disaster relief."

The division was able to make all these plans only after it made it past a major change in its basic structure.

In the division's first 56 years of existence, only two men served as division head: Col. H.R. Brayton and Henry D. Smith.

In February 1986, after 30 years of service, Smith retired and Page was named to replace him.

It was a difficult time, at best, for Page.

"Although I had been with the division for 16 years, I was untested as division head," Page said. "Quite frankly, some people were afraid things would fall apart. Everyone knew, liked and respected Chief Smith. They didn't know what to expect."

With the transition and professional growing pains behind him, Page said, the division can look forward to a healthy financial future only through constant improvement and self-examination.

"We can't live on our past laurels or good reputation," he said. "We have to set a track record. We have to be the first in the nation to provide the current, helpful technology."

Page said that even if the state's economic stresses aren't relieved soon, Fire Protection should escape budget cuts.

"TEEX on the whole has always had a warm reception by the Legislature because the state appropriations committee sees we're providing a valuable service and we get only a small percentage of our budget from state funds," he said. "The service we provide protects state property."

"It's to the state's advantage to provide volunteer fire departments with whatever help it can. It's to the citizens' advantage."



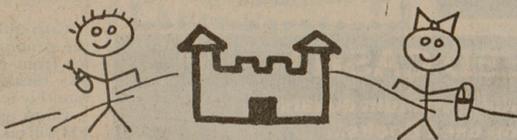
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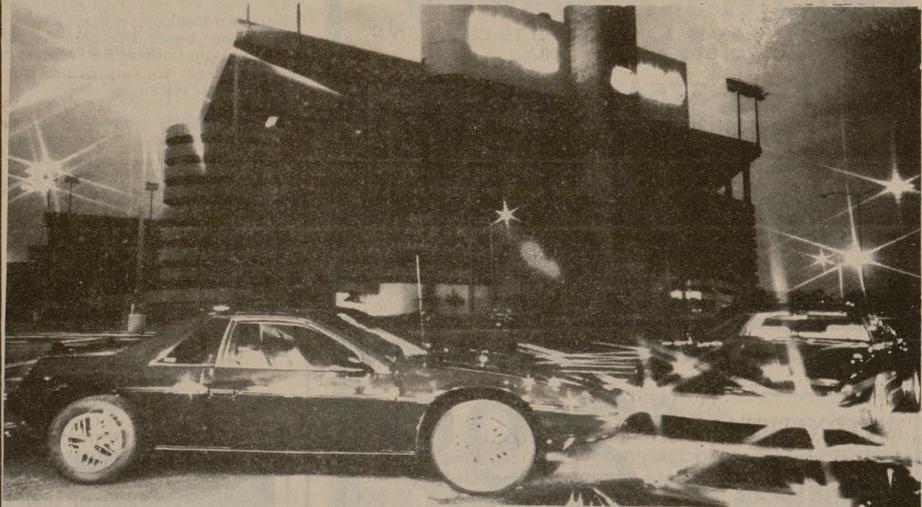
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