



# PORT ORCHARD INDEPENDENT

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## Bremerton to vote on public safety tax increase

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*Port Orchard Independent*

Voters in Bremerton can mark their calendars for Aug. 1, a day they will be tasked with the decision to approve or reject a property tax increase designated for the funding of 17 new positions in the city's police and fire departments.

The decision to add the public safety levy lid lift to the primary ballot was approved by the Bremerton City Council April 19 following presentations from both safety

departments and public comment.

If approved, the city's property tax rate would rise by 40 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value, bringing that total tax to \$1.87 per \$1,000. Funds collected from the increase would total a projected \$2.3 million annually to fund the addition of nine positions for the fire department and eight for the police department, along with coinciding equipment and training.

Bremerton fire chief Patrick McGanney cited

that along with Bremerton's population growth in the past decade, there has also been a significant increase in call volume. The combination of the department's minimum staffing of 14 front-line firefighters and a 2022 call volume of over 10,000 gave each firefighter an average of 757 calls responded to last year.

"We do need help," added Craig Patti, president of Bremerton Firefighters union and a captain in the fire department. "The system is stressed, and it's due to the commitment of

the firefighters and police officers out on the street responding to those calls that the system hasn't broken yet."

Police gave the same low staffing concerns, with chief Tom Wolfe saying with 64 officers and a population of over 45,000, they only had 1.4 officers per 1,000 residents. Comparatively, the department with 66 officers had an average of 1.8 per 1,000 in 2007, when the population was 35,000.

"One of the things we want to make clear is, with the police ask, we're not

asking for more," Wolfe said. "We're asking to get to a baseline level that is sustainable, and we believe is functional to provide the services that our citizens deserve."

While several in attendance gave their support for a vote on the matter, concerns on the survivability of the fire department were also voiced. Mike Simpson of Bremerton asked whether the council would resume consideration of consolidation with surrounding fire districts if the levy fails.

"We love our heroes, and we want to make sure they get funded," he said, "but we've got to remember that in the city right now, if there's one residential fire, and we deploy all of the folks that are currently assigned to duty, we still have to bring in an outside agency to help out."

Bremerton voters last approved a property levy lid lift in 2015, which provided funds for fire station renovations and the acquisition of new fire engines and ambulances among other equipment.