

Applegate Fire District Levy It's our decision

BY SANDY SHAFFER

Our Applegate Valley Fire District #9 (AVFD#9) was formed 28 years ago to provide emergency services and fire protection to homes in the eastern portion of the valley. A lot of growing and changing has taken place in the Applegate since 1980, and it's been a challenge for the Fire District to keep up with our community's needs. They've done so very successfully, now providing seven fire stations, 20 emergency vehicles, 47 volunteers and seven staff to provide full protection services to homes within an area of 181 square miles.

However, we voters within AVFD#9's jurisdiction will be asked to make a decision this coming November that could change things. In short, do we want to maintain the services that AVFD#9 is **currently** providing—at the **same rate** that we are now paying, or do we want to reduce those services? Knowing that local levies can be a complicated and contentious subject, I decided to sit down with our Fire Chief, Brett Fillis, and ask some questions.

“What are we paying now, and to whom?”

The first thing I did was look at my last property tax bill. It showed two entries for Fire District #9, and two entries for the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF). Since ODF's entries mentioned “fire,” I talked to the SW Oregon District Forester, Dan Thorpe, to get clarification. As an FYI, ODF provides wildland fire protection to private properties in Oregon, and they also provide support for structural protection. Dan told me that the “surcharge” entry is a flat rate assessed on improved lands to cover large fire suppression efforts. The ODF “timber” tax entry is assessed only on forested parcels to cover ODF's operating expenses

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to fight fires in our area.

AVFD#9, on the other hand, provides structural fire protection to homes in the District, and they are also our first responders for medical emergencies. They also respond to any other types of emergency calls, including vehicle accidents, drownings, and wildland fires.

So, what are we paying District #9 right now? The first entry on my tax bill labeled “Applegate Valley RFPD #9” represents the tax district rate that was set up for the Applegate Fire District #9 in 1980. Chief Fillis told me that when State Measures 47 & 50 passed in 1997, voters could no longer vote to approve a tax increase for a district; once District #9's rate per thousand (of assessed value) was set, that's it. The Chief told me the District's rate was reduced by over 21% due to those two Measures, a huge cut. This entry will not be affected by our voting in November.

The second entry, called “Applegate Valley RFPD #9 Local Levy” is the current five-year levy, which began 7/1/04 and will

expire on 6/30/09. This is the levy up for a vote in November. The rate of the current levy is \$0.85 per \$1000 of assessed value; it represents 32% of AVFD#9's current tax revenue.

“What levies have we had in the past, and what have they provided?”

Some history, per Chief Fillis: Due to the revenue reduction in 1997, Applegate voters approved a five-year “local levy option” for AVFD#9 in 1998 to help with operating costs, at \$1.00 per thousand. The District pledged to work toward reducing that rate in future years. During that five-year period the District replaced two rescue engines, refurbished another, and built two new “Midis” (designed and built from the chassis up to serve our needs for medical equipment, water storage and a short wheel base to get up windy, narrow driveways). Equipment purchased were 16 breathing apparatus, 40 turnouts and eight radios. Construction: a fourth bay was built on Station 1, and a staircase and deck built at Headquarters (HQ) in Ruch that provided a second exit from the second floor. Staffing: three shift officers were hired to provide 24/7 coverage at HQ. Also completed, but not in the original five-year plan of work: a Brush engine was replaced and a new set of the “jaws of life” were purchased.

The second five-year levy: In 2003 the District made good on its pledge, asking voters to approve the levy at a reduced rate of \$0.85 per thousand, and we did. The five-year plan for the period of July 2004 through June 2009 was just as aggressive. Chief Fillis told me that the following has been accomplished to date: a third Midi was constructed, a new tender was purchased, six portable and eight mobile radios were purchased, and a new set of rescue tools purchased for Station 1. The District also purchased a breathing air compressor, allowing air tanks to be filled at HQ rather than having to travel to Medford. An Operations Chief was re-hired (the position had been filled prior to 1997), water came to Station 6 in the form of a well and septic system, the parking lot of HQ was paved, and Station 7 was built on Griffin Lane.

“What will the levy that we will vote on in November actually say?”

The same as the last five-year levy: \$0.85 per thousand of assessed value. The actual wording is: “Shall District continue to impose \$0.85 per \$1,000 of assessed value for five years for improvements and general operating purposes?” What this means to you as resident and taxpayer is that there is **no increase in the rate** that you are **currently** paying to help support Fire District #9.

