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NEWS

'Pivotal vote' to decide future of SKFR

Chief: More firefighters, stations needed, not less

By Elisha Meyer Port Orchard Independent • July 12, 2023 1:30 am



A firefighter works the hose during a training exercise for South Kitsap Fire and Rescue. Elisha Meyer/Kitsap News Group Photos

Fire districts often use firefighter training exercises as a way to refine skills and encourage teamwork.

For South Kitsap Fire & Rescue, it also demonstrates what its leaders say is a need to increase staffing and reopen fire stations, both obstacles the district hopes to hurdle in the August primary election.

Staffing has been a consistent issue for the district that is seeing its population continue to grow while maintaining similar staffing levels from over a decade ago. The number of EMTs and paramedics, 19 in 2013, has remained the same while call volume increased to 12,708 in 2022.

Fire chief Jeff Faucett said that response times have suffered as a result. "Our goal over the next six or seven years, whatever that looks like, is to get three people in our fire engines," he said, "so that when a fire engine shows up, they can do work and not have to wait" for up to 10 minutes for help.

Such a need was showcased in training June 28. Firefighters were faced with a simulation of a fire and victim rescue. The timed response from the first go-round when two people occupied the engine was clocked from arrival to entry at around five minutes, given the personnel had to wait for a second engine. The second exercise which had the first responding engine occupied with three firefighters, reduced that time in half.

Division chief Jon Gudmundsen said that current staffing doesn't allow for all engines to have that three firefighters. "What it does is it slows this process down because we have fewer people to get the rig loaded, and then the calls keep coming," he said.

The district attempted to address these problems but in 2022 51.46% of South Kitsap voters rejected the proposition for a levy lid lift of 29 cents, which would have brought it to its original cap of \$1.50 per \$1,000 in property valuation.

It's a loss that the fire chief said came down to a lack of accurate information, but more so about the lack of community immersion. "We weren't in the community," he admitted. "Your fire department is much more than just fire and EMS. I mean, our goal, one of our core values, is to prevent emergencies."

The district is attempting to improve communication with the public this year. After SKFR commissioners voted to renew the levy to \$1.50 per \$1,000 it has hosted a number of town halls and firefighter-sponsored events.

The public seems more supportive this time — recently highlighted by a large crowd waving green signs toting the message, "Your fire department needs you!"

However, supporters realize the topic still has challenges at the polls. "I have a sticker for it. I'm all in," said Denise Kulak, 22. "But I'm not sure if the attitude around it has changed."

As it was last year, the levy has a written statement against the measure provided by the South Kitsap Citizens Demanding Responsible Taxation. Its chairperson, Jeff Daily, describes the levy as nothing more than a cash grab for a district spending far too much on salary increases for leadership. Rather than taxpayers paying more, he argues in favor of consolidation with surrounding fire districts.

"The goal of combining the fire districts in 2004 was abandoned as no one wants to give up their chief's job," he said. "Millions could be saved. Since every fire department has multiple agreements with local fire departments to respond if they can't, no one is going 'uncovered'."

Furthermore, Daily blames the slow response times on the agency itself. "The SKFR says response times are down but they are the ones giving out free transportation to hospitals and then sitting 'out of position' when they do it—self-induced problem," he said.

Faucett fears the district will face staffing cuts and closures of fire stations if the measure loses again. "This is a pivotal vote," he said. Jobs "would eventually be at stake, and our agency knows that. I'm not a doom and gloom guy, but it's a reality."

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