

# A look at the upcoming fire district levy

BY TOM CARSTENS

*"The cost of being ready isn't cheap."*

—Brett Fillis, former Applegate fire chief

In a few months, Applegaters will vote on a levy that is designed to keep our fire department operating. Why do we have to go through this? Don't we already pay a hefty property tax?

## What does our fire department do for us?

Our firefighters put out structure fires and are first on the scene for wildfires, rope and water rescues, and highway accidents. About half of their 9-1-1 calls are for medical emergencies. They provide rapid and sophisticated emergency care, which, in a rural, aging community like ours, can make the difference between life and death.

## The fire district budget

Our fire district—181 square miles with over 10,000 residents—has a 2018 budget of almost \$3 million. With its reserves, the district could operate for six to eight months on its own.

About 37 percent of the district's budget pays personnel costs—salaries, pensions, and premiums for medical and workers compensation insurance. Training, vehicles, equipment, and maintenance make up the rest of the budget.

## Other revenue sources

Aggressive grant writing, garnering \$1.5 million over the past 15 years, has paid for firefighting, rescue, medical, and communications equipment.

Also, at great savings to the taxpayer, the fire district receives fees—over a quarter million dollars last year—from other agencies for lending its command expertise on large wildfires.

Finally, thousands of dollars donated by Applegaters in recent years have helped pay for training equipment and firefighter support.

## What about the taxes?

In our property tax, baseline fire protection services cost \$1.67 per \$1,000 of value as assessed by the county. For a \$200,000 property, that amounts to \$334 per year.

Our current fire district levy stands at \$0.92 per \$1,000 of assessed property value or an *additional* \$184 per year on the same \$200,000 property, totaling \$518 per year.

The fire district is asking for a 14 percent increase (to \$1.05) in the levy for the next five years, bringing the total tax payment for fire protection to \$544 on that same property—an increase of \$26 per year. This is what we'll be voting on in November.

Since the first levy 20 years ago was \$1, you could say that the extra nickel of this levy represents only a five percent increase in a period that has seen a cumulative inflation rate of 56 percent (per the US Bureau of Labor Statistics). The cumulative rate of increase of property assessments over that same 20-year period has been 81 percent (three percent per year over 20 years). Given these rates, the proposed levy looks like a pretty good deal.

## Why the levy increase?

Applegaters will want to read the fire district's article on this page.

## What if it doesn't pass?

If the levy doesn't pass, the district reverts to the same flat tax rate of \$1.67 per \$1000-of-assessed-value we've had since 1996 and to the kind of force we

had then—mostly volunteers with no 24/7 professional shift officers, no summer seasonal firefighters, and longer emergency response times.

We'll be paying higher premiums on our homeowner policies too. The Insurance Services Office (ISO) rates all fire districts with a numerical grade that considers a variety of risk mitigations, the most important being "the capability of the fire department to effectively respond to and extinguish a fire."

Our fire district currently carries a hard-won rating of "6." The fire chief says his goal is to get to a "5," which is the highest protection rating available to homeowners.

Without a levy, our district would receive a rating downgrade, and our home insurance premiums would rise.

Chief McLaughlin says that this levy is "an all-or-nothing" proposition. In a sense, he's right: Failure of the levy would mandate a reversion to an all-volunteer level of operation. And right now there aren't enough volunteers signing up. (You might consider volunteering if you decide to vote against the levy.)

However, there *are* voices that question the need for a levy increase above what we're already paying. Some prior and present fire district board members believe that this ballot measure is actually an attempt to continue to raise salaries and compensation for staff. They believe that, at our current level of funding, no jobs are lost and equipment can be replaced—just maybe not brand new vehicles.

There is *no* dispute, however, among officials past and present, of the need to continue a levy at some level. Some would prefer that this 14 percent increase be defeated now and the present levy rate be retained, with a re-vote taken on the May 2019 ballot. In any case, the present levy remains in effect until next July.

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## — A little history —

By the mid-90s, rising real estate values had resulted in runaway property taxes. So Oregon voters decided to limit growth in property assessments to no more than three percent per year. The unintended consequence was a reduction in tax receipts of about \$360 million statewide. Fire districts like ours, which had been planning on expanding services, were caught flat-footed. (For a more detailed explanation of this tax history, go to [oregon.gov](http://oregon.gov) and search for the Oregon Department of Revenue's *A Brief History of Oregon Property Taxation*, pamphlet #150-303-405-1 Rev. 6-09.)

In 1998, Applegaters responded by voting for a local option levy of \$1 per \$1,000 of assessed value. Passage of this levy allowed our fire district to hire three paid shift officers and maintain a professional staff, including a fire chief, an operations chief, and a maintenance chief.

Since then, the Applegate Valley Fire District has continued to grow and modernize. It now has seven stations, 27 specialized vehicles, and a large training facility, which doubles as a community center.

In 2009 the district received the "Outstanding District" award from the Oregon Special Districts Association.

# Applegate Valley Fire District proposes tax levy

BY MIKE MCLAUGHLIN

Applegate Valley Rural Fire Protection District No. 9 has referred the Operations Tax Levy 2018 to the ballot for the voters' consideration.

