



MERGER: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS



In March of 2021, commissioners of Port Ludlow Fire & Rescue (PLFR) recognized the need for a array of management services and reached out to East Jefferson Fire Rescue (EJFR). Talks resulted in the creation of a Fire Management Interlocal Agreement. The arrangement allows PLFR to offset some of the costs associated with meeting needs in-house. This temporary agreement is one of several efforts by EJFR and PLFR to improve efficiencies to maintain or improve service levels while costs rise at rates beyond revenue increases allowed under state law. The proposed merger, if approved, will make these efficiencies permanent. The districts, whether together or separate, will have to ask voters in the future to lift the fire levy lid in order to meet the demands of inflation and maintain current levels of service. Fire commissioners from both districts voted in July to put the merger question on the November 2022 ballot.

HOW WILL THE MERGER IMPACT

MY COMMUNITY'S EMERGENCY SERVICES?

The current Management Services Interlocal Agreement, has allowed for a battalion chief on-duty who manages routine surges in 911 calls across both districts. The battalion chief then shifts resources between districts when multiple calls occur in order to optimize response to the community's needs.

As a result of the cooperative efforts, both districts have increased minimum staffing during the past year. A merger will make this permanent, increasing the combined daily staffing and growing the depth of recall for volunteers and off-duty members in the event of major incidents.

HOW WILL THE MERGER AFFECT PERSONNEL?

Both districts have lost valuable employees to larger agencies that can provide more opportunities. The merging of our two small fire districts will create a larger organization that has the capacity to focus on our most precious resource — our people.



WILL MY PROPERTY TAXES INCREASE WITH THE MERGER?

Fire districts submit their tax levies in the fall before the new budget year. So, if the merger is approved by voters in November 2022, it will go into effect in January 2023 and the merged district will operate that first year on the combined revenues levied separately. Both district's levy rates are among the lowest in the region. As of August 2022 the projected 2023 rates for EJFR are \$.85, and for PLFR \$1.02 per \$1000 of assessed value. Whether merged or operating as individual agencies, these low levy rates will no longer be sufficient to maintain current levels of service in 2024. Commissioners in both districts are developing plans to ask voters to approve a levy lid lift, likely in early 2023.

Inflation is especially high now but has averaged 2.48% over the past 10 years. State law prevents fire districts from increasing their levies more than 1% annually without voter approval. As assessed valuations rise, levy rates decline to keep revenue increases under the 1% cap.

WHAT HAPPENS IF THE MERGER FAILS?

If the merger proposal fails, both districts will need to reassess their 2023 budgets and make decisions, immediately reducing expenditures until their respective levy lid lifts can be approved by voters. The temporary management services agreement will end; while very effective, it is also labor-intensive as district leaders manage two staffs with two budgets overseen by two boards of commissioners. PLFR, without access to EJFR's administrators, would need to recruit for a fire chief and assistant fire chief at a cost of nearly \$350,000 a year. The battalion chief's daily management of PLFR resources would be eliminated as would other efficiencies that have resulted from the management services agreement.

NEED MORE INFO?

See the districts' websites at www.plfr.org and www.ejfr.org.
Contact EJFR Fire Chief Bret Black at (360)385-2626 or bblack@ejfr.org.