



Snohomish County Fire District #4

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Snohomish County Fire District 4 Shares Funding Philosophy

"We want our community to understand how we fund emergency services," fire chief says

Snohomish, Wash. – Snohomish County Fire District 4 provides fire and life safety services to 32,000 people over 60 square miles, operates under a balanced budget and has passed all independent financial and accountability audits. Last year the fire district responded to almost 4,500 calls, of which 66 percent were for Emergency Medical Service (EMS).

"Transparency and accountability are key to maintaining public trust," Fire Chief Don Waller said. "We believe it is critical for our community to understand how we are funded. This is a partnership to save lives and property and we are grateful for the support."

How emergency services are funded

The fire district's daily operations are funded by a fire levy capped at \$1.50 per \$1,000 of assessed property value. EMS is funded by a separate levy capped at \$0.50 per \$1,000. Both levies are paid through property taxes.

Fire Chief Waller said a common misconception is that revenue for the fire district increases annually by the same amount as assessed property values. That is not the case. State law limits fire districts to a one percent revenue increase per year. This means fire levies fall as property values rise to limit fire districts to that one percent revenue increase per year (or any voter-approved increase).

For example, voters approved a fire levy rate of \$1.50 per \$1,000 in 2017. Since then, the fire levy rate has dropped to \$1.14 per \$1,000. This is called "levy compression" and impacts a fire district's ability to provide emergency services as call volumes increase.

Since 2017, call volumes have increased by 13.4 percent for the Snohomish community due to growth and an aging population. Fire District 4 is considering asking voters to return the fire levy to \$1.50 per \$1,000 sometime in 2023. The final decision will be made after a public process is conducted.

Stretching tax dollars further

The fire district applies for grants and works with neighboring agencies to share costs. It also funds capital items – like stations and emergency apparatus – through its regular fire levy. Many fire districts fund stations and emergency apparatus through voter-approved bonds, which costs taxpayers more due to interest payments.

“This policy has been in place long before I came to Fire District 4,” Fire Chief Waller said. “This financial stewardship is part of the reason I wanted to be here.”

The fire district’s funding decisions are guided by its strategic plan. The plan is approved by the Board of Fire Commissioners who are locally elected to represent the Snohomish community’s priorities. All board meetings are open to the public and meeting information can be found on the fire district’s website.

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Snohomish County Fire District 4 provides fire and life safety services to 32,000 people over 60 square miles. The fire district relies on full-time and part-time emergency personnel and volunteer chaplains who responded to almost 4,500 calls in 2022, of which 66 percent were for Emergency Medical Service (EMS). The fire district’s firefighters are highly trained to provide quality emergency services including fire suppression and prevention, EMS, water rescue, hazardous material spills, auto extrication and life safety programs.