



THE SHELBYVILLE NEWS

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Firefighters breathe easier with air packs

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Shelbyville firefighters (from front) Dyan Current, Craig Morningstar and Dennis Bonebrake crawl through the halls of the old Wellman building during a live training drill Thursday morning. As they crawl to safety, simulated non-toxic smoke rises above them. **NEWS photo by DAYLA THURSTON**

Logan said.

On Thursday morning, several of the department's firefighters trained with the new SCBAs inside the former Wellman building thanks to the owner, Progress Parkway LLC. To make the training eerily realistic, four smoke machines (two borrowed from the Morristown Fire Department) belched out a non-toxic smoke that visually replicated a real fire — minus the 1,200-cubic feet of smoke that would accompany such a blaze.

Going into a burning building is always a daunting task, but local firefighters are now more self-assured, thanks to 30 new state-of-the-art air packs recently acquired by the Shelbyville Fire Department.

"They feel a lot more confident, a lot more safe," said Tony Logan, the department's deputy chief. "Obviously, it's new technology, so there's a learning curve, but the guys have adjusted extremely well."

The total cost for 30 new Scott NXG2 self-contained breathing apparatus — including an individually fitted facepiece for each of the department's 58 full-time firefighters — was \$240,000. The money came from Shelbyville's Cumulative Capital Development Fund, which can be used only for the city's fire and police departments, Logan said.

"Without these SCBAs, we would not be able to enter a burning structure," said Dennis Tennell, a public information officer. "In turn, we could not extinguish fires in a residence or structure, which also means we could not rescue any persons trapped in dangerous atmospheres. It would be like going fishing without a fishing pole."

The department's old SCBAs were at least 20 years old, Tennell said.

"The old ones had an elephant hose that easily collapsed," Logan said. "The new high-pressure hose that connects to the facepiece."

The new ones have a lot of safety features built into them that the old ones didn't have, he said.

For example, it was very difficult to communicate inside a smoky, burning building with the old air packs. But the new ones are equipped with an intercom system so that firefighters on a particular team can talk to one another.

Furthermore, radios are built into the facepieces that allow the firefighters to communicate with the fire command outside of a burning house.

"Our old air packs did not have that, and our communications indoors was terrible,"

For any observer who was not equipped with the special gear, a nearby person could quickly disappear into the thick disorienting haze. But the Shelbyville firefighters used one of the department's four thermal imaging cameras (valued at \$10,000 apiece), which is outfitted with a small screen on which the firefighters in the room could be seen, even though they were not visible to the naked eye.

The new SCBAs have bright green lights on the back of the equipment, so one firefighter can easily follow the trail inside a smoky building. Also, if a firefighter is hurt or falls down, his SCBA sets off an audible alarm that immediately alerts fellow firefighters.

Logan said the new SCBAs have a "heads-up" display inside of their facepieces that tell them when they are running out of compressed air. The display lets the firefighter know when they are down to 25 percent of air, plus — as an additional feature — the facepieces actually start to vibrate when air is running out.

With the old SCBAs, it was often difficult to tell whose warning device was going off. "When you are actively fighting fires, noises tend to blend together," Logan said.

During Thursday's fire, firefighters practiced what it would be like if a ceiling collapsed on a firefighter and others helped him out. They also used a "buddy breather" in which one firefighter could give another some of his air.

While the bottles of compressed air are designed to last 30 minutes with minimal activity, if a firefighter is doing intense physical labor — which would be the case in most fires — the air would last only 11 to 18 minutes, Logan said.

An air pack committee of several firefighters researched numerous brands of air packs before selecting the Scott Air Pak, Logan said.

The department has been using the Wellman building to conduct some of its live drills. And in the near future, the department will practice a live drill at an old house that was donated for a controlled burn, he said.