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West Falmouth Fire Station Faces Temporary Closures

By CARRIE GENTILE

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The West Falmouth Fire Station is closed temporarily.

GENE M. MARCHAND/ENTERPRISE

Many West Falmouth residents learned that the village's fire station was closed Wednesday, July 1, from a notice on the door of the station that read simply, "Station Temporarily Closed."

It came as a surprise to many, who took to social media voicing their dismay and confusion over the sign, considering Falmouth Town Manager Julian M. Suso had said on several occasions it would remain open and be staffed voluntarily.

In response, Mr. Suso said that the station is temporarily unstaffed, but is not closed.

“We rely on volunteers who want overtime to staff it, and in July and August, that can be hard,” he said. “Until we get the new firefighters hired and trained, it will be on a shift-by-shift basis whether the station is open.”

The voluntary overtime program with the firefighters union supplements shift staffing by two additional firefighters on each shift. In the summer, pre-approved vacations can make finding it hard to volunteers to work, Falmouth Fire Chief Michael F. Small said.

Permanently staffing the station will occur sometime between January and March of 2021, when more manpower is in place, Mr. Suso said. The department is hiring 10 additional firefighters largely as part of a \$971,507 Town Meeting override that passed in May and was approved at Town Meeting in June.

Chief Small and Mr. Suso released a statement Wednesday stating the town is offering overtime shifts every day in an attempt to increase staff from 14 to the 16 needed to open all of Falmouth’s five stations. On shifts when fewer than 16 firefighters are on duty, the West Falmouth fire station will not be staffed.

According to the statement, as of July 1 the fire rescue department is increasing the start of shift staffing from 10 firefighters to 14 firefighters and is prohibiting the deployment of an engine or ladder truck with only one firefighter. That new rule impacts the department’s ability to staff all five fire stations, according to the statement.

“Once the positions are filled, the fire department will be able to operate five stations on a consistent basis and maintain the two firefighter per apparatus minimum,” Mr. Suso said.

West Falmouth Village Association member Mary Bunker Ryther said the news is troubling.

“We continue to have concerns, especially during the busy summer season with visitors and more residents,” she said.

Through ongoing discussions with the town, Ms. Ryther said, she and other residents were aware that closures were a possibility considering it would be months before the new firefighters would be hired and trained.

“But we remained hopeful that the will of the voters through their support of the override would make a difference in keeping it open,” she said. “People strongly supported the override and there was an assumption that when it passed, it meant the station may remain open.”

Chief Small said he was able to staff the station on Wednesday night and all three shifts yesterday.

“Fingers crossed it can continue...it is the best we can do with what we’ve got,” he said. “The new staffing model will make everything we do safer across the board for the 44 square miles of Falmouth we cover.”