

CASCADIA **DAILY** NEWS

Whatcom Fire gets a 'yes' to levy lid lift

Voter approval means staff at Semiahmoo station, safety upgrades at Birch Bay station

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North Whatcom Fire & Rescue's Station 63 on Birch Bay Lynden Road was built in 1981 and has seen minimal improvements since then. The district received voter approval for a levy lid lift in August's primary election and some of the increased revenue will go to rehabilitating the station. ([Santiago Ochoa/Cascadia Daily News](#))

By [Julia Tellman](#) Local News Reporter

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Residents served by North Whatcom Fire & Rescue will see some changes in coverage now that the fire district's levy lid lift looks primed to pass.

The results were too close for comfort on primary election night, Aug. 4, but by the end of the week, Fire Chief Jason Van der Veen could breathe a sigh of relief: More than 52% of voters had [given the levy lid lift the OK](#).

It was a change of circumstances after district voters rejected three similar ballot measures between 2021 and 2024, as well as an earlier proposition in 2008.

Van der Veen credited a group of community members who helped spread the message about the district's needs.

"They helped organize more outreach and helped give the district more opportunities to speak to the public directly," he said. "They were force multipliers."

Van der Veen said he has heard from constituents about their homeowner insurance rates doubling or even tripling because of degradation of services or distance from a staffed fire station.

"We were able to talk face-to-face with more people who have been affected by the slow decline of services," he said.

North Whatcom, formally known as District 21, has [struggled for years](#) to keep up with rising costs and growing demand.

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The district covers 156 square miles and serves 33,800 people, including the communities of Blaine, Custer, Laurel, Birch Bay, Semiahmoo and unincorporated parts of Lynden. The district also has a contract to serve residents of District 4 along the north shore of Lake Whatcom.

In 2006, North Whatcom voters approved a fire levy rate of \$1.37 per \$1,000 of assessed property value. Since then, the district's levy rate has dropped to \$0.77 per \$1,000, even as calls for service have increased exponentially.



The Station 63 announcement board keeps track of all emergency calls made in the area in July. ([Santiago Ochoa/Cascadia Daily News](#))

The district has drawn down its reserves by \$1 million per year for basic operational needs, and firefighters chose to forego a 2026 wage increase because of the tight budget.

Following the election, the rate will be restored to \$1.20 in 2027. The district is authorized to increase its levy by up to 3% annually for the next five years.

Van der Veen said he's been telling employees: "This is fantastic for the district's future but we need to temper our expectations.

"The 2026 budget is set; 2027 will be an infrastructure rebuilding year when we address deferred maintenance, station needs, IT upgrades, and in 2028 we'll start to see big improvements," he continued.

A significant change residents will see is an operational Fire Station 62 in Semiahmoo. The station has mostly remained empty since it opened in 1995, and during emergencies, residents of Semiahmoo have relied on stations in Birch Bay and Blaine that are 6 to 7 miles away. Van der Veen anticipates the station will be fully staffed with three firefighters, an engine and an ambulance in the next 12–18 months.

Another priority is rehabilitating Fire Station 63 in Birch Bay. The 46-year-old station has seen minimal upgrades since it was built; refurbishment is expected to cost around \$5 million.

The district has lost three firefighters to occupational cancer-related deaths since 2006 — John Snobody, Leslee Smith and Shaun Ward — and all those staff members spent significant time in Station 63.

"It's a project that will enhance our response to the public as well as the health and safety of our employees," Van der Veen said.

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