


ELECTION 2024

Fire districts seeking more revenue

ALEX POWERS
 Alex.Powers@lee.net

The fire chief who oversees an area just outside of Albany and Millersburg is trying to avoid laying off one part-time staffer — a move that would crush firefighters' capacity to handle back-to-back calls — by asking voters for additional tax funding.

Jefferson Rural Fire Protection District wants to double revenue — a \$2.32 million increase for five years — area property owners are currently paying on a tax that will expire in June if voters shoot down the request, as they did in November.

"It's never an easy battle," said Levi Eckhardt, the district's fire chief.

In all, three small governments that provide fire and medical crews across Linn County are talking about \$17.85 million in tax-related funding to the ballot in Oregon's May 21 primary election.

If they pass, taxpayers would be obligated to hundreds more on their tax bills because rising costs and stagnating income have burned through budgets at small local governments for years.

Sweet Home's district is building its name as a wildland fire outfit — maybe one of the first departments in the country to moonlight as a fire crew for hire — based on its recognition for fighting a blaze on a forest 6 miles south and east of the city in 2023.

"We had some huge success on the Wiley Creek Fire," Sweet Home Fire and Ambulance District Chief Nick Tyler said.

Sweet Home Fire is asking for more than \$3 million in bonds to pay for the brush rigs and wood chipper truck it needs to fill that specialized forest firefighter role, and make good on \$1 million in annual federal forest funds that could help fill budget gaps closer to home.

And Lebanon's firefighting service is counting on polling that shows most voters want more firefighters and trucks while the district makes its first attempt to raise tax revenue — an about \$10.82 million local tax option for daily operations, levied over five years.

Second try

The Jefferson district is based in a Marion County city of the same name but includes around 40 square miles of Linn County in its service area of about 3,200 properties.

Eckhardt said the district held four meetings after January to tell voters their tax money would pay for three full-time firefighter-paramedics and an ambulance over five years, a total cost of about \$3.7 million.

"We said it's not a want — it's a need," Eckhardt said. "We need to have this levy."

Without the funding, the Jefferson fire district expects to cut back a part-time emergency medical technician to address an about \$300,000 funding gap.

Eckhardt said the cut effectively would reduce ambulance service and leave two full-time firefighter-medics, two fire chiefs and an administrative assistant to respond to emergencies one at a time.

Jefferson's fire district is like a lot of small governments that need taxes to operate. But revenue, mostly from property taxes, increases slowly in Oregon and frequently doesn't keep pace with wages.

And fuel, medications and the vehicles firefighters use to do their jobs keep getting pricier — "everything that's going up," Eckhardt said.

For voters feeling their own inflationary spending pinch, that message alone may not be enough.

The district held three town hall-style meetings in the runup to the November 2023 Oregon special election.

And around 60% of the 464 people who returned ballots in Linn County voted no. Marion County counted 835 no votes — 53.3% of returned ballots against the measure.

Jefferson's district covers 6,424 voters, 1,352 of those on the Linn side of the county line.

Eckhardt said the district struggled to convince voters additional taxes aren't new. Jefferson is asking for 81 cents for each \$1,000 of property value, effectively a 43-cent increase over a similar tax that falls off tax bills in June. Voters passed that local option levy in 2019.

An owner would pay \$243 each year on a property assessed at \$300,000. That's more than dou-


JESS HUME-PANTUSO PHOTOS, MID-VALLEY MEDIA

Lindsey Hartford, a part-time EMT with the Jefferson Fire District, explains how having modern and dependable technology in ambulances makes a big impact on the quality of care medics are able to provide.

What's going on with taxes?

The Linn County clerk received three ballot measures each seeking passage of a local option levy — a finite, additional tax on top of the district's regular permanent tax rate. It's a common move across the state at special taxing districts like Jefferson's de-facto fire department.

Such special taxing districts are standalone government bodies.

They typically provide a service like sewage, water or fire-fighting. Their major source of revenue frequently is property taxes, and property taxes in the Jefferson fire district didn't keep pace with costs for fuel, medications, payroll and utilities after 2019.

That's because Oregon property owners pay a maximum tax. And an Oregon property typically sits within the boundaries of multiple governments, each taking its share.

State laws passed in the 1990s make Oregon taxation a crowded market.

A property's value as assessed by local tax officials can grow at 3% each year under state law. That means the taxable value of a property grows relatively slowly even when the real market value skyrockets.

