



Architectural rendering of Drayton Valley Fire Training Academy main building designed by Daryl Prociński of Design Revolution.

On The Threshold Of Training Excellence

By **Brian Stecyk**

In 2010, Tom Thomson had a problem. As fire chief of the Drayton Valley-Brazeau Fire Department, he like many other fire chiefs, needed to send his volunteer firefighters for training. But where?

Often people returned from training with credentials but considered the time spent a waste of time. Many said they would never go again. A common complaint was that the trainers were uninspiring and boring and trainees had to spend hours and hours in classrooms.

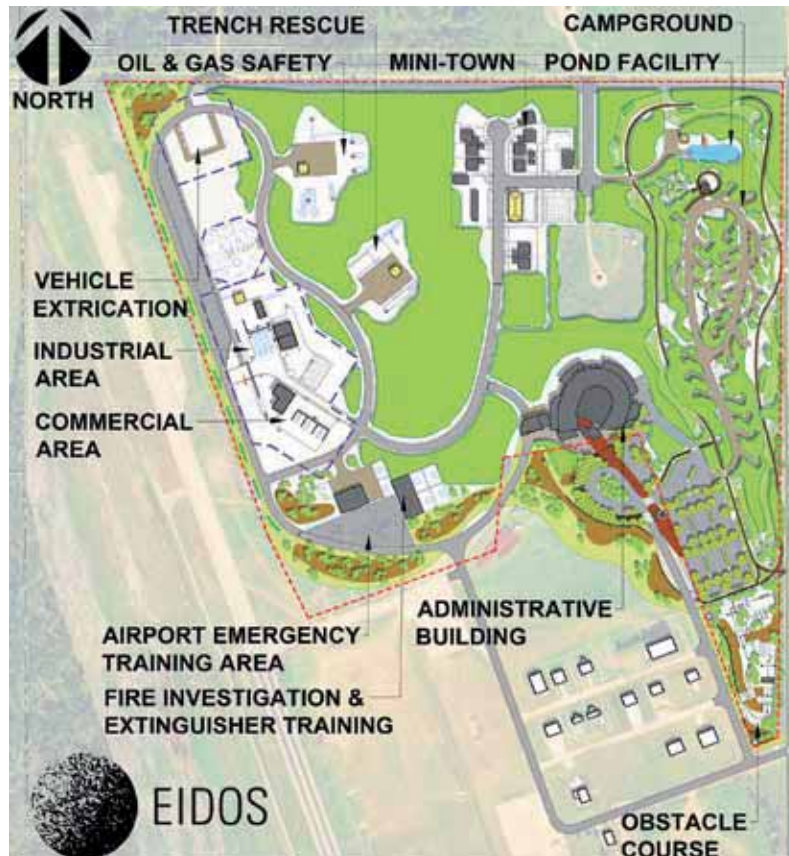
Training was also hindering the recruitment of volunteer firefighters. Although interested, most just could not afford to take time away from their regular employment to attend multi-week fire training programs.

Tom evaluated the available training programs and quickly realized that the programs mostly offered classroom instruction or field training that was essentially unrealistic.

He remembered some of the courses he had attended. "I remember going to a vehicle extrication course. It was interesting but not very realistic. The vehicles were turned



Fire Chief Tom Thomson is guiding a dream to reality.



It is a massive project with specialized training areas for almost every type of firefighter and emergency response training.

over on a flat paved surface, the weather was bright and sunny and it was mid-day. In my experience, I have never seen a vehicle flipped over in a parking lot in the middle of the day. Firefighters have to respond to roll-overs in ditches, on hills, in poor weather conditions with driving rain or snow, and most often in the middle of the night.”

Tom began to visualize how things could be different and a vision of a new kind of fire training school began to take shape. It would be a school with a primary focus on training volunteer firefighters. Instead of uninspiring classroom instruction, most of the training would be experiential. The students would be trained in re-created real life situations. They may be called into action during a snow storm or at 3:00 a.m. to respond to a motor vehicle collision. A rescue may involve a tractor-trailer rig rolled over on a hillside or a school bus on its side in a ditch. In all cases, it will be as close as possible to a real first responder experience.

