

Out-of-town firefighters enjoy a weekend in Essex

BY DANIEL SCHWAB

down poles, firefighters know how to have a good time.

More than four hundred

When they're not climbing up ladders or sliding



TO THE RESCUE - Billy Mercer, right, of the Alliston Fire Department, attempts to bring a dummy out of harm's way as Trevor Holmes keeps the ladder steady during the Rescue Race of the firefighters' games behind Essex Memorial Arena Aug. 5. Each team of five members began the competition by mounting a ladder up against scaffolding, retrieving a dummy, climbing down and returning it to a designated area. Nine teams participated in the race. Alliston won with a time of just under 25 seconds. Other races included the "ladder race" and "hose replacement race."

of them from across Ontario and the U.S. brought their families to Essex last weekend for the 105th Fire Fighter's Association of Ontario convention August 4-7.

Dozens of mobile homes were packed into the campground behind Essex Memorial Arena, turning it into a sizable party that included pig roasts, loud music, makeshift horseshoe pits, hours after information-sharing sessions and certification classes had ended.

A tight schedule of three days' worth of events, including a Hootenanny with live entertainment, firefighters' games, and a parade down Talbot Street, each drew large crowds eager for a good time.

Members of the Teeswater Fire Department, located near Walkerton, also brought an inflatable pool to their campsite to cool off between events.

"It's great to be able to interact with other firefighters you don't normally get to speak to," said Brian McKeachnie, a five-year volunteer with the Teeswater department. "There's such an instant camaraderie between us, even though we come from all different areas."

Bob Jolliffe, past chief of the Port Robinson department, said he was impressed by how welcomed he felt in Essex.

"It's a cute town," the 40-year volunteer said. "All of the people our crew has talked to have been really nice, and that's important to our guys."

Two meetings also took place during the festivities, one of the FFAO executive and a general business meeting of officers.

It was decided that FFAO first vice-president John Scheeringa would be replacing Ted Droog as president of the FFAO.

The meetings also served as a forum for discussions of contemporary issues facing firefighters.

One of the biggest, says Essex Fire and Rescue Service Capt. Tom Bonneau, is that of professional services and their unions frowning on firefighters who work full-time for one department and volunteer for their hometown service, also known as "two-hatting."

"It's a major thing that (the FFAO) are trying to work out some details on and find some common ground so there's no animosity there," Bonneau said.



FLAGBEARER - A member of the County of Brant Fire Department stands at attention as fire trucks from departments across Ontario pass through downtown Essex during the equipment parade Monday morning.

The shortage of volunteers in some of the more remote communities in the province is also an issue, he added.

"It's often difficult to find people who are willing to give up a certain amount of their time for training and commitment," Bonneau said.

Thorold Fire Service volunteer Mike Egan, said, "Nowadays, for families with both a husband and wife working, there is not always enough availability to volunteer."

Egan, the father of a six-

year-old child, added that between spending time with his family and working a full-time job, fulfilling his volunteering duties is difficult, and he doesn't expect many people to be able to handle such a full schedule.

At the end of the conference, Essex Fire Chief Ed Pillon said local firefighters deserve a "tremendous amount of credit for all their work and effort in making the event such a success."

Pillon also thanked the families of local firefighters for their support.



FFAO YOUTH REPRESENTATIVES SELECTED

Sarah Milne, 18, of Mount Forest, left, became this year's Miss Ontario Firefighter during a pageant at St. Michael's High School Aug. 5. A panel of six judges chose Milne out of four potential candidates. Daniel Caille, 17, of Essex, right, was chosen as the 2006 Fire Safety Youth Representative. As the newly elected representatives, Milne and Caille will be asked to fulfill a number of community-oriented duties. Some of their responsibilities include preparing a message of safety for the next Fire Fighter's Association of Ontario conference, offering their support to muscular dystrophy programs, and assisting the FFAO in its promotion. During the pageant, each contestant was asked to answer two questions for the judges. Here, the winners ride in Monday morning's equipment parade as it travels along Talbot Street in Essex.



The ESSEX
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16 Centre Street
Essex, ON N8M 1N9
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Fax: (519) 776-4014
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