Local governments were limited to taxing property at 1% of its assessed value. Schools, typically funded through their own standalone taxing districts, were cut off at 0.5%.

Reporting in 2006 found Measure 5, approved by voters in 1990, had caused an estimated \$40-plus billion revenue shortfall in local governments, and a legislative panel found by 2011, Oregon tax law was to blame for a \$3 billion shortfall in public school funding.

Special districts can float tax levies for daily operations, or bond measures for construction and equipment to get around the caps set to maximum taxation in Measure 5.

ble the expiring tax, a bill of about \$114 for the same property.

Hand crew for hire

Specifically, Sweet Home is asking for voters to cover a seven-year general obligation bond. The estimated annual average tax rate would be 47 cents for every \$1,000 of assessed property values.

But it's not the only financial source the district is eyeing. Sweet Home's fire district is trying to fund its efforts to fight structure fires and respond to medical emergencies in the East Linn County city by digging fire lines elsewhere in Oregon's forests, "which is what our community needs," Nick Tyler, chief at the Sweet Home Fire and Ambulance District, said.

"We need those local resources. We need a robust wildland division," he said.

The district experienced a lot of the same attrition seen at small fire and police departments after the start of the coronavirus pandemic. Tyler said trainees in the district's part-time emergency medical technician program frequently leave for fire departments with bigger budgets.

"That person we used to employ for minimum wage can go up to Clackamas and make \$100,000 a year without their paramedic certificate," Tyler said.

Tyler said the district considered an option levy like Jefferson or Lebanon, but scrapped the estimated \$1.5 million-each-year

Ballot measure for one

Probably no one will vote on an about \$1.4 million fundraising effort near the border between Lane and Linn counties.

Tax records show a single property on the Linn side falls under the jurisdiction of Mohawk Valley Rural Fire District.

The district extends from Springfield north, through central Lane County, to a strip-like intrusion into Linn County, and ends about 4,200 feet south of where the Sweet Home Fire & Ambulance District picks up.

Mohawk Valley Fire saw four candidates run uncontested for positions on its board of directors in May 2023. No one voted in Linn County.

They also didn't return any ballots voting to fill three seats in May 2021, also uncontested positions.

Linn County recorded one registered voter inside the strip-like edge of Mohawk Valley's tax district. That person voted Peggy Shultz to board position No. 4, the only contested race in the district, in 2019.

Then the property's owners moved to Lebanon.

Mohawk Valley Fire passed a bond measure 758 to 406 votes in 2018, in Lane County. The measure didn't appear on the Linn County ballot.

demand on taxpayers. Sweet Home Fire hadn't earned those additional taxes, he said.

"I was going to have to go to the taxpayers and ask them to double their tax burden to facilitate this happening," Tyler said. "I live in Sweet Home — I'm a taxpayer, too. That just didn't sit well with me."

Instead, Tyler looked to connections his agency made while Sweet Home crews worked alongside Oregon Department of Forestry on Wiley Creek. That fire consumed 245 acres of trees between August and September 2023.

And forest managers noticed the local fire district's efforts to contain the blaze.

The U.S. Forest Service will grant the district \$1 million each year to fight fire in federal forests.

That's a large grant for a department with an about \$5 million-each-year budget.

In turn, Tyler said, Sweet Home Fire will pay for a 20-person crew that can dig up dried, flammable plants and create barren lines on the ground meant to stop the advance of flames. Tyler said 10 of those positions are permanent, with the rest filled ahead of each summer.

The district starts hiring in May, Tyler said.

With the wildfire hand crew fully funded, Sweet Home Fire would funnel any reimbursement paid from Oregon or other districts into the agency's budget. Then, Tyler said, the district would use income from wildland firefighting to pay for equipment and wages needed to respond to medical calls and fires in buildings inside the city of Sweet Home.

Tyler said it's too early to know how much revenue the district's hand crew will raise, but said Sweet Home Fire will need the money to offset a 17% hike to insurance rates and increased contributions to the state Public Employees Retirement System.

"The financial burdens to the district are going up like no one has seen," Tyler said.

The district also is seeking to fund a big, all-terrain wood chipper truck that the newly formed wildfire crews will use to break



This ambulance is scheduled to be removed from service, as it's breached the recommended 200,000 miles for use as an emergency vehicle.



The 2003 ambulance will soon be put out of service, according to Jefferson fire Chief Levi Eckhardt. It has many features now considered hazards, such as the low ceiling under which medics sit.

down and transport plant matter before it can catch fire.

