

A tradition: New fire truck's baptism

Fire Station 44 gets a ladder truck; mayor helps firefighters dry it off

By Dan Scanlan
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Ladder 44 got baptized Monday, but it wasn't by fire.

Instead, Fire Station 44's new 42-foot-long Pierce Enforcer ladder truck was hosed down as part of a long-standing tradition before firefighters, joined by Mayor Lenny Curry, towed it dry to be blessed by a Catholic priest.

With an average 150 runs a month and more than 140,000 miles of firefighting on the previous 10-year-old ladder truck, a new one was needed to handle a Southside district full of apartments, hotels, homes and businesses along the Baymeadows Road corridor, Station 44 Capt. James Kountz said. So he revived a tradition of baptizing a new fire truck that dates back to the 1800s when firefighters used horse-drawn steam pumps.

"When you got a new apparatus, you would invite local politicians, clergy and community members to come and you would bless it," he said. "You would give it a bath, and everybody together would push the apparatus back in. So we are carrying on that tradition with our new baby here."

As one of six aging ladder trucks replaced in the most recent fiscal year, Curry said this was a necessity. But he admitted he'd never helped baptize a fire engine.

"It is a first and it is serious stuff. These men and women put their lives on the line every day," Curry said. "When you see the priest here blessing this, it reminds us of the seriousness of what they do every

day. ... We will solve the pension so we have more money to give them the equipment they need."

Jacksonville's fire department has 58 stations with 51 engines, 12 ladder trucks and 41 rescue units, according to spokesman Tom Francis. The city's fleet management division considers a fire truck's age, mileage and cost to repair before a decision is made to replace it. That's about 10 years of use for an engine, 15 for a ladder truck and five for a rescue unit. Many things can alter that life span.

"A catastrophic event can occur at any time necessitating a prompt and ... driven need for replacement," Francis said.

The city's 2014-2015 budget included 24 new fire engines, six ladder trucks and 10 rescue units. All of the rescue units have been delivered, and all but two ladder trucks, Francis said. Ladder 44 was one of those six and will be housed at the station at 8275 Western Way.

The Rev. Greg Fay of San Jose Catholic Church and previously at Holy Family Catholic Church nearby prayed to "bless this fire truck to be the companion to sustain them on their way," before he sprinkled holy water on them. Then everybody, Curry included, pushed the truck into its new home.

"I usually bless houses, churches and babies," Fay said.

The city's 2016 budget has \$8.2 million set aside to replace 10 more rescue units, three tanker trucks and 12 engines.

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Lt. Joe Schweckendieck of the Jacksonville Fire and Rescue Department gets help from Sunny Mac Kilday, 4, as they wash a new fire truck during a ceremony to bless the new equipment Monday at Fire Station 44. A ladder truck usually lasts 15 years, a spokesman said.

Photos by Will Dickey@jacksonville.com



VIDEO

For video coverage of the fire truck baptism, see the story on Jacksonville.com.

Mayor Lenny Curry (far right) joins Father Greg Fay, pastor of San Jose Catholic Church, as Fay prays for firefighters and their new fire truck during a blessing ceremony Monday.

Area middle schoolers head to state Mathcounts

Regional math contest was held at University of North Florida on Friday

By Saphara Harrell
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Middle school students from James Weldon Johnson College Preparatory won the Mathcounts competition held at the University of North Florida on Friday.

Five-hundred-twenty "mathletes" participated in the event, put on by the Northeast Florida Engineering Society, which aims to improve students' math skills.

The top four individuals and the top six teams will represent Northeast Florida at the state competition in Kissimmee next month.

Sri Meghana Kopparthi, an eighth-grader at J.W. Johnson College Prep, won the individual category for the second year in a row. Other top winners included J.W. Johnson's Adit Saxena and Jeannie Wang and Lakeside Junior High's Kayla Herman.

Schools going to the state competition include: J.W. Johnson College Prep, LaVilla School of the Arts, Lakeside, Switzerland Point Middle School, Julia Landon College Preparatory and Duncan Fletcher Middle School.

The top four individual winners at the state tournament will go on to the nationals in Washington, D.C.

More than 6 million students across the U.S. have participated in Mathcounts competitions.

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