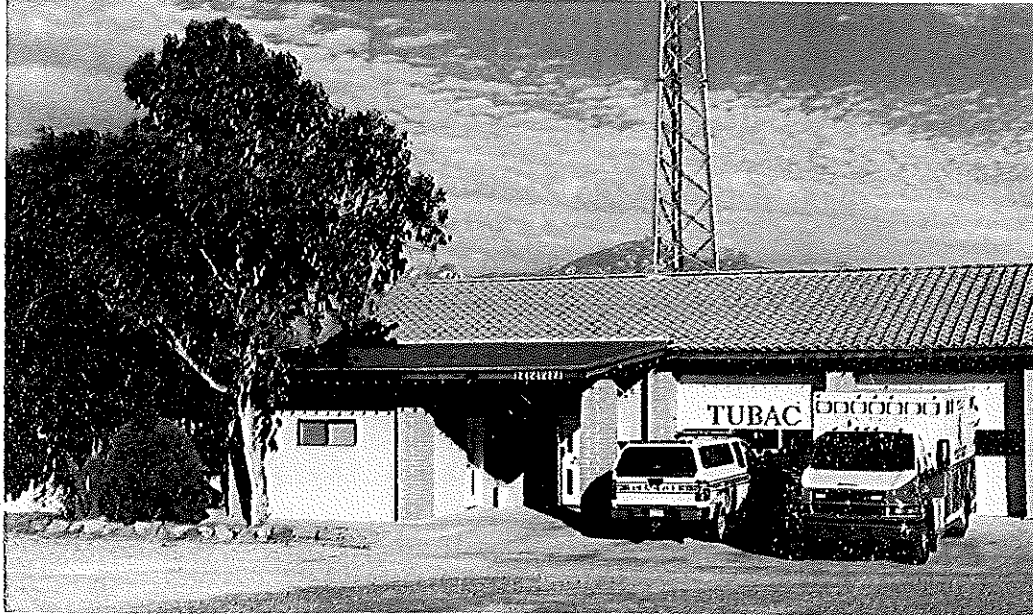


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## DIY bunks at fire station fall short

By Arielle Zionts

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In addition to being built without a living space, Chief Kevin Keeley said, the garage at Tubac Fire District Station 1 barely fits modern firefighting trucks. The building, which Keeley estimates was built in the late 1960s, doesn't have space for his office, so he is stationed in a mobile home.

Photo by Arielle Zionts

An effort by the Tubac Fire District to save money while building safer, nicer living facilities at one of its stations has run afoul of county regulation after the rooms were built without a permit or proper safety measures.

With firefighters providing the labor, the district recently converted part of the garage space at Station 1 on the frontage road in Tubac into two bedrooms accessed through an interior common space at a cost of about \$7,100.

However, the district needed to apply for a permit to build the two rooms, said Daniel Menefee, the county's chief building official. What's more, he said, he determined during a Dec. 8 visit to the station that the rooms lacked smoke alarms and a fire escape route to an outdoor area. Smoke alarms have since been installed.

"It just seemed easy, just to do the two little rooms. That's all that happened, (they) didn't put a whole lot of thought into it that life would get complicated," Menefee said, adding he was surprised the district didn't apply for a building permit or make the rooms firesafe.

In hindsight, the station should have applied for a building permit, said Fire Chief Kevin Keeley. He gave the firefighters who proposed the plan permission to build because the trailers they had been sleeping in -- once used by FEMA during Hurricane Katrina in 2005 -- were in poor condition, he said.

"We needed to do something before the floor fell through in one of the outdoor travel trailers, so we went (for it)," Keeley said, adding that it was a "huge money saving" measure to use in-house labor rather than hire a contractor.

Keeley said most of the firefighters did the construction -- which included the installation of electric wiring and an HVAC system -- while on duty, but some were paid to come in during their time off. The rooms were completed in October and each one has a bed, desk, chair, phone, intercom system, shelves, lockers and now, a smoke alarm.

The lack of a building permit and missing safety features came to light after Tubac-based freelance reporter Kathleen Vandervoet followed up on a discussion about the project at a fire district board meeting in November.

### Hindsight

The funds to build the new rooms were approved in the FY 2018 budget earlier this year, but details surrounding how they would be built weren't discussed, said board chair Mike Connelly.

"As an individual, I know that you need a permit when you remodel. Did I think that it was not going to get done? No, I did not think that," he said. "In hindsight, I wish I would have asked questions I didn't feel I needed to ask.

"It needs to be done exactly to code, exactly to fire code, exactly to building code, and at this point it appears to be very embarrassing that it has not been," Connelly said.

The chief said he is in communication with Menefee to resolve the permit and safety issues. The district won't be fined while they work on a solution, Menefee said, but added that firefighters should not sleep in the new rooms because of the safety issues.

He said the rooms, which are accessed through a conference room and built against the garage, need a window or door to an outdoor area.

"If you had a fire in the conference room, there's no way out," he said.

But Keeley said his crew will continue to sleep in the rooms because there is nowhere else for them to stay, since the inside of the trailers that previously served as a dormitory space have already been broken down. In fact, he said, the new living quarters are safer than the old ones because firefighters don't have to scramble down stairs in the dark and run into the building when a call comes in.

"It's also much quicker and it increases our response time with their proximity to the vehicles," he added.

During his Dec. 8 visit to the station, Menefee said, he found other violations in the building, such a lack of Americans with Disabilities Act-compliant parking spots, entrance and bathrooms.

"They need to upgrade that station," he said.

Keeley agreed that the station, which he estimated was built in the late 1960s, needs to be improved.

"This building, quite honestly, is inadequate for our needs," he said.

In addition to being built without living quarters, the garage can barely accommodate modern fire trucks and there is no room for Keeley's office. Instead, he works out of a mobile home next to the station.

The chief said the district is waiting for the assessed value of a bond issued prior to the Great Recession to increase so the district can build a bigger, modern station on a larger plot of land.