“If passed, what will be done with the levy funds during the next five years?”

The levy will state that the purpose is to continue to provide funding to allow Applegate Fire District to operate at the current level of staffing, and to continue to provide for replacement and improvement of vehicles and equipment. Chief Fillis told me that the average age of the District's fire vehicles was 28 years old when the levy process began in 1997, and that today the average age is down to 16 years! (See photos.) Personal firefighter and communications equipment continually



Top: AVFD's newest vehicle—a 2006 Water Tender.

Right: An “oldie but goodie,” this 1961 Ford Type 1 engine is the oldest in the fleet.



needs to be upgraded in order for our firefighters to be safe, and to be in contact with others during an event.

The current staffing at HQ in Ruch includes the fire chief, operations chief, office manager, logistics/maintenance officer, and three shift officers. The Chief explained the shift staffing to me in the context of pre-1997. Being a volunteer fire department, all calls were responded to by volunteers who received a page, jumped in their cars and drove to their fire station, suited up and drove to the call address. This could take anywhere from 5-15 minutes. Current shift staffing at HQ provides two firefighters at the station 24/7. When a call comes in for anywhere in the District, these guys are the first to respond, usually leaving the station within three minutes. Volunteers still respond, and sometimes, depending upon the location, they can beat the HQ guys to a call. But, in general, having shift officers at HQ greatly reduces response time to the majority of the population in the Applegate Fire District's jurisdiction.

Other advantages of having this staff are not quite so apparent, but in my mind are just as important. Three of the new vehicles were custom-built on site under the direction of the logistics/maintenance officer. Each cost roughly half of what a newly purchased vehicle would. This same officer services all vehicles at HQ whenever necessary, thereby saving time and mileage to have repairs done in town. The operations chief has been hugely successful in writing grants the past four years: grant funds paid for a portion of the new air compressor, radios and a brand new tender! The office manager is more than a bookkeeper; she answers all of our telephone questions, she made those evacuation warning calls to Humbug Creek last summer, she stocks the fire information kiosks, keeps up the District's webpage, visits the local schools to teach fire safety, and writes the defensible space rebate checks. Lots of little things that I think makes this Fire District a real part of the Applegate community.

“What are the consequences of not passing this levy?”

Chief Fillis has been agonizing over how he'd suggest reducing the budget if the levy did not pass: staffing versus capital projects versus sound vehicles versus safe equipment. He told me that he feels he “would be irresponsible to propose that only capital expenditures would be cut.” Response times are vital, but we currently have a good army of volunteers who can

continue to respond to our emergency calls. Vehicles need to be dependable, equipment safe, communications high-quality, stations/facilities maintained.

While the ultimate decision on budget cuts would be made by the District's Board of Directors, the proposed cuts if this levy is not re-approved will be the loss of 3.5-4 staff positions, less equipment replaced, and fewer improvements to facilities. The three shift officer positions would be cut and the office manager position either reduced to part-time or eliminated altogether. The remaining three officers would increase their responses to calls during the normal 40-hour work week, with volunteers covering the off-hours. What about optional stuff such as home assessments for defensible space, grant writing for fuel reduction or equipment, fire prevention events, I asked? Most likely gone, the Chief told me.

What are my thoughts and conclusions?

It seems to me that our Applegate Fire District has shown that they can keep promises, stick to a budget, plan for the future and provide for our valley's growing needs. The Applegate community has definitely grown, with new construction averaging around 8% over the past five years. Chief Fillis told me that their annual alarms have risen from 458 in 2002 to 582 in 2007. This is an increase of 27% over five years! We are growing.

We have a solid base of volunteer firefighters with an average length of service around nine years (as opposed to the national average of 18 months!). Our staff is securing additional revenue through grants, they build vehicles in their spare time to save the District money, they engage the public in fire prevention and education work (which also saves money), and they mentor, train and encourage the volunteers, which helps keep the team spirit alive. Our Fire District is more community-engaged than any in the Rogue Basin, if not the state!

Considering the valley's growth, and recent raises in insurance rates, gasoline and energy costs, and the basic cost of living, I feel that our District and the Board of Directors have done an outstanding job in keeping the levy request at the same level as the past five years. I therefore urge everyone to vote YES to renew our operating levy at the same rate that we are now paying.

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