

# Fire districts asking for funds in election

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Many fire districts have seen their staffs stretched as the ranks of volunteer firefighters declined in recent years.

Three fire districts in Marion County have levies on the May 19 ballot that would help make up for that shortfall by allowing the districts to hire more full-time firefighters.

"Our numbers are down tremendously over the years, as is Oregon in general and nationally," Marion County Fire District 1 chief Kyle McMann said.

## Stayton Fire District

The Stayton Fire District's operations levy would replace an expiring bond measure and allow the department to hire an additional three full-time firefighters with a slight increase in cost to property tax owners.

The district's last bond, which was passed in 2015 and is set to retire in June, was used to purchase equipment such as fire engines and made significant repairs to the main fire station including the fire sprinkler system.

The cost increase from the operational levy would replace an expiring bond measure and allow the department to hire an additional three full-time firefighters with a slight increase in cost to property tax owners.

The district currently has five full-time firefighters and they staff its stations from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

The rest of the time, the district relies on volunteer firefighters.

"This is a new thing for us," Stayton fire chief Jack Carriger said. "We just are getting to the point where volunteers are getting fewer and farther between."

The Stayton Rural Fire District covers 107 square miles of Marion and Linn counties, including Stayton, Elkhorn, Mehama and the Little North Fork recreation area.

The current five full-time firefighters also perform tasks in the department including information technology, maintenance, training and administration in addition to responding to calls.

Despite efforts to increase the number of volunteer firefighters, including a grant that allowed the district to hire a full-time recruiter, the number of volunteers has waned in recent years.

Carriger said that until the recent pandemic, call volumes the district received increased significantly each year, putting more pressure on the current volunteers.

The levy would cost homeowners about \$62.50 per year for homes at the median \$250,000 assessed value for the area.

If the levy passes, it would enable the department to have staff firefighters working at peak times including from 5 a.m. to 8 a.m. and from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. on weekdays and on weekends.

"We would look at augmenting those times with those people," Carriger said. "It certainly won't put us at 24/7. Three people just doesn't do that."

The five-year levy would raise an es-



**Marion County Fire District 1 covers 88 square miles including areas east of Salem and Keizer, and unincorporated communities such as Brooks, Howell Prairie and Pratum and over 50,000 residents in rural parts of Marion County.** MICHAELA ROMÁN / STATESMAN JOURNAL

timated \$239,000 in the 2020-2021 fiscal year and rise to \$264,000 in 2024-2025.

## Marion County Fire District No. 1

Between the declining ranks of volunteer firefighters and increasing call volumes, the Marion County Fire District's staff and resources have become strained.

McMann said the district has 60 volunteers, down from 125 when he started in 2001. And he said call volume is up 48% since 2013.

That's why Marion County Fire District 1, a special district separate from Marion County, is asking voters to approve a new operations levy that would tax homeowners 99 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value for the next two years and allow it to hire two more firefighters and a deputy fire marshal.

"This time we're just asking for what we need as opposed to saving for future years," McMann said.

The levy would cost \$198 per year for homeowners with the median \$200,000 assessed value.

The district currently has 55 employees and covers 88 square miles including areas east of Salem and Keizer, and unincorporated communities such as Brooks, Howell Prairie and Pratum and over 50,000 residents in rural parts of Marion County.

"We have mutual aid agreements with all Marion County fire districts," McMann said.

The expiring four-year levy, which was passed in May 2016, taxed property

at 71 cents per \$1,000 of assessed home value.

Voters approved bonds in 2008 that were used to purchase and maintain equipment and are expected to be retired in 2022 and 2023.

If passed, the new levy would cover that same equipment costs as well as the new hires and potentially could save property owners money in a few years.

"It won't necessarily save them now," McMann said.

If passed, the levy would raise approximately \$3,319,968 in 2020-2021 and \$3,419,568 the following year.

McMann said the shorter two-year levy lets the department ask for funding when necessary in the future rather than use long-term predictions for service levels.

"It allows us to not get trapped also in a second year when call volumes have gone up or service demands are different," McMann said.

## Hubbard Fire District

The Hubbard Fire District, which serves 7 square miles of north Marion County including Hubbard, is asking voters to pass an operational levy for the first time.

The five-year levy would tax property owners 99 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value. It would cost an average of \$161 per year for a property assessed at the median \$162,400.

If approved by voters, the levy would provide funding for required maintenance of equipment and vehicles, the purchase of personal protective equip-

ment and add two staff members to allow the department to be staffed 24 hours per day.

"Actually, Hubbard is doing well with the number of volunteers, it's just that the call volume is going up," Hubbard Fire Chief Joseph Budge said. "We've got 27 volunteers there. Last year we had 715 responses. It's over the kind of sweet spot threshold for volunteers that are busy taking calls. It's too much of a burden."

