

Shape your Fire and Emergency Medical Services Future – Please VOTE!

By North Whatcom Fire & Rescue / Fire District 21 Fire Chief Jason Van der Veen and Fire Commissioner Rich Bosman

Summer is in full swing. Along with sunnier days spent outside with family and friends, we are excited about the upcoming Aug. 3 primary election. Elections matter. We are fortunate to live where citizens govern themselves. But that comes with an awesome responsibility: voting.

Voters in the [North Whatcom Fire & Rescue Service](#) (NWFR) area will have a say about the future of your fire and emergency medical services through Prop. 2021-3, the Fire Levy Lid Lift. The NWFR Board unanimously placed this measure on the ballot so voters can decide if they want to provide funds to maintain and enhance current levels of fire and emergency medical service. NWFR has not asked its voters for a levy rate increase in 12 years.

Providing our community with reliable emergency response services is our highest priority and, we believe it's also a top priority for our community. But delivering these critical services at our current standard is becoming more difficult. Population growth is increasing service demand every year, with our calls for service rising approximately 52 percent since 2011. And state law caps total property tax receipts collected by local governments to 1% more each year plus the value of new construction. Even with careful budget management and firefighters foregoing salary increases in recent years, our current service levels cannot be maintained without additional revenues.

Prop. 2021-3 would maintain and enhance services levels and improve response reliability. If approved, proposed service enhancements include:

Adding four battalion chiefs—a fire industry standard that manages crew responses, especially critical in complex incidents.

Adding four firefighters to staff a peak transport unit—to meet the significant increase in service calls, especially during peak times when NWFR is receiving multiple calls in both populated and rural areas.

Replacing aging fire engines, a ladder truck, water tenders and firefighter equipment—most of our vehicles—critical for 911 response—have exceeded their planned useful lives.

The most important question, of course, is what will this cost? If Prop 2021-3 is approved, NWFR's levy will be raised from \$1.15 per \$1,000 assessed value in 2021, to \$1.45 beginning in 2022. That increase would cost the owner of a home with an assessed value of \$400,000 an additional \$10.13 per month in 2022 for these public safety services. A home owner with an assessed value of \$600,000 would pay \$15.20 more per month in 2022.

Our residents and businesses deserve quality fire and EMS services and they expect our first responders to be safely at emergency scenes fast and to be prepared for more kinds of incidents. But the reality is current services levels cannot be maintained, and replacement of aging vehicles is not possible with revenues currently available to us. Only the voters can decide if they want to increase funds to meet existing needs.

We are not alone. To address similar financial challenges, several of our neighboring fire districts are also seeking voter approval of levy lid lifts on the August 3 election. If Prop. 2021-3 fails, NWFR will assess why voters rejected the measure and is planning to go back to voters on the November ballot.

Enjoy the summer, and please learn about the fire levy lid lift at www.nwfrs.net/levy-lid-lift/ and/or in your [Voter's Pamphlet](#). Most importantly, remember to vote on or before August 3.

Jason Van der Veen is the Fire Chief and Rich Bosman is the Vice-Chair of the Board of Commissioners for North Whatcom Fire & Rescue/Fire District 21.