

The Northern Light

Blaine and Birch Bay's Community Newspaper

Fire District 21 levy passes, 2 candidates with Blaine ties advance to November

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By Kie Relyea

After three failed attempts, Fire District 21 has convinced voters to increase their property taxes so the district can afford to update or replace aging buildings and equipment, hire more employees and meet the fire and emergency services needs of a growing population.

In other races, two Blaine School board members will advance to the November election, one vying for a state Senate seat and the other to be Whatcom County's top prosecutor.

As for Fire District 21, the measure it put before voters passed with 52.16% in approval, or 6,170 yes votes, and 47.84% in opposition, or 5,660 no votes, as of the last count released on Friday, Aug. 7.

This election marked the fourth time within six years that the district, also known as North Whatcom Fire and Rescue, has asked voters to approve what's known as a levy lid lift.

"We're pleased with the outcome and thankful for everyone that voted, that took part in the process," Fire Chief Jason Van der Veen said.

"It was an election where we asked people to consider raising their taxes and we understand the gravity of that," he said.

The measure is the first levy rate increase for the district in 20 years.

It will allow the district to collect up to \$118.6 million during the six-year levy by raising property tax rates from 77 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value to \$1.20.

That means the owner of a home valued at \$500,000 will pay \$600 annually, an increase of \$215 from the lower rate.

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

Having more funding will allow the fire district to prioritize:

- Replacing and modernizing aging apparatus and equipment more frequently.
- Modifying Birch Bay Station 63.
- Hiring more people to allow for the reopening of Station 62 in Semiahmoo, which has been vacant.

“This certainly will over time bring the department to a new level, to allow us to serve the community so much better,” Van der Veen said.

The district serves 33,800 people in a 156-square-mile area that includes Blaine, Birch Bay, Custer, Lynden and Laurel.

About 72,309 ballots were cast across Whatcom County in the Aug. 4 primary election, making for a turnout of 42%, according to elections officials.

Because this election is a top-two primary, the two candidates with the most votes advance to the November general election, regardless of party affiliation.

Here are the results for other races.

2nd Congressional District

Rep. Rick Larsen (D-Everett) will advance to the November general election against challenger Edwin Feller (R-Lynden).

Larsen received 36.08% of votes, or 25,832, while Feller garnered 35.17%, or 25,184 votes.