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East Pierce Fire and Rescue Seeks Budget Options

Bonney Lake, WA— East Pierce Fire and Rescue has applied for a Federal grant to address staffing shortfalls. If awarded, the SAFER Grant would allow the department to hire nine entry-level firefighters. According to East Pierce Fire Chief Bud Backer, even with the additional firefighters, the fire district will remain understaffed. “The nine firefighters represents less than one third of the firefighters we need to be fully staffed,” Backer said.

The fire district applied for the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response Grants (SAFER) through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). According to FEMA, the grant was created to provide funding directly to fire departments and volunteer firefighter interest organizations in order to help them increase the number of trained, “front line” firefighters available in their communities. The SAFER grant assists the local fire departments’ abilities to comply with staffing, response and operational standards established by the National Fire Protection Agency (NFPA) and the Office of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

If approved, the matching grant would cover 75 percent of the cost in the first year, and then reduces over the next two years. East Pierce is responsible for the entire employee cost beginning in the fourth year.

Backer is hoping that the SAFER Grant will help the fire district hire additional firefighters to meet the growth in both the number of alarms and the increase in population for the area served by East Pierce, including Bonney Lake, Sumner, Lake Tapps, Tehaleh, South Prairie, Edgewood, Milton and the ridge communities—a total of 153 square miles. In 2016, the East Pierce firefighters responded to a record 10,236 alarms—an increase of nearly 19 percent over the past five years.

“Funding a fire district is both complicated and simple at the same time,” said Backer. “Fire districts are limited to the funding sources available by state statute. Any taxes that a fire district collects are property based in nature.”

There are few other options for fire districts to raise the necessary funds to do their job. “Fees for emergency medical transports make up close to 10 percent of our revenue, with the other one percent from miscellaneous intergovernmental charges,” Backer said. “We don’t have other taxes such as Sales, B & O, Utility, and REET that are used by other county or city entities.”

East Pierce collects a voter-approved Fire Protection Levy of \$1.50 per \$1,000 of assessed property value (AV), plus an Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Levy of \$0.50 per \$1,000 of AV, for a total of \$2.00 per \$1,000 AV. “These two levies make up 89 percent of our revenues,” Backer notes. “We could have an additional Maintenance

and Operations Levy or a Benefit Charge, but for now, we do not use either one those. Compared to the 12 fire districts in suburban Pierce County, we rank 10th in tax collection rate. The top fire district collects at a rate of \$1.37 more than we do,” he said.

One of the challenges is a state law that limits most local governmental entities to a one percent annual increase in property tax growth, preventing the district from collecting the full voter-approved tax rate. If there is a large increase in property values, East Pierce is limited to the one percent increase, unless voters reset (or lift) the levy lid.

Last year, East Pierce ran a “lid lift” to return the EMS Levy to voter-approved levels of 50 cents per \$1,000. This year, the Fire Protection Levy hit the one percent limitation, decreasing the collection rate from \$1.50 to \$1.38 per \$1,000 AV. This reduced our available revenues by more than \$1.3 million dollars. “That is a big reduction for us. Although we will receive one percent more than last year (plus new construction), it doesn’t keep up with the cost of doing business—and it’s nowhere near what is needed to add staffing to address our operational shortcomings,” said Backer.

The fire district should hear if they are awarded the grant by the end of September. “If you’d like to help, please contact your U.S. Senator and Representative and ask them to support East Pierce Fire and Rescue’s application for a SAFER Grant,” Backer said.

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