Budge said the Hubbard Fire District's Measure 50-capped rate for the district of 80 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value was set in a time when the district had an all-volunteer force.

"Really it takes around \$2 per \$1,000 to operate a professional, career staffed fire district," Budge said.

The levy would raise \$326,030 in 2020-2021 and increase to \$366,950 in 2024-2025.

The Hubbard Fire District has had several bonds, including an ongoing one that taxes residents 27 cents per \$1,000 that is set to expire in 2023.

Staffing the station 24 hours a day would allow Hubbard to enter into automatic mutual aid agreements with neighboring fire districts Woodburn and Aurora and eliminate the current lag time in mutual aid calls, Budge said.

"It can only happen when everybody's covering all their own calls around the clock 24/7," Budge said. "What we can't have is the people of Woodburn or the people of Aurora subsidizing the people of Hubbard."

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## Racing

Continued from Page 1A

The dirt ovals at Park Jefferson and Raceway Park aren't any different than the hundreds of others across the nation, except they are operating when all racing in Oregon and other states is shut down.

"I just don't see racing happening in Oregon this summer," said Ferrando, who owns GO Plumbing.

South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem repeatedly encouraged people not to attend the races, but stopped short of forcing them to be canceled.

Initially, a few hundred tickets were going to be sold for each race with fans being required to adhere to social distancing measures. Shortly after the limited number of tickets to the race went on sale, the tracks announced they had sold out.

Days before the races, however, both tracks announced that after receiving pressure from the South Dakota governor, county commissioners, Health Department and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, they would no longer allow fans to attend and refund all tickets purchased.

The races went forward with empty grandstands.

## Racing at an empty track

"I don't really pay attention much to the grandstands," Ferrando said. "It didn't really bother me."

The only way to view the races was by pay-per-view on the internet, and so many people tried to watch that Saturday's races were slightly delayed while fans from throughout the world tried to log on.

Since returning to circle track racing in 2015 after years spent racing ATVs, Ferrando has become one of the top racers of IMCA modifieds in the northwest.



**A driver's team prepares him for the sprint car races at Park Jefferson Speedway on Saturday in Jefferson, South Dakota.** PHOTOS BY ERIN BORMETT/ARGUS LEADER



**Drivers prepare to race.**

The cars are designed to be an economy class with some stock parts including the frame and some suspension parts – though the bodies are flat sheet metal – but has gained huge popularity among drivers in the United States with its competitive racing. A number of former NASCAR drivers including David Reutimann and David Stremme make a living building and racing the cars.

Ferrando, grandson of local racing

icon "Papa" Tom Ferrando, won the track championship at Cottage Grove Speedway in 2017 and followed that with the Willamette Speedway track championship in 2018.

But the entry fields of the South Dakota races drew some of the best drivers from across the nation, including former NASCAR drivers Kenny Wallace and Ken Schrader.

In Saturday's race at Park Jefferson, Ferrando rebounded from a poor draw to win the B-Main event and transferred into the A-Main, where he went a lap down before coming back to finish 15th in a race where many cars didn't finish.

"Hit a tire on the first lap," he said. "That put me ahead of the wreck. They destroyed some cars in that wreck. There were like four bent chassis in that wreck."

Ferrando knows wrecks. He appeared in 2002's Jackass The Movie in a demolition derby alongside family members Terry and Zac driving in the "Rent-a-car Crash Up Derby" scene

where he crashed into Johnny Knoxville.

On Sunday at Raceway Park, Ferrando won his heat race and briefly challenged leader Chris Mills, but placed third after being passed by eventual winner Ricky Thornton Jr., who also won Saturday's race.

## Racing without fans

Races are usually a social affair. From the time people sign in to enter the track until they leave at the end of the night they are constantly around others.

But in the South Dakota races, the racers and their crews were kept apart with the only people allowed in at a maximum of 10 people per car and trailers were required to be 10 people apart.

Ferrando's crew of 10, Gage Matt Freeman and his son, Paxton, and Chris and Jojo Batalgia wore face masks and gloves at all times.

In the days following the success of the South Dakota races, dirt tracks in Iowa and South Carolina have announced they will put on races under the same restrictions and using similar formats.

While in the Midwest for the race, Ferrando picked up a new race car – the ninth he's had since 2015 – and left his racing equipment in Iowa.

With Oregon's stay-home order, it's unclear when racing will resume in the state, and Ferrando isn't taking any chances.

In the past few days, Cottage Grove Speedway promoter Heather Boyce said her track will not race if fans are not allowed.

"I'm going to fly back here a few times a month to race," he said while sitting on a quarter-full plane bound for Oregon. "I'm hoping to race in Iowa. They're thinking they're going to be racing out here."

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