



North Whatcom Fire and Rescue

1507 E. Badger Rd. | PO Box 286 | Lynden, WA 98264
360 318-9933 | www.nwfrs.net

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Date: November 15, 2023
Contact: Chief Jason Van Der Veen | 360-318-9933 | jvanderveen@nwfrs.com

North Whatcom Fire and Rescue facing service challenges

Staffing levels cannot keep up with call volumes and overlapping calls

Lynden, Wash. – Call volumes for North Whatcom Fire and Rescue have almost doubled in the last 10 years. Additionally, overlapping calls (multiple calls at the same time) happen 30 percent of the time. Last year, the fire district responded to 5,936 calls – of which 57 percent were for emergency medical service.

Revenue, however, has not kept up with the demand for and costs to provide emergency services.

“We want to be transparent with our community,” Fire Chief Jason Van Der Veen said. “We are struggling to keep up with the demand for service. We need more firefighters as well as adequate facilities and equipment to respond to calls.”

North Whatcom Fire and Rescue (NWFR) 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 residents in Whatcom County Fire District 4 through a contract agreement.

NWFR is facing several challenges to service, including:

- Emergency medical service (EMS) calls have increased by 50 percent. Emergency personnel are unavailable for as long as two hours when transporting a patient to an area hospital. This increases response times for other emergency calls during these times.
- Fire stations are not adequately staffed to respond to call volumes, which have almost doubled in the last 10 years. The fire district is too reliant on mutual aid, which takes longer to reach people in emergencies. This situation is leading to longer response times. Additionally, daily train traffic delays emergency response times for NWFR and mutual aid from other agencies.
- Station 63 in Birch Bay needs to be replaced to improve service reliability in the area, and a response unit for medical emergencies, ladder truck and three fire engines have all reached the end of their serviceable lives and need to be replaced.

NWFR funds its daily operations through a fire levy capped at \$1.50 per \$1,000 of assessed property value. In 2006, voters approved a fire levy of \$1.42. Since then, the rate has dropped to \$0.85. This is called “levy compression” and impacts the fire district’s ability to provide emergency services.

Why did the levy rate drop?

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 go up 20 percent, the fire district can only collect one percent more. This means the levy rate falls as property values rise to limit the fire district’s budget to the same amount of revenue each year plus one percent more.

The one percent revenue increase is no longer adequate to meet the emergency service needs of the community. That is why NWFR is considering asking voters for a levy lid lift sometime in 2024 to fund:

- Up to eight emergency personnel over six years to respond to higher call volumes, adequately staff fire stations, and put into service another response unit for medical emergencies
- Replacement of emergency apparatus that have reached the end of their usable lives

The fire district can pay for operational needs and most capital projects without asking for voter-approved debt, such as a bond, which costs taxpayers more in interest payments. The fire district can pay for these projects through its regular fire levy.

The lid lift would also help fund the replacement of Station 63 in Birch Bay (a bond may be needed to complete this project) to improve response times and service reliability in the area.

The fire district is considering asking voters to reset the levy rate from \$0.85 to \$1.20 per \$1,000 of assessed property value. This would be the first time in almost 20 years that NWFR has asked voters to reset the levy rate.

The \$0.35 lid lift would last six years and cost the owner of a \$500,000 home (considered average for the area) an additional \$175 per year or \$14.58 per month.

Learn more at www.nwfrs.net. Fire Chief Jason Van Der Veen also welcomes questions at 360-318-9933 or jvanderveen@nwfrs.com.

###

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 2022, NWFR responded to 5,936 calls – of which 57 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.