“Every firefighter knows that a fire call never comes at

a convenient time or when conditions are just right,” states Tom. “Volunteers are flushed from their beds, their jobs, or their family commitments and thrust into critical emergency response situations. I believe that experience has to be duplicated in training situations. At the same time, trainers that have the ability to capture the imagination of their students and captivate them in the learning experience have to lead the way.”

In mid-April the Drayton Valley-Brazeau firefighters were participating in their annual hockey night. It didn’t go well because they got five calls during the team selection process. Calls are never convenient.

Tom’s next step was to create a team to help with the development of a different kind of training concept. With some grant help and the encouragement of the Town of Drayton Valley and Brazeau County he was able to retain out-of-the-box thinkers—Stefan Johansson of EIDOS Consultants, architect Daryl Procinsky of Design



Donated containers put in place by energy industry volunteers will soon be used as temporary facilities for live fire training exercises until our new facility is built.

Revolution and engineer Andy Heath of McElhanney Consulting. Things really began to take shape after many creative thinking sessions.

Daryl Procinsky says, “I have a passion. I love working with people and bring their dreams to life. We are so proud to have worked with Tom and his team—it was magical. As I worked to become part of them they became part of Design Revolution, the creative synergy that ensued created a truly transformation solution. Together, we created the first fully immersive experiential Learning Centre that empowers volunteer first responders. The Centre inspires interactive planning, studio testing, live challenges and forensics in every conceivable condition 365/24/7. Drayton Valley Fire Training Academy will create adrenaline-fueled problem solvers.”

Once an economic feasibility study was completed the task was to locate a suitable site for the school. The selected site was a 67-acre parcel adjacent to the Drayton Valley Industrial Airport.

When the project became publically known in the Drayton Valley—Brazeau area, Tom was inundated with positive response. The ideas and offers for help came from community and business leaders. Some requested

the project include industrial training, oil field safety training, construction safety training and rescue (trench rescue, confined space, vehicle extrication, big rig safety training, aviation fire response, agricultural industry first response, and many others).

“The immediate interest and support helped us design a training centre, that although primarily focused on volunteer firefighters, will be able to provide a wide range of other training initiatives—all with the singular thought of mind—great trainers in an experiential environment,” adds Tom.

Stefan Johansson, a partner in EDIOS Consulting, says, “Projects like this come along once in a life time. The scope of the vision and proposed facility has never been attempted before here in Alberta - possibly all of Canada. It’s a big challenge. We all know it’s not going to be easy - but we all know it’s going to be worth it!”

Choosing a name was another goal. The fire department and the community will be working together to choose a name. Several suggestions have already been considered but more discussion is necessary before a final decision is made. “We expect that to occur over the next few months,” says Tom. “In the interim, we are using a



This house came from some land the Town of Drayton Valley had purchased and rather than tearing the house down, it was moved to the training site. It will be placed in the mini town or disaster city part of the training area. It will be used from cold smoke searches, Police high risk take down scenarios, and a host of other activities.

A great reminder about the necessity of quality training.



temporary name—Drayton Valley Fire Training Academy.”

Tom says, “When students return from training, we want them to say, ‘I learned so much and it was the best training I have ever attended.’ Whether they led their own training or used the offered training we want fire chiefs to say, ‘Drayton Valley Fire Training Academy was the best facility and the greatest training venue and we will be back!’”

The Drayton Valley Fire Training Academy is working cooperatively with the Clean Energy Technology Centre in Drayton Valley. The Centre will provide administrative and training space and support until the airport site can be developed.

Some site work is underway and training structures are being constructed. It is anticipated that the first internal dry-run classes—NFPA 1001 will take place in the fall of 2016 with general classes starting in 2017.

“When we started this effort our economy was still strong. Our region is strongly dependent upon the oil and gas industry and now they are hurting, but that hasn’t stopped their community commitment. They are donating training props such as huge oil tanks, valves, and other equipment and they are on site providing needed services such as welding, land clearing, and levelling. It is a real testament to their resiliency and of how the people of Drayton Valley and Brazeau County pull together to help each other,” adds Tom.

Tom has a quotation on the wall of their fire department meeting room. It is something he believes every fire chief and firefighter should heed. “Let no man’s ghost come back to say my training let me down.”

“We are just getting started,” says Tom. “We are truly on the threshold of training excellence!”