

## Response Times Ride On Levy

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The Columbian*

Jan. 17, 2002 - Vancouver Fire Chief Don Bivins believes it's only a matter of time.

Sooner or later, he says, every engine company will be tied up at a big fire or occupied by simultaneous medical calls when another emergency occurs.

No units will be available to respond. Mutual aid from Fire District 6 or other departments won't arrive quickly enough. Someone's home or business will burn to the ground. Someone's husband or father will die from a heart attack.

"I think it's really a matter of happenstance if we are in position and in service to handle a significant call when the time is critical," Bivins said. "And time is critical in our industry most of the time."

The goal is to respond to 90 percent of urban calls within five minutes, a standard Vancouver meets 54 percent of the time. During the past five years, as population and traffic has grown, average response time has increased by 30 seconds.

To improve deteriorating response times, Vancouver and Fire District 5 want voters to approve emergency medical services, or EMS, levies.

The tax would allow Vancouver to buy and staff three medical vehicles, freeing its engines to respond to fires and other emergencies. The revenue also would help build, equip and staff two new fire stations and beef up firefighter training.

The tax would last for six years and cost property owners 50 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value, or another \$75 a year for a \$150,000 home.

County elections this Friday will mail ballots to 34,107 absentee voters in Vancouver and to 16,698 absentee voters in District 5. Other voters can go to the polls on Feb. 5.

Fire departments no longer only put out fires. Their primary mission today is emergency care for the sick and injured. EMS has become part of the everyday lexicon.

In 1975, fires accounted for 70 percent of calls in Vancouver and District 5, with medical calls making up the rest. By 1980, calls were almost evenly split between the two types.

In 1990, medical responses accounted for 70 percent. By 2000, they had grown to 80 percent, a trend expected to continue as the population ages.

Medical calls abound

Projections indicate that Vancouver will respond to close to 25,000 medical emergencies in 2010, more than a 4,000 percent increase since 1975.

Despite a shifting emphasis, response time remains critical. A person suffering a heart attack has greater chance of surviving if paramedics arrive in four minutes or less. In four minutes, a structure fire can grow elevenfold.

### Staffing studies

Fire District 5 consolidated with Vancouver in 1994. District 5 remains a separate government, with its own taxing powers and elected commissioners, but it has no firefighters, stations or equipment.

Fire officials say they haven't added a single firefighting crew in the past 20 years and are understaffed compared with other large departments in Washington. In separate staffing studies, department administrators and the Vancouver Firefighters Union Local 452 each found the city ranked last.

Data compiled by Vancouver at The Columbian's request indicate the city hasn't been whittling away at fire funding.

In 1995, the first full year after consolidation with District 5, the fire department received \$13.8 million in city and district revenue, equal to 13.7 percent of Vancouver's general fund. In 1999, the department received \$17.5 million, or 17.7 percent of the general fund. The 2001 budget called for the department to receive \$18.1 million, or 16.4 percent of the general fund.

On a per capita basis, fire funding has increased by 13 percent since 1995, while general fund revenue fell by 3 percent during the same period.

Mike Worthy, president and chief executive officer of the Bank of Clark County and co-chairman of the campaign to approve the EMS levy, said the issue is about ensuring an acceptable level of basic service.

"We can debate all we want about all the great things we would like to do in the city of Vancouver," Worthy said during a campaign gathering last month. "But the fact is this is one we cannot afford not to do."

### **No public opposition**

No opposition, organized or otherwise, has emerged to the EMS levies. Yet supporters worry that voters might reject the levy because of a slumping economy, general hostility to higher taxes or suspicions that Vancouver would have plenty of money if it weren't intent on building a special events center. To pass, the levy must get a 60 percent "supermajority" of yes votes.

Although rising unemployment might make voters wary of tax increases, it also increases the fire department's workload, Bivins said.

"More people in the community rely on the fire department to provide medical care at no cost because they don't have insurance or can't afford to pay for medical care," he said.

Vancouver property owners already pay a number of levies for state, county and city government; the Port of Vancouver; and the Fort Vancouver Regional Library District.

City property owners inside the Vancouver School District will pay a total rate of \$14.27 this year, or \$2,140.50 on a home valued at \$150,000. Tacking on 50 cents for EMS would boost that bill by 3.5 percent.

Voters, particularly those in the eastern half of the city, might feel bombarded by money requests for schools and other services. But Bivins believes the EMS proposal is responsive to taxpayer sentiment.

"People want a say in how their funds are going to be spent," he said. "They want dedicated funds for dedicated services."

### **EMS LEVY AT A GLANCE**

- Vancouver provides fire and rescue services to 205,500 people spread across 92 square miles, including Vancouver, Orchards, Sifton, Pleasant Valley and Proebstel. Population base makes it fourth-largest fire department in Washington.

- Vancouver responded to 20,485 emergency calls in 2001, a 10.2 percent increase from 2000. Fires and hazardous materials spills accounted for 18.6 percent; remainder were medical emergencies, car accidents and nonfire rescues.
- Proposed emergency medical services levy would raise \$4.8 million a year in Vancouver and \$1.75 million in Fire District 5. Money wouldn't begin flowing until April 2003, but city would start spending immediately.
- If voters approve levy, medical response vehicles would be purchased this year for Station 81, 7100 N.E. 63rd St., and Station 84, 1110 N. Devine Road. Design work would begin on new fire station in 12600 block of Northeast 72nd Avenue. In 2003, third medical unit would be placed at Station 82, 900 W. Evergreen Blvd., and design work would start on new station on Northeast 18th Street east of 162nd Avenue.
- City would spend \$5.69 million on construction and equipment during 2002, 2003 and 2004 and fill 65.5 fire positions. Additional personnel costs projected at \$12.27 million for three years, followed by ongoing costs of \$5.84 million a year beginning in 2005.
- After six years, voters would either reauthorize the levy or Vancouver would cut fire spending or find other revenue to plug the multimillion-dollar budget hole.