

SOUTH WHIDBEY FIRE/EMS

5579 BAYVIEW ROAD
LANGLEY, WA 98260

WWW.SWFE.ORG
360-321-1533

 SWFireEMS



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Contact: Fire Chief Nick Walsh | 360-321-1533 | chief@swfe.org

Fire levy lid lift on August primary election ballot

Ballots are due by 8 p.m. on Election Day, August 6

Langley, Wash. – The South Whidbey Fire/EMS Board of Fire Commissioners has placed a fire levy lid lift on the August 6, 2024, primary election ballot. The lid lift would fund additional firefighters to reduce response times and replace fire engines and apparatus that have aged out of service.

Ballots have been mailed to voters and must be postmarked by August 6, 2024, or placed in a ballot box by 8 p.m. on Election Day to count.

SWFE relies on both full-time and volunteer personnel to provide fire and emergency medical services, but the district is struggling to recruit and retain new volunteers to respond to calls.

“We need to hire more full-time firefighters to keep up with rising call volumes and reduce response times,” says Chief Nick Walsh. “Our community requires both full-time and volunteer firefighters to maintain the level and quality of our emergency response.”

Additionally, some fire engines have reached the end of their usable lives and must be replaced. The district responsibly maintains its apparatus and emergency equipment, but parts for fire engines that date back to the 1990s cannot be found.

SWFE has a history of good financial stewardship, having passed all independent financial and accountability audits. However, revenue from the fire levy is not keeping up with demand for and costs to provide services.

Voters approved a fire levy rate of \$0.95 in 2021. Since then, the rate has dropped to \$0.81. With costs increasing four to five percent per year, the fire levy is not keeping pace with current costs to provide service. SWFE is asking voters to consider a \$0.39 lid lift to raise the fire levy from \$0.81 to \$1.20 per \$1,000 of assessed property value.

State law limits fire districts to a one-percent revenue increase annually (or an amount approved by voters). As a result, the fire levy rate actually falls as property values rise to limit a fire district to roughly the same amount of revenue per year.

If approved by voters, the additional revenue would hire more full-time firefighters which would staff a third station in the southeast part of the district. This would decrease response times for fire and EMS calls to 10 minutes or less on average, down from the current average of 15 minutes. Every minute counts to improve save rates for fire and medical emergencies.

The lid lift would also fund firefighter training programs and replace aging fire engines and equipment to ensure service reliability when responding to calls. Learn more at www.swfe.org or by contacting Chief Walsh at 360-321-1533 or chief@swfe.org.

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South Whidbey Fire/EMS provides fire and life safety services to people on Whidbey Island south of Mutiny Bay Road. SWFE serves approximately 15,000 residents and 10,000 visitors and 533 businesses over 66 square miles. SWFE relies on full-time and volunteer emergency personnel and responds to an average of 2,600 calls per year. SWFE firefighter/EMTs are highly trained to provide services for fire suppression and prevention, EMS, technical rescue, hazardous material spills, vehicle accidents and extrication, and life safety education programs. The district operates under a balanced budget and has passed all financial and accountability audits by the state.