If the levy passes, the fire district would be able to maintain operations. The staff of seven full-time staff members would be retained, and the average response time of three minutes would continue.

The District, in addition to a Tax District Rate, has received funding from a Fire District Levy and by consecutive levies passed by the Applegate Community. These local levy options supplement the Tax District Rate.

## Purpose

Operations Tax Levy currently funds one-third of the operation of the fire district's seven stations and personnel.

## History

**1980:** Tax District Rate initiated for basic services

**1997:** Oregon State Measure No. 47 and No. 50 initiated

- Reduced Tax District Rate by 21 percent
- Unalterable (frozen) Tax Rate

**1998:** 5-Year Local Levy Option passed by Applegate District voters

- Hired one full-time Headquarters Fire Officer

- Funded continuation of Emergency Services

**First Local Levy** (July 1, 1999, through June 30, 2004) passed at \$1.00 per \$1,000 of Assessed Property Value. Levy funded:

- Continued staffing of three Fire Officers and one Office Manager

- Hired 3 full-time Shift Officers to provide 24/7 Coverage

- Hired 3 Seasonal Summertime Firefighters

- 2 Brush Engines (constructed by Fire District Personnel)

- 1 Jaws of Life rescue tool

- 2 "Midi" Structure Engines (constructed by Fire District Personnel)

- 16 Used Self-Contained Breathing Apparatus (SCBA)

**Second Local Levy** (July 1, 2004, through June 30, 2009) passed at \$.85 per \$1,000 of Assessed Property Value. Levy funded:

- Maintained Staffing Levels at seven full-time employees and three Seasonal Employees

- 1 "Midi" Structure Engine (constructed by Fire Personnel)

- 1 Used Water Tender for Station 5

- 1 Jaws of Life rescue tool

- 1 Well/Septic System installed at Station 6

- 2 Staff Vehicles

- Station 7 on Griffin Lane constructed

- Headquarters Parking Lot paved

**Third Local Levy** (July 1, 2009, through June 30, 2014) passed at \$.85 per \$1,000 of Assessed Property Value. Levy funded:

- Maintained Staffing Levels at seven full-time employees and three seasonal employees

- 1 Used Water Tender added to Station 5

- 1 Staff Vehicle

- 1 Utility Van

- 1 Pumper to Headquarters

- 1 Water Tender replacement to Station 4

- 1 Vehicle Lift installed at Maintenance Shop

- 1 Water Tank installed at Station 4

- 1 Water Tank installed on Forest Creek

- 1 Water Supply Pump installed next to Applegate Store (to create a draft site in Applegate)

- Parking Lot paved at Station 1

- Parking Lot paved at Station 4

**Fourth Local Levy** (July 1, 2014, through June 30, 2019) passed at \$.92 per \$1,000 of Assessed Property Value. District increased its rate by \$.07 per \$1,000 Assessed Property Value by renewing its pledge to develop and follow a five-year strategic plan. Levy funded:

- Maintained Staffing Levels at seven full-time employees and three seasonal employees

- Student Program to allow additional staffing at Headquarters

- Training/Community Building constructed on District land next to Headquarters

- 27 sets of Structural Protective Clothing (Turnouts)

- 1 Staff Vehicle

- 1 Used Fire Engine for Station 6

- 1 Used Water Tender for Station 2

- New Dormitory Rooms constructed at Headquarters

- Upkeep/Maintenance Issues addressed and completed at all seven stations

- New generator for Headquarters

**Proposed Tax Levy** if passed would be assessed from July 1, 2019, through June 30, 2024. District will be proposing a \$0.13/\$1,000 of Assessed Property Value increase to the current \$0.92/\$1,000 Assessed Property Value for a total of \$1.05/\$1,000 of Assessed Property Value.

**If the intended Levy passes, it would fund:**

- Continuing 24/7 staffing with seven full-

- time employees

- Increasing Summertime Seasonal Firefighters from three to six

- Installing a Manufactured Home with dorm rooms for a resident firefighter program at Station 1

- Replacing fire engines that will be 31 to 41 years old at time of replacement

- Replacing one staff vehicle that will be 21 years old

## If Levy does not pass:

- Real property taxes would remain at \$1.67/\$1,000 of assessed value and the \$1.05/\$1,000 of assessed value would not be assessed, resulting in a one-third reduction in the District's Operating Budget

- Most full-time staff would be laid off

- 24/7 Staff Coverage would end

- Summertime Seasonal Firefighters program would end

- Replacement of aging vehicles would not happen

- The district would revert back to an all-volunteer response

- Response times would increase

- The District's Insurance Services Office (ISO) rating would be downgraded, which would increase homeowner insurance rates.

## District goals

- Retain Community confidence and support

- Continue Community safety

- Seek additional funding mechanisms to include; Grants, Bonds and Donations

- Maintain District's Footprint

This information was reviewed by the Oregon Secretary of State's Office for compliance with ORS 260.432.

Mike McLaughlin

Fire Chief

Applegate Valley Rural Fire Protection District #9