

Elections: Lebanon fire goes to voters first time ever on May 21 ballot

Alex Powers | April 12, 2024

Lebanon's firefighting service is counting on polling that shows most voters want more firefighters and trucks while the district makes its first attempt ever to raise tax revenue.

On the May 21 primary election ballot, the Lebanon Rural Fire Protection District is asking voters to approve a \$10.82 million local tax option for daily operations, levied over five years.

Fire officials in Lebanon think they found the tax rate voters will accept to fund more firefighter jobs and improve near-nine-minute call response times.

Voters said they were more likely to approve a tax that expands services, adding vehicles and crews and speeding up Lebanon Fire District response to emergencies.

"They want improved service, not a status quo," district Chief Joe Rodondi said.

To get there, the district wants property owners to pay 75 cents for every \$1,000 of assessed value, or \$225 in new taxes each year for five years on a property assessed at \$300,000.

Lebanon Fire's tax would raise a little less than \$2.2 million each year. That's on top of the about \$6.5 million the district already collects on its base property tax rate.

"It's one of the fastest growing cities in the state," Rodondi said. "But unfortunately it takes thousands and thousands of buildings to raise enough revenue to pay for a firefighter."

The small government began considering [additional tax funding](#) in 2023. That's when district staff warned elected leaders that without additional revenue, Lebanon Fire will overdraw its budget by about \$490,000 in 2024 and around \$1.4 million in 2026.

Leading the shortfall are basic operating costs.

"Revenue is stagnant," Rodondi said. "Prices are increasing. Inflation doesn't help."

The district schedules seven firefighters at any time to cover 144 square miles.



Lebanon Fire District crews maneuver on the ladder of a firetruck while battling a fire Tuesday morning, March 28, 2023, on West Maple Street near the city's downtown.

Courtesy Lebanon Fire District, File photo

“That’s not a lot,” Rodondi said.

Additional tax revenue would pay for three more firefighters per shift, creating six full-time positions, and allow Lebanon Fire to staff more equipment. The district also would use the funds to help replace an ambulance.

In an October poll, voters said they’re not likely to support a lower tax rate of 40 cents. That’s how much the district would need to keep from operating at a loss.

Just 40% of respondents said they’d approve. But 62% of respondents said they’d support a higher rate for faster fire service.

Rodondi said a brain begins dying after four to six minutes without oxygen. Firefighters' average response time in 2023 was eight minutes and 53 seconds.

"So every minute counts," Rodondi said.

The call time grew by three minutes and 23 seconds in a decade. And more people call emergency responders every year for fires and medical crises.

Lebanon's [call volume increased](#) 44% between 2014 and 2024 and hasn't slowed. The district answers an average 7,000 calls each year.

Voters generally appear to favor more money for fire districts.

Idanha-Detroit Fire District passed additional tax funding 3 to 1 in November. Linn County recorded 14 votes for and five against in the service area on the North Santiam River.

Across Oregon, taxing districts footed 20 tax levies — only Jefferson's failed.

Without additional funding, the cuts at flailing small governments likely would "be draconian," Rodondi said.

"We are all cash-strapped," he said.