

SOUTH WHIDBEY FIRE/EMS

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 SWFireEMS



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South Whidbey Fire/EMS facing service challenges

Additional staffing and adequate apparatus needed to respond to calls

Langley, WA – South Whidbey Fire/EMS (SWFE) responds to an average of 2,600 calls per year and relies on full-time and volunteer emergency personnel to serve 15,000 residents and another 10,000 visitors and businesses south of Mutiny Bay Road. The fire district, like others across the country, is struggling to recruit volunteers to respond to higher call volumes.

The community requires full-time personnel to respond to calls. Additionally, some of SWFE's apparatus have reached the end of their usable lives. The fire district aggressively maintains its engines and equipment, but now parts for fire engines that date back to the 1990s cannot be found.

"We want to be up front with our community," Fire Chief Nick Walsh said. "We are struggling to keep up with the demand for and costs to provide service. We need more firefighters as well as adequate equipment to respond to calls."

SWFE funds its daily operations through a fire levy capped at \$1.50 per \$1,000 of assessed property value. In 2021, voters approved a fire levy rate of \$0.95. Since then, the rate has dropped to \$0.81.

Why did the levy rate drop?

Each year SWFE is allowed to collect a set amount of revenue. State law limits SWFE to that amount plus a small annual increase approved by voters. SWFE's revenue does not increase at the same rate as property values. This means the fire levy rate falls as property values rise to limit SWFE's budget to the approved amount each year.

This is called "levy compression" and impacts SWFE's ability to provide emergency services. The fire district is considering asking voters to reset the fire levy rate, known as a levy lid lift, from \$0.81 to \$1.20 per \$1,000 of assessed property value.

A levy lid lift requires voter approval and the community will have an opportunity to provide feedback before a final decision is made by the Board of Fire Commissioners to place a measure on the ballot sometime in 2024.

"We believe it is critical for our community to understand how we are funded and the service challenges we are facing," Walsh said. "We report to you and look forward to having this important conversation."

Learn more at www.swfe.org. Fire Chief Nick Walsh also welcomes questions at 360-321-1533 or chief@swfe.org.

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South Whidbey Fire/EMS provides fire and life safety services to people on Whidbey Island south of Mutiny Bay Road. SWFE serves approximately 15,000 residents and 10,000 visitors and workers over 66 square miles. SWFE relies on full-time and volunteer emergency personnel and responds to an average of 2,600 calls per year. SWFE firefighter/EMTs are highly trained to provide services for fire suppression and prevention, EMS, technical rescue, hazardous material spills, vehicle accidents and extrication, and life safety education programs. The district operates under a balanced budget and has passed all financial and accountability audits by the state.