Within the district, the hand crew and chipper truck will knock back brush and trees that potentially could fuel fires threatening Sweet Home.

Tyler said taxpayers want more security from conflagration in a region where some are still recovering from the 2020 Labor Day fires. State officials estimated more than 1.2 million acres burned in a dozen fires around Oregon, the largest and most destructive in northeastern Linn County.

"We also need that crew in our area as well," Tyler said.

The district's wildland crew also will work in Sweet Home during fire season, when the area typically sees a week or two of high-risk fire conditions. Lightning potentially can spark fast-moving fires in the wind-dried and sunbaked foothills of the Cascades, typically by September.

The state forestry department usually manages fires over a certain size or burning in terrain where a structural fire fighting department like Sweet Home doesn't need to lead firefighters' attack. But that department frequently relies on outside, private contractors for equipment and personnel and doesn't have a hand crew in the area.

"Now we can give help to ODF and really solidify what we do together," Tyler said.

Tyler said the district's hand crew will need a home.

Sweet Home Fire would use funding from its bond measure in May to overhaul a station where no firefighters are based, in Cascadia, an unincorporated community about 20 minutes and 16 miles east of Sweet Home.

The wildfire-focused Cascadia station would put firefighters capable of handling structural fires closer to the Cascades, too, in a relatively remote region where some emergency calls are an hour away.

Sweet Home Fire also will buy radios that could help fire crews talk on a remote district where sometimes steep hills and deep canyons block signals and black out communication.

And the district needs two ambulances, \$350,000 apiece, to replace aging vehicles in a district where medics respond to nearly 3,000 calls each year.

"Not too long ago, that was the cost of a firetruck that lasts 20 years," Tyler said.

Voter approval

Fire officials in Lebanon think they found the tax rate voters will accept to fund more firefighter jobs and improve near-nine-minute call response times.

Voters said they were more likely to approve a tax that expands services, adding vehicles and crews and speeding up Lebanon Fire District response to emergencies.

"They want improved service, not a status quo," district Chief Joe Rodondi said.

To get there, the district wants property owners to pay 75 cents for every \$1,000 of assessed

value, or \$225 in new taxes each year for five years on a property assessed at \$300,000.

Lebanon Fire's tax would raise a little less than \$2.2 million each year. That's on top of the about \$6.5 million the district already collects on its base property tax rate.

"It's one of the fastest growing cities in the state," Rodondi said. "But unfortunately it takes thousands and thousands of buildings to raise enough revenue to pay for a firefighter."

The small government began considering additional tax funding in 2023. That's when district staff warned elected leaders that without additional revenue, Lebanon Fire will overdraw its budget by about \$490,000 in 2024 and around \$1.4 million in 2026.

Leading the shortfall are basic operating costs.

"Revenue is stagnant," Rodondi said. "Prices are increasing. Inflation doesn't help."

The district schedules seven firefighters at any time to cover 144 square miles.

"That's not a lot," Rodondi said.

Additional tax revenue would pay for three more firefighters per shift, creating six full-time positions, and allow Lebanon Fire to staff more equipment. The district also would use the funds to help replace an ambulance.

In an October poll, voters said they're not likely to support a lower tax rate of 40 cents. That's how much the district would need to keep from operating at a loss.

Just 40% of respondents said they'd approve. But 62% of respondents said they'd support a higher rate for faster fire service.

Rodondi said a brain begins dying after four to six minutes without oxygen. Firefighters' average response time in 2023 was eight minutes and 53 seconds.

"So every minute counts," Rodondi said.

The call time grew by three minutes and 23 seconds in a decade. And more people call emergency responders every year for fires and medical crises.

Lebanon's call volume increased 44% between 2014 and 2024 and hasn't slowed. The district answers an average 7,000 calls each year.

Jefferson and Sweet Home each saw call response times lengthen by about 41% during the same time.

Voters generally appear to favor more money for fire districts.

Idanha-Detroit Fire District passed additional tax funding 3 to 1 in November. Linn County recorded 14 votes for and five against in the service area on the North Santiam River.

Across Oregon, taxing districts footed 20 tax levies — only Jefferson's failed.

Without additional funding, the cuts at flailing small governments likely would "be draconian," Rodondi said.

"We are all cash-strapped," he said.

Alex Powers (he/him) covers agri-business, Benton County, environment and city of Lebanon for Mid-Valley Media. Call 541-812-6116 or tweet @OregonAlex.