

Graham Fire & Rescue to Place Levy on August Ballot April 16, 2014

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Graham Fire & Rescue to Place Levy on the August Ballot

GRAHAM, WA – Fire Chief Ryan Baskett announced today that Graham Fire & Rescue will be placing a four year, \$2.75 million per year maintenance and operations levy on the 2014 August ballot for citizens to consider.

Graham Fire has seen a decrease in assessed valuation of property in excess of 20% since 2008, which equates to a 20% decline in tax revenue used to operate the District. Fire Districts have no ability to increase the rate of tax collection without a vote of the people.

During the same time period, calls for service have increased more than 14% with a projected 3-6% annual increase. “We are tasked with protecting 61,000 citizens and running over 16 calls a day with just 11 firefighters and paramedics as our minimum daily staffing,” Chief Baskett said.

The District has attempted to avoid layoffs and reductions in services during the economic downturn by not replacing personnel who left through attrition, reorganized the administration of the department to put more people on the streets, cutting costs, employee concessions and depleting reserves down to the State Auditor recommended minimum level.

The new Thrift fire station originally staffed 85% of the time is now staffed less than 25% of the time. Overtime costs are up and mutual aid assistance from neighboring districts is out of balance and cannot be continued. Response times are getting longer, a warning sign the District can no longer adequately cover the calls for service. With these reductions and increased alarms, services to the citizens are being impacted.

The District organized a Citizens Advisory Group to review the state of the District and make a recommendation to the Board of Fire Commissioners. The group reviewed financials, response data, future call volume projections, staffing needs and current infrastructure costs.

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The group unanimously recommended placing a maintenance and operations levy on the ballot at a rate of \$2.75 million per year. “I ask that you put this on the ballot for the citizens to decide,” said Ryan Portmann of the citizen group.

If the measure is approved, the Fire District will hire 16 additional firefighters and paramedics. The increased staffing will allow 24/7 staffing of the Thrift station providing much needed coverage to the east side of the District while keeping other units in their response areas. Two additional response units will be on the road daily, one of which will be a transport ambulance. These increases will allow Graham Fire to meet the current response needs of the community and reduce their dependency on mutual aid assistance.

Graham Fire & Rescue does not want to live on this excess levy forever. Based on the recent economic growth rate it will likely take more than 10 years to recapture the lost tax revenue, but as tax assessments rise and more homes and businesses are built the levy rate will continue to decline. “Eventually, we want to be fully funded back on normal tax collections,” Baskett said.

If the levy is not approved, the current trend of decreased staffing, longer response times and fewer units to respond to calls will continue. Funds for fire station and fire engine repairs will not be readily available and the department infrastructure will eventually deteriorate.

“This is a decision for the citizens. They will tell us what level of service they wish us to provide,” Baskett said. “Either way, Graham Fire & Rescue will continue to provide the best possible service with the funds given to us by the community.”

Facts about the levy are available at www.grahamfire.org or can be obtained by calling the headquarters fire station at 253-847-8811.

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