

# Turmoil has abated at AV Fire District

## New chief, nearly brand-new board said to be key to easing troubles

By Shelley Shelton  
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The Avra Valley Fire District heads into the new fiscal year — which began Friday — with a much rosier outlook than it has had in years.

The worst seemed behind the district after 2007, which saw hefty fines from the Industrial Commission of Arizona, the closure of two of the district's three stations, resignations of its governing board chairman and fire chief and the layoff of about half its firefighters.

But the ensuing years brought infighting between board members as well as between the firefighters' union and district administration.

In 2009, the firefighters announced a vote of no-confidence in the replacement fire chief, who was put on administrative leave and took a buyout at the end of the year.

Last year, problems persisted on the board, making it hard to accomplish much, according to the people who were there at the time.

Now, the district has had a new chief in place for a little more than a year, and just one board member remains from darker times.

The board just approved a \$3.65 million budget for this year and is waiting to hear whether it has been approved for about \$1 million in grants, said Chief Brian Delfs, who is widely credited with changing how people feel about being in the Avra Valley Fire District.

The district's website has been revamped. Record-keeping methods have changed, increasing revenue collections. The tax rate has been reduced. Plans are in the works to reopen one of the stations. There's a vehicle and equipment replacement plan in place. And the district is debt-free.

"We were close to being done" as a fire district, said board member Sara Bauer.

Board Chairman Luis Castaneda — who as a board member was the subject of a lawsuit last year that was later dropped, and is now the most senior member of the board — described the district's old direction as "being close to the bottom of a downward spiral."

"We were almost to the point of no more" fire district, he said.

Even former board member Joe Cross — who served on the board for 14 years, briefly took over as chairman after the 2007 resignation of then-Chairman Gary Perry and continued to follow the district for about six months after he moved last year — said he

couldn't believe some of the fighting he saw just a year or two ago.

A lot of it had to do with people wanting their way without realizing the district's obstacles, he said.

"Avra Valley has some very, very unique financial constraints," he said, noting it has about half the population of nearby Picture Rocks but serves a geographic area about 30 percent larger.

The district seems to be on the right track now, he said, giving Delfs credit for being a strong leader.

Bauer and Castaneda also praised Delfs, though the chief himself deflected the compliments.

"It was a matter of all of us coming together and establishing a common vision and everybody going to work to achieve that vision," he said.

He appreciates that the board now represents four different areas of the district, including Red Rock, which has historically been under- or unrepresented.

"I honestly can't say enough good things about them," Delfs said of the board. "They're asking the right questions. They're giving good direction."

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