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Rating directly affects how insurance rates are calculated for a community



By JESSICA CRAWFORD

- Daily Leader

Many may not be aware that the performance of a specific city's fire, water and communications departments have great bearing on the fire protection premiums local insurance companies set.

The Insurance Services Office Inc. (ISO) were on hand in Liberal to rate such departments. A rating of such magnitude has not been taken since 1985, Liberal Fire Chief Kelly Kirk said. However, he added, such a drastic amount of time will not lapse between the current rating process and the next.

"In August of last year an ISO representative was here for three days and conducted a Public Protection Classification," Kirk said. "To put that more simply, it just establishes our ISO rating for the city. This process actually started back in June when Mr. Mike Cochran from ISO contacted me and advised me that he would like to do a survey."

Kirk was curious as to why the rating process had not been conducted since 1985. He said Cochran stated the time lapse was in fact the reason for the visit.

“I asked him if it was possible that we had went that long without a reevaluation? He said, ‘Yes.’ That was why he needed to come in 2009,” Kirk said. “In actuality, I wish he would have come in 2010, we would have been in a little better shape, but I think we will remedy that pretty quickly.”

Kirk was proud to announce the City of Liberal was awarded a score of four, which is an improvement of the score of five the city received in 1985.

“It is on a one to 10 scale and there is only one city with a one rating here in Kansas,” Kirk said. “Basically, if you have a one, that is essentially a perfect score. If you have an ISO rating of 10, that means there is basically no recognizable fire protection in your community. Sometimes rural areas will have a 10. So four is a score that I am proud to have, actually.

“Just looking at ISO’s Web site, there were 1,195 ratings issued in Kansas,” he added. “That puts us with 116 in Kansas rating a four or higher. So, that basically puts up in the top 116 ISO ratings in Kansas with this score.”

There are several factors involved in actually determining a city’s ISO rating, Kirk said.

“When they come out and evaluate you, they evaluate not just your fire department as far as staffing, equipment, training and where your stations are, they also evaluate your city water supply systems and your city’s communication and 911 system – your dispatch system,” he said. “Those are all given weight. Dispatch is 10 percent of the grade, fire department is 50 percent and the water department is 40 percent.”

ISO ratings drastically determine fire protection insurance premiums throughout the city for commercial and private entities, Kirk said.

“The reason for the ISO rating is the insurance companies have found that cities who take their fire protection seriously, that staff their fire department and equip their fire department, over time it is proven that they suffer less fire loss,” he said. “So, a good ISO rating score on their part with them indicates the city is serious about fire protection, therefore, the community generally has better insurance rates on home and commercial fire insurance premiums. That is the purpose of the rating.”

Kirk explained the ISO score can further aid the department in improving their performance.

“What we can do with this, we can use this as a tool for future planning and future development,” he said. “We can break this down by category and find the area where we can improve and where we can gain points. Our score this year was 65.2. The next break for an ISO of three would be a 70 percent.”

Already, Kirk said, the City of Liberal is improving their score. So next time the ISO rating process is conducted, the score is very likely to be higher.

“There were things that weren’t in place last year when we were under this evaluation that have since went into place that will add points to our score,” Kirk said. “So we are already working toward that goal. The new Rosenbauer pumper wasn’t delivered yet, as he evaluated us he could not give us credit for that 1,250 gallon per minute pumper. He evaluated us on two trucks, so we lose a few points in reserve pump capacity. Now we gain those points, so we are already earning those points on our fire department’s part.

“On the water department’s part, we spent one full day with Mr. Cochran going around town flowing hydrants,” he explained. “He picks 20 target areas and we go flow the hydrants in those areas to determine if the water supply in that area is adequate or a potential fire loss in that area. There was only one area that we came up deficient, and we weren’t horribly deficient in that area, just a little bit low. Working with Bernie and Wally at the water department, they went within like two weeks of the survey and went across the street from the hydrant that we tested and put a newer hydrant on which remedied that problem. So, we already solved that. Those are the sort of things that we area working for.”

Kirk added that even though the communications aspect of the process went down in its score,

it is actually due to a growing community rather than a faulty system.

“The communications actually went down a little bit, but that is not a function of poor equipment or anything like that,” he continued. “That is a function of Liberal growing and the number of 911 calls that they are required to handle now. The city is starting to out pace the phone lines that they have coming in and the number of dispatchers that have the ability to handle those calls. We still received a very good score in that area.”

Kirk was pleased that the effort of the city will be reflected in insurance premiums Liberal’s citizens will be asked to pay.

“What we like is we have got this survey, we made an improvement over all,” he said. “I hope that when this goes into effect in March with the insurance industry, we hope the citizens of this community will enjoy better fire insurance premiums as a result of this. It is a very positive thing. Once we feel comfortable we have gained those points, we can call for a reevaluation and perhaps move that score up from a four.”

Kirk added that cities that compare to Liberal in size such as, Garden City, Dodge City and Hayes all received a three or four rating. Kirk said this further illustrates the City of Liberal is able to hold its own in regards to other cities of similar scale.

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