

# Augusta's Hartford Fire Station renovation, expansion, nearing completion

The \$6.37 million renovation and expansion project, delayed by months over initial projections, melds modern public safety needs with historic architecture.

BY **KEITH EDWARDS** KENNEBEC JOURNAL



Augusta Fire Chief Roger Audette talks about the bigger truck bays in new addition during a tour on Friday at Hartford Fire Station in Augusta. The station, has been renovated and expanded, and is expected to reopen in June. Kennebec Journal photo by Joe Phelan

AUGUSTA — The next time firefighters head into Hartford Fire Station — about a month from now — they'll be entering a building more than double its previous size.

Major renovation and an expansion of Augusta's nearly 100-year-old Fire Department headquarters are almost complete.

The project initially was expected to wrap up by January, but a range of problems encountered during the project delayed it. Most notably, the temperature dropped too low too soon last fall to pave the area around the garage bays that will house firetrucks and ambulances. Final paving has to wait until warm weather returns this spring.

Last year firefighters and ambulance crews moved out of the 1920 station, which overlooks the city's downtown riverfront from Rines Hill. Emergency personnel had to leave when it became unworkable to respond to calls from what had become a construction site.

The original plan was to build the station addition and move firefighters into that when completed, with contractors then completing renovations to the older section. As it became more involved and without a final coat of pavement for the heavy firetrucks to drive over, the building has remained unoccupied during the work.

Augusta Fire Chief Roger Audette talks about the fire pole during a tour on Friday at Hartford Fire Station in Augusta.  
*Kennebec Journal photo by Joe Phelan*



He said renovation to modernize and expand the cramped station had been discussed since at least around 1990. The station is, he said, ideally located to respond to emergencies in the heart of the city.

“Here we are, 30 years later, and it’s finally coming to fruition,” Audette said Friday during a brief tour of the station, as a moving crew began hauling furniture into the building. “It’s nice to think we’re finally getting there, getting in and having some room to move around the trucks, and not having to worry about hitting the doors when you’re going in and out. So many people are in close proximity to here. Operationally, this is the best place for us to be.”

The original garage bay doors of the older section of the station weren’t built with today’s larger firetrucks in mind, so some of the city’s trucks had only inches to spare on each side when backing into the station.

Now the city’s largest firetruck, its [relatively new ladder truck, Tower 1](#), won’t have to back in at all, as two of the large bays of the addition have doors on both ends. That means larger trucks can drive in one side and out the other.

The public will no longer can turn off Memorial Drive onto the short section of the former street next to the station to connect to Water Street. That section now will be gated off, with access available only to firetrucks and ambulances, which will be equipped with remote controls to open or close the gate. A sidewalk that goes alongside the site will remain accessible to the public, however.

Interior work included the addition of eight bedrooms for firefighters, who work a standard 24-hour shift but regularly work longer than that, 36 or even 48 hours, Audette said.

When he first started, Audette said, firefighters shared a group sleeping area, lacking privacy and prompting him to keep a small stack of magazines near his bed to throw at fellow firefighters if they were snoring.

The station, for the first time, now has an elevator and is accessible to people with disabilities.

Upstairs it has a large training room, equipped with connections for phone and other communications. If necessary, it would serve as the city's emergency operations center.



The new kitchen and day room, shown Friday, at Hartford Fire Station in Augusta. *Kennebec Journal* photo by Joe Phelan

It also includes a new kitchen, equipped with appliances removed from the old kitchen, and a dining area with spectacular views of the Kennebec River. A fitness room will help ambulance crew members, who in a typical shift each move about 1,200 pounds of weight, stay in shape.

The addition is heavily insulated and lighting has been replaced with more-efficient LEDs.

“There’s nothing extravagant in here,” Audette said of the renovations. “Everything is built to last and efficient.”

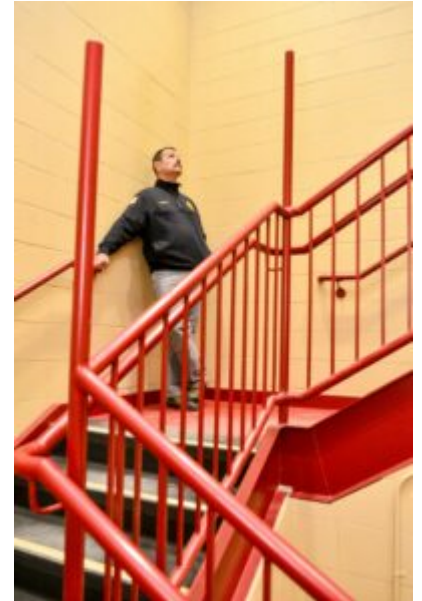
The new facility has space for cleaning and storage of firefighters’ turnout gear, separate from their living and training areas, to avoid spreading carcinogens that can accumulate while fighting fires.

“My whole career has been in this building,” he said.

Ralph St. Pierre, finance director and assistant city manager, said the budget for the project, [which voters approved funding for in 2016](#), was \$6.37 million. Of that, \$113,000 remains. He anticipates work being completed with a slight surplus, around \$75,000, but warned that in first year of operation there may be minor problems that could be paid for with some of that surplus money.

Two pieces of the project were eliminated from plans last year when it appeared the project, with them included, would run over budget.

Augusta Fire Chief Roger Audette talks about the tall corner railing poles in a stairwell during a tour Friday at Hartford Fire Station in Augusta. He said that it gives firefighters something to grab while rounding corner as they hurry



A secondary stairwell on the back wall of the building was originally going to be enclosed and made of brick, but was changed to a wrought iron set of stairs instead, saving about \$86,000.

And a plan to add a small museumlike space, featuring [the city's first motorized firetruck](#) and other old firefighting gear just inside the entrance was changed because repurposing the space would have required costly structural changes. Instead the truck and antique gear will be located in the rear of the older garage section of the building, where the public, including Scouting groups and school field trippers, will be able to view the items.

The public entrance to the building, previously on Water Street, will be moved to the back side of the building. It will be locked, but visitors — for example, people seeking fire permits — can push a button to contact someone inside who can let them in.

Audette said the renovated station's official reopening probably will occur in June.