

New Q.C. chief moves like, well, a house afire

Summers reveling in role as town's first top firefighter

By SARAH J. BOGGAN TRIBUNE

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Van Summers was so excited about being hired as Queen Creek's first fire chief he went to work before his official start date.

"He's got that level of enthusiasm," Town Manager John Kross said. "He knew exactly what to do from day one."

Summers, on the job as the leader of the town's first fire department for three months now, came out of retirement to help build the startup Queen Creek Fire Department.

"Part of it's fun but the other part is ego," Summers, 62, said of his decision to take the job. "It's another thing to add to my pedigree chart."

He smiles and winks after that comment, knowing it's been hard work, too.

Summers is described by colleagues as warm, personable and approachable. On a recent day he made the rounds at Town Hall between meetings, popping into offices and talking with town employees.

"There's not a day that I've seen when he hasn't gone out his way to say 'hi' to you," assistant fire chief Ron Knight said. "It's genuine. You truly have his attention."

The department now has 28 firefighters and three chief officers, including Summers and Knight. The leadership of the department has about a combined 100 years of fire service experience, Summers said.

Summers, a resident of Queen Creek's planning area in Pinal County, is a 31-year veteran of fire service. He said he didn't grow up wanting to be a firefighter but took on the career as a better job to provide for his family. Summers served 23 years in the Phoenix Fire Department, and for eight years was the chief of the fire department in West Valley City, Utah.

"We've had our careers," Summers said of the department's leadership. "This is about bringing people along so we leave this in capable hands. It's not a legacy unless it keeps improving."

Kross said Summers was one of about 100 applicants from across the U.S. for the fire chief post.

"We went through an extraordinary background check and process just because of how critical this position is for this community — the first fire chief for our first municipal fire department," Kross said. "We are extremely fortunate to have somebody of Van's experience and talents to be serving as our first fire chief."

Summers said the town leadership has been supportive of his work.

"When you're building a fire department you do have a basic plan based on your experiences," he said. "But it's still trial and error. You're looking at situations day in and day out."

Some of the challenges the department faces in its infancy are the current economic situation and improving already "high quality" firefighters, Summers said.

"We understand there's going to be a different tomorrow, but we're looking for the best foundation," he said. "We're getting positioned to give the best level of service."

With between three and six calls a day, firefighters are focused on training and planning in their down time, Summers said.

He said that the firefighters need to grow and mature with the town, such as training for fighting fires in "bigbox" retail developments, something the town hasn't seen until recently.

Also among his goals for the department is community outreach. Summers said he wants the department to provide everything from health screenings to teaching people how to survive in disaster situations.



IN CHARGE: Queen Creek fire Chief Van Summers poses at the fire station near Town Hall. THOMAS BOGGAN, TRIBUNE