



# WEST THURSTON REGIONAL FIRE AUTHORITY

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## **With Half Its Funding on the Line, West Thurston Fire to Again Place Levy on Ballot:**

*Sixteen Firefighters Could Be Lost and Some Stations Would Close if Voters Oppose Measure, Chief Says*

By Emily Fitzgerald/[emily@chronline.com](mailto:emily@chronline.com)

The Chronicle

With almost half its funding for the next four years on the line, the West Thurston Regional Fire Authority has decided to place its maintenance and operation levy proposal on the November ballot.

The two ballot items, one for each district encompassed by West Thurston Fire, both garnered over 50% approval in the August primary election, which would be enough to pass if the proposal required a simple majority.

But because West Thurston Fire’s maintenance and operation (M&O) levy is considered an excess levy, defined as a levy imposed on top of regular property taxes, it requires a supermajority approval of 60% or more under Washington state law.

West Thurston Fire Chief Rob Smith attributed the levy’s failure on the August ballot to a misunderstanding between the fire authority and residents. “There seemed to be some confusion that this was an added tax, when in fact it is a replacement tax for the one that is expiring at the end of 2022,” Smith told The Chronicle on Thursday. “We have decided, because of that confusion, that we will run it again and focus on some of the feedback from the community that we received about that confusion and explain more clearly about the need and what the impacts are from it.”

West Thurston Fire is asking voters to replace the levy at a higher rate than the 83 cent rate expiring at the end of the year: approximately \$1.71 for 2023, \$1.63 for 2024, \$1.55 for 2025 and \$1.48 for 2026. “With everything that’s costing more now, we understand the burden that families are under,” said Smith, “but with the M&O levy funding, not only can we keep families safe, but also (they can) know it goes towards protecting their family from loss of life or property.”

West Thurston Fire’s board of commissioners calculated the ballot request based on the fire authority’s current needs and projected increased call volumes over the next few years. “Over the past nine years, we have had a 40% increase in our call volume. And it is because of the increased population growth and demand on the system,” Smith said. “We anticipate that that will continue to rise over time.” As it is now, West Thurston’s call volume is stretching firefighters and administrative staff thinner than they can manage. “There’s a lot of stress being placed on the staff, not only to keep up with that demand, but ... we’re beginning to experience a lot of mandatory overtime for our personnel in order to continue to meet those needs. But it is not a sustainable model over time,” Smith said.

Further extenuating the problem is the fact that West Thurston Fire is holding off on filling two vacant firefighter positions until it knows whether it will have the funding to keep them.

Because the current levy accounts for 50% of West Thurston Fire's funding, the fire authority is prepared to lay off 16 firefighters and four administrative personnel — roughly half its staff — and close three of its five stations after the current levy expires at the end of the year.

But the fire authority isn't handing out pink slips just yet. "We have delayed sending layoff notifications to current staff until we know the results from the Nov. 8 election," Smith said.

The effects of those layoffs would be felt across the fire authority's 158-square-mile coverage area. Smith predicts that West Thurston Fire's average response time would at least double, up to 16 minutes in some cases. "Minutes and seconds count, particularly when fires double in size every 60 seconds and the chance of survival from cardiac arrest decreases 10% for every minute of delayed response," Smith said.

West Thurston Fire would also likely lose its transport program, meaning that area residents would have to rely on private ambulance service in case of an emergency.

Those fortunate enough to not need fire or EMS response would also be affected, Smith said. The reduction in service would lead to an degraded fire protection rating, which could mean higher insurance premiums for home and property owners. "That's really the consequence to citizens directly from their pocket," Smith said.

However, if the levy passes in November, West Thurston Fire will be able to maintain its current level of service and hire six additional firefighters so it can keep up with demand. "We want to ensure that (West Thurston residents) receive the effective fire and emergency services that they deserve," Smith said. "That we cover 22% of the land mass in the entire county using a minimal staffing model in place speaks volumes to the amount of hard work that our staff is putting in to provide these services to the public, and again, they deserve it. And for us to ask for any less would be a disservice to our citizens."

The Nov. 8 general election is the last chance West Thurston Fire has to try and pass its proposal before the current levy expires at the end of 2022. If West Thurston Fire tries for it again in 2023 and passes it then, the fire authority won't be able to collect the levy until the following year.

Both ballot measures will need to pass in order for West Thurston Fire to impose the levy, Smith said. When asked what would happen in a scenario where the proposal passed in one district and failed in the other, Smith said, "We will be forced to rerun the levy for the one district that did not pass. We would not collect from any of the districts unless both of them passed."

Smith encourages anyone with questions about the ballot measures or West Thurston Fire's operations to call Smith at 360-352-1614, visit the fire authority's website at <https://www.westthurstonfire.org/> or stop by its headquarters at 10828 Littlerock Road SW, Olympia.