



## Walla Walla County Fire District #4

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### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **Walla Walla County Fire District 4 facing service challenges**

*Revenue is not keeping up with costs to provide emergency services*

Walla Walla, Wash. – Walla Walla County Fire District 4’s call volumes have been on the rise – increasing by 30 percent from 2018 to 2022. Calls for emergency medical service (EMS) are also increasing and now account for 68 percent of all emergencies.

Revenue, however, is not keeping up with the demand for and costs to provide service.

“We want to be up front with our community,” Fire Chief Rocky Eastman said. “We require additional emergency personnel to respond to increased fire and medical emergencies. We also need to make station improvements and replace some apparatus to improve response times and ensure service reliability.”

Walla Walla County Fire District 4 (Fire District 4) provides emergency services to 9,250 people over 125 square miles in the unincorporated areas west, south, and east of the cities of Walla Walla and College Place, and the Port of Walla Walla Regional Airport. In 2022, emergency personnel responded to 1,104 calls, a 30 percent increase since 2018.

### **How we fund emergency services**

Fire District 4’s daily operations are funded by a fire levy capped at \$1.50 per \$1,000 of assessed property value. The fire levy accounts for almost 60 percent of the budget. The fire levy also helps fund EMS (Basic and Advanced Life Support and ambulance transports), which is partially funded through a countywide levy capped at \$0.50 per \$1,000. The county EMS levy is not adequate to fund the district’s EMS program. EMS calls account for 68 percent of all emergencies.

In 2003, Fire District 4’s fire levy rate was \$1.39. Since then, the rate has dropped to \$0.88.

### **Why did the levy rate drop?**

Each year, Fire District 4 is allowed to collect a set amount of revenue. State law limits the fire district to that amount plus a 1 percent increase per year. Even if property values double, the fire district can only collect 1 percent more. This means that the levy rate falls as property values rise to limit the fire district’s budget to the same amount per year plus 1 percent more.

This is called “levy compression” and impacts the fire district’s ability to provide emergency services. For example, the fire district’s annual day-to-day operational costs to provide emergency services have increased 4 to 5 percent, but the fire district can only collect 1 percent

more each year. The 1 percent increase is no longer adequate to meet the emergency service needs of the community.

“The revenue from our fire levy is simply not enough to respond to higher demands for service and cover annual cost increases,” Eastman said. “For the first time in almost 40 years, we must consider asking voters for a levy lid lift.”

The fire district is considering asking voters for a levy lid lift sometime in 2024 to meet the district’s daily operational and capital needs. The fire district can fund these items through a basic fire levy lid lift.

The projects the levy lid lift would fund include:

- Hire up to three firefighter/paramedics to respond to increased call volumes and reduce response times.
- Improvements to Station 41 (Howard Street) for additional sleeping quarters and an updated ventilation system to remove exhaust fumes and protect the health and safety of emergency personnel.
- Replace a 26-year-old fire engine and apparatus that have reached the end of their usable lives.

Fire District 4 is considering asking voters for a \$0.38 lid lift to reset the fire levy rate from \$0.88 to \$1.26. The \$0.38 lid lift would cost the owner of a \$400,000 home (considered average) an additional \$152 per year or \$12.67 per month.

“We believe it is critical for our community to understand how we are funded and the service challenges we are facing,” Eastman said. “We report to you and your partnership is important to saving lives and property. We look forward to having this conversation.”

Learn more at [www.wwfire4.com](http://www.wwfire4.com). Fire Chief Rocky Eastman also welcomes your questions at 509-529-1282 or [reastman@wwfire4.com](mailto:reastman@wwfire4.com).

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*Walla Walla County Fire District 4 provides fire suppression and emergency medical service (EMS) to 9,250 people over 125 square miles in the unincorporated areas west, south, and east of the cities of Walla Walla and College Place, and the Port of Walla Walla Regional Airport. Fire District 4 is a combination fire district that relies on volunteer, part-time and full-time emergency personnel who are highly trained to provide structural and wildland fire suppression, Basic and Advanced Life Support EMS, ambulance transport, vehicle accidents and extrication, and life safety programs. Fire District 4 is debt free, has passed all independent financial audits by the state, and works with neighboring agencies to share costs and improve emergency service levels.*