

WALLA WALLA COUNTY FIRE DISTRICT 5

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Walla Walla County Fire District 5 shares funding philosophy

We want our community to understand how we fund emergency services, fire chief says

Burbank, Wash. – Walla Walla County Fire District 5 provides fire and life safety services to 4,100 people over 120 square miles, operates under a balanced budget and has passed all independent financial and accountability audits. The fire district responds to an average 700 calls per year – of which 65 percent are for emergency medical service (EMS).

“Transparency and accountability are key to maintaining public trust,” Fire Chief Mike Wickstrom said. “We believe it is critical for our community to understand how we are funded. We are partners in this effort to save lives and property and we are grateful for the support.”

How emergency services are funded

The fire district’s daily operations are funded by a fire levy capped at \$1.50 per \$1,000 of assessed property value. The fire levy pays for fire suppression and 60 percent of the EMS program staffed with highly skilled paramedics who can perform advanced lifesaving care. The fire levy also pays for capital projects like replacing equipment or renovating fire stations.

Each year, the fire district is allowed to collect a set amount of revenue. State law limits the fire district to that amount plus one percent more per year. Even if property values double, the fire district can only collect one percent more. This means that the levy rate falls as property values rise to limit the fire district to the same amount of revenue per year plus that one percent increase.

This is called “levy compression” and impacts the fire district’s ability to provide emergency services.

For example, voters approved a fire levy rate of \$1.50 per \$1,000. Since then, the rate has dropped to a \$1.14 while call volumes have increased 100 percent in the last 10 years. The fire district has been able to operate efficiently for 30 years without having to raise its levy rate. This is no longer an option and the fire district is considering asking voters to raise the fire levy to \$1.38 sometime this year. The final decision will be made after a public process is conducted.

Stretching tax dollars further

The fire district applies for grants, works with neighboring agencies to share costs, and pays cash for capital projects, which saves taxpayers from having to pay more in interest. The fire district also relies on volunteer personnel, but due to the time commitment, the fire district went from 30 volunteers to seven who are active.

The fire district's funding decisions are guided by its strategic plan. The plan is approved by the Board of Fire Commissioners who are elected to represent the community's priorities. All board meetings are open to the public and meeting information can be found on the fire district's website at www.wwcfd5.org.

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Walla Walla County Fire District 5 provides fire and life safety services to approximately 4,100 people over 120 square miles. The fire district relies on seven full-time, two part-time and 12 volunteer emergency personnel who respond to an average of 700 calls per year, of which 65 percent are for emergency medical service (EMS). The fire district's firefighters are highly trained to provide wildland and fire suppression, EMS, technical rescue (confined spaces, wilderness, surface water and ice), vehicle accidents and extrication, and life safety programs.