



North Whatcom Fire and Rescue

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Fire levy lid lift to maintain emergency service response *Ballots are due by 8 p.m. on Election Day, August 6*

Lynden, Wash. – The North Whatcom Fire and Rescue Board of Fire Commissioners has placed a fire levy lid lift on the August 6, 2024, primary election ballot. The lid lift would fund additional firefighters to respond to higher call volumes, put into service another response unit for medical emergencies, and replace fire engines and apparatus that have aged out of service.

Ballots have been mailed to voters and must be postmarked by August 6, 2024, or placed in a ballot box by 8 p.m. on Election Day to count.

The fire district needs to hire additional emergency personnel to respond to higher call volumes – which have nearly doubled in the last 10 years – but revenue from the fire levy has not kept pace with the growing demand and rising cost of service.

“As a result, our fire stations are understaffed, we’re experiencing longer response times, and we aren’t equipped to handle multiple emergencies happening at the same time,” says Chief Jason Van der Veen.

Simultaneous calls occur at least 30 percent of the time, so this is a real concern. As a stopgap, NWFR relies on mutual aid from neighboring agencies, but that can take longer to reach people during emergencies – a time when every minute counts – and places additional strain on those agencies.

NWFR has a history of good financial stewardship, having passed all independent financial and accountability audits. But their costs increase four to five percent per year, with state law limiting fire districts to a one-percent revenue increase annually (or an amount approved by voters). As a result, the fire levy rate actually falls as property values rise to limit a fire district to roughly the same amount of revenue per year.

Voters approved a fire levy rate of \$1.42 in 2006. Since then, the rate has dropped to \$0.76. NWFR is asking voters to consider a \$0.34 lid lift during the August primary election to reset the fire levy rate to \$1.10 per \$1,000 of assessed property value.

If approved by voters, the revenue would fund up to eight emergency personnel over six years to respond to higher call volumes and adequately staff fire stations. More staffing means NWFR can put into service another response unit for medical emergencies, which is critical since EMS calls have increased by 50% and now account for most calls (71%).

The lid lift would additionally replace a ladder truck and three fire engines that have reached the end of their usable lives and help fund replacement of Station 63 in Birch Bay, NWFR's busiest station, to improve service reliability in the area. Learn more at www.nwfrs.net or by contacting Chief Van der Veen at 360-318-9933 or jvanderveen@nwfrs.com.

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North Whatcom Fire and Rescue provides fire and life safety services to 33,800 people over 156 square miles, including the communities of Lynden, Laurel, Blaine, Custer, Birch Bay and Semiahmoo. NWFR also serves the residents of Whatcom County Fire District 4 through a contract agreement. In 2023, NWFR responded to 5,753 calls – of which 71 percent were for emergency medical service (EMS). Call volumes have almost doubled in the last 10 years, and overlapping calls happen 30 percent of the time. NWFR operates under a balanced budget and is debt-free.