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'At a breaking point,' Fire District 21 seeks new levy rate

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By Nolan Baker

For the fourth time in six years, Fire District 21, also known as North Whatcom Fire and Rescue, will ask voters to approve a levy lid lift in an attempt to update aging facilities and fleets, hire more staff and adapt to a growing population.

On the Aug. 4 primary ballots mailed to voters this week is Proposition 2026-03, which seeks to authorize a property tax levy of $1.20 per $1,000 of assessed value, what the fire district calls a "restoration" of previous rates.

The current property tax rate collected for the fire district is $0.77 per $1,000 in assessed value, which costs $385 annually for a $500,000 home. The proposed rate increase, if approved, would cost that same median household $600 annually, an increase of $215.

The levy would also allow annual increases of up to 3% on the total collected revenue for the next five years.

The last time voters approved a new property tax levy for the fire district was 2006, when 64% of voters (3,254) favored the tax. That levy rate was set at $1.37 per $1,000, but has shrunk over time due to inflation, and a law capping tax revenue collection to grow by a maximum of 1% year over year.

Since then, the district has tried and failed on multiple occasions to pass levy increases, most recently in 2024, when 57.7% of voters rejected the proposal.

Meanwhile, the population of northwest Whatcom County continues growing, call volumes are snowballing, firefighters are retiring or commuting to higher paying districts, and infrastructure is aging, Fire Chief Jason Van der Veen told *The Northern Light*.

The fire district reported a 79% increase in the number of calls since 2006, and a near-doubling in volume since 2014, from just over 3,000 calls annually to eclipsing 6,000.

Now, 30% of calls "overlap," meaning a station could be responding to two emergency calls at once, with only three people on staff in each of the three stations.

Van der Veen said that with the intense volume of calls, the fire district regularly relies on neighboring districts in Ferndale and Lynden to respond to calls, usually on a weekly basis.

“When we’re four or five calls deep in the western and central side of the district, we’ve just used up all our resources,” Van der Veen said. “That’s OK to do from time to time, but it’s not sustainable for those (other) districts either.”

Infrastructure of the fleet and station facilities are also aging, and the cost of replacement is only growing, Van der Veen said. According to data from the fire district, of the 35 total vehicles in the fleet, 16 have exceeded their recommended service life.

A new ladder truck that cost less than $400,000 in 2006 now runs north of $1 million. Supply costs have increased and diesel has nearly doubled in price in the two decades since the last voter-approved levy.

If the levy is approved, part of the new revenue would go toward hiring — the current vacancy rate is at 10%, higher than Van der Veen said he would like — and staffing Station 62 in Semiahmoo, which hasn’t been fully staffed since the mid-1990s.

“If the levy doesn’t pass, I have a number of young firefighters that will look for opportunities in other places,” Van der Veen said. “That’s based on several things. One is public support, and second is that they can drive two hours to King County and make a lot more money.”

Van der Veen said firefighters can make up to $20,000 more annually working in King County, and it's common for firefighters to make the long commute. Another goal with the possible revenue increase is to maintain current service levels at the three staffed stations in Birch Bay, Blaine and Laurel, Van der Veen said.

“I want voters to know that the reason we’re in this spot is not because of our employees,” Van der Veen said. “The reason we’re in this spot is because the last approved levy rate was in 2006 and it hasn’t been adjusted since then. We’ve done everything possible to extend our dollars, but we are just at the breaking point.”