

Whatcom County Fire District 14



Sumas, Kendall, Welcome

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WHATCOM COUNTY FIRE DISTRICT 14
FIRE COMMISSIONERS

January 7, 2008

David Stalheim, Director
Whatcom County Planning and
Development Services Dept.
Northwest Annex
5280 Northwest Drive
Bellingham, Wa. 98226-6907

Martin Blackman, Land Use Supervisor-SEPA
Whatcom County Planning and
Development Services Dept.
Northwest Annex
5280 Northwest Drive
Bellingham, Wa. 98226-6907

RE: SEP 07-181; 2007 Draft Foothills Subarea Plan

Dear Mr. Stalheim and Mr. Blackman:

Thank you for the opportunity to express our concerns regarding the ability of the existing volunteer Firefighters from District 14 to continue to provide fire protection and EMS responders as the population of our District continues to grow. This report is presented on behalf of the Fire Commissioners from Dist. 14 regarding the Public Facilities section of the Environmental Impact Statement for the Foothills Subarea Plan.

Fire District 14 is comprised of three stations; Sumas, Kendall and Welcome. Each station is responsible for supplying responders to answer calls in their individual areas. Depending on the severity of the call, surrounding stations from that district are automatically requested for back-up or paged out if the primary station is already responding to a call.

Whatcom County Fire District 14



Sumas, Kendall, Welcome

Recent growth in the Columbia Valley region has resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of responses for both fire and EMS for Kendall station. Our fire district total responses have grown from 556 responses in year 2002 to 716 responses in 2007.

A break down of response statistics for the individual stations shows Kendall Station responded to 286 calls in 2003. In 2007, Kendall's responses have increased to 443. Total number of response calls for Sumas station has grown from 122 in 2003 to 220 response totals for 2007. The number of responses totals for Welcome station has gone from 43 in 2003 to 65 in year 2007 (numbers for station responses won't add up to the 2007's totals due to automatic response to fire calls in each station's area but they are close). North Whatcom, another District in rural Whatcom County, has been reviewing it's call numbers in an attempt to determine how it will deal with increased growth in it's area. Their research showed their District responds to one call per ten individuals with a mix of paid and volunteer firefighters. District 14 responds to one call per nine individuals with an entirely volunteer force. Growth in this area will worsen this trend unless paid responders are available to augment the existing volunteer force.

As you can see, the entire region has seen an increase in the number of incidents to which it is required to provide personnel for fire suppression or to administer emergency care. The numbers from Kendall station have placed a considerable demand on the volunteer responders from that station and subsequently the surrounding stations as they are toned out in Kendall's place when Kendall is busy with an existing call and a second tone out comes through from Prospect.

Reviewing these run and staff numbers also illustrates the difficulty of obtaining new recruits who are able to remain in the area and the large number of volunteers ready to retire after 25 years of service. The three stations currently have a total of 58 volunteers. Of those 58, 21 have between 20 and 25 + years of service. These firefighters will be mustered out in the near future leaving a number of empty bunker gear hooks. Seven volunteers have served for less than one year. The District has been able to retain only five individuals for the time period of one to four years. As the population increases in this region there are fewer and fewer community members willing to make the sacrifice to serve their neighbors.

In an e-mail sent Oct. 27, 2007 to Kate Koch with Studio Cascade from Denise Christensen, District 14 Division Chief, Chief Christensen comments regarding the situation at Kendall Station "Not that long ago, we had a strong volunteer force of 65 firefighters. But in the past three years, we have not been able to keep up with the amount of volunteers that have retired or left the area. With high mortgage payments and very little job opportunities in our area, most families have two members that leave the area to work. This makes our day response slim. It also makes our late night/early morning responses not good because the people that have to get up and go to work cannot take the

Whatcom County Fire District 14



Sumas, Kendall, Welcome

risk of being tied up on a call so they don't respond. We recently tried for months to get new volunteers at our Kendall station and ended up with only one new volunteer recruit. We know in the future we are going to have to change the way we have always "done business". With the increase in population, we will not be able to keep up the way we have in the past."

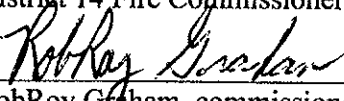
Chief Christensen, in her e-mail, proceeds to list what it will take to meet the growing need for services from the increased population. This list includes a new station with sleeping quarters to accommodate full time, paid personnel and the equipment needed with which to respond. At a minimum, required equipment would include an engine, tender and an aid car. I would encourage you to review the e-mail mentioned above for further examples of how the increase in population decreases the quality of service a volunteer response can provide. A copy will accompany this correspondence.

The New Year, 2008, will see the implementation of BLS transport by volunteers. This will require the aid car and responders to make a two hour round trip into Bellingham to transport non-critical patients. While that aid unit is on the road, an additional tone-out will require a response from one of the other stations in the District. Due to the rural nature of our District, a mutual aid response can take an additional 15-20 minutes. Increased response time from one of the surrounding stations could literally mean life or death to a critically ill or critically injured individual.

Increasing the population in the Foothills sub area, specifically the Columbia Valley region, without major improvements to District 14, Kendall Station, will result in a lower standard of care to those in the affected areas. As population increases, it is just a matter of time before the number of responses will dictate the need for full time paid firefighters as the volunteers will no longer be able to meet the requirements placed upon them to adequately protect those to which their welfare is entrusted!

Thank you for your attention to this issue.

Sincerely,
District 14 Fire Commissioners



RobRoy Graham, commissioner

Chris Moe, commissioner