



## Fire District to request operational levy

By Sarah Brown, Lebanon Local

For nearly one year, Lebanon Fire Chief Joseph Rodondi has been preparing to ask his community one question: “What level of fire and EMS protection would you like in your community?”

Ultimately, the answer will be known after voters weigh-in by marking their May 2024 ballot regarding a local operational levy request to support services provided by Lebanon Fire District.

Shortly after COMP-NW released a white paper about emergency medical services (EMS) being stretched thin, LFD initiated a campaign for a local levy intended to make more robust its ambulance and fire services. During a sort of kick-off party to the campaign on Jan. 11, Rodondi explained the District will request a levy of 75 cents per \$1,000 of *assessed* value to improve services to the community.

In the past decade, he said, LFD call volume increased 45%, they saw a 200% increase in “call overlap” (more than one call happening at the same time), and average response time

increased three minutes, 23 seconds. And, he added, they have been hit with the post-COVID inflation as everyone else has.



*Lebanon firefighters answer questions about their job during a special career day event at Pioneer School in May 2023. Photo by Sarah Brown*

### **The white paper**

A partnership between the LFD and Western University of Health Sciences established the WesternU Lebanon Fire District Emergency Alliance (WLEA), a service-learning program that allows COMP-NW students to volunteer as emergency medical technicians (EMT), firefighters and first responders.

Recently, WLEA students released a white paper, “The Strain of Healthcare on EMS in Oregon,” on behalf of the LFD and Oregon Ambulance Association (OSAA), based on an earlier position paper released by the OSAA and the Oregon Fire Chiefs Association (OFCA).

Using LFD as an example of an Oregon fire and EMS department that serves both rural and urban areas, the paper highlighted shortages in the labor workforce, training, critical access hospitals and other issues rural emergency medical services are facing.

Ambulance services are expected to respond to calls in a “reasonably quick” amount of time, a standard that is set by Oregon Health Authority and varies based on population and other factors. A 2022 survey of fire and ambulance providers indicated they believe that meeting response time compliance is mostly difficult or not successful, and that lack of personnel or applicants is the biggest challenge.

Furthermore, in Lebanon, the LFD operates two medic units. When one unit is tasked with transporting a patient to a hospital outside of the city – for example, Portland, Corvallis or Eugene – that leaves only one unit available to respond to the city and surrounding rural areas.

According to the paper, Samaritan Lebanon Community Hospital as a critical access hospital is constrained by the number of available beds and, with a rapidly growing population, is expected to see an increase in the number of patients to be transferred elsewhere via ambulance.

The authors concluded “hospital and prehospital care are showing signs of strain and the workforce is bearing the burden.” Also, education in emergency services is declining in popularity, and current professionals are transferring to jobs that are more stable and higher-paying.

“The Lebanon Fire District is an example of how a storm of factors can pose challenges to reliable, timely, and sustainable emergency patient care, from a shrinking pool of qualified and interested job applicants to a strained and undersized hospital,” they wrote.



*LFD replaced its two aging medic units last September. Provided photo*

**The need**

It's a multi-faceted problem Rodondi has been staring at since he took his position at LFD in 2019, a problem that has been exacerbated by COVID. He first shared his concerns in March 2023 when he gave a report to the City Council.





*Lebanon Fire District hosts an annual Young Women's Fire Academy for women ages 16-19, giving potential future firefighters a taste of the work. Photo by Sarah Brown (2018)*

He reported the district serves fire calls in 134 square miles consisting of 29,000 people, but it also serves 419 square miles with its ambulance service, serving 38,000 people stretching from Scio to Crabtree to Brownsville. LFD is one of three ambulance providers in Linn County (Albany and Sweet Home being the other two). According to Rodondi, emergency response takes up much of the district's workload (71%) while fire calls take up 2%.

There are 11 ambulance providers in Linn County, Rodondi added. The 2020 census had the population in Linn County as 128,610. Most of the counties inhabitants reside in or around the three most populated areas: Albany, Lebanon and Sweet Home.

"Lebanon is one of the fastest-growing communities in the state and you should be proud of that," Rodondi told the council. "However, my caution to you is when you build units at such a fast rate, you can outpace your public safety. We're not able to keep up with that demand, so what happens and the potential is you dilute services to your existing population."

Ambulance service operates like a business for many fire departments. They provide a service and send out billing. However, much of the community LFD serves is insured through Medicare and Medicaid, and the costs incurred through those patients are federally required to be written off. Rodondi presented data indicating LFD receives only 35% of what it bills and has to

write off 60% due to government regulations. In 2022, the fire district billed \$7,711,715, but wrote off \$4,795,948.

It's an unsustainable model that will eventually force them out of the ability to provide ambulance services, he said.

It's a problem with many sides, Rodondi told Lebanon Local. It's about providing a level of service, what level of service the community expects, and cost-versus-revenue. It's also about limited resources, limited staffing, and limited avenues of revenue.



*Firefighters inspect a burned-out house on Park Street on the morning of Dec. 24, 2023. Photo by Sarah Brown*

The LFD receives funding through property taxes, service fees (inspections, permits, ambulance), and through bonds, grants and levies. Although Lebanon is said to be among one of the fastest growing communities in Oregon, the tax base in this rural community isn't growing fast enough to keep up with needs.

“Let’s be proud of the fact that we’re one of the fastest growing communities, but we’re outstripping our ability to provide service,” Rodondi said. “The tax revenues aren’t keeping up with the ability to provide service.”

At the kickoff party, he said LFD needs nine more firefighters, but pared that number down to six to make it more digestible for voters. The 75-cent ask would cost homeowners approximately \$150-300 per year (based on a home valued between \$200,000 and \$400,000). It would provide the added six firefighters, maybe some increased fire prevention staff, help “round out” the fleet and, ultimately, improve response times.

Responding to a question, Rodondi said the levy would give them “room in the belt” to work with, whereas a 45-cent/\$1,000 levy would “sustain” the current mode, essentially just plugging a hole in a sinking ship. The levy is expected to last four to five years, and voters should expect it to probably be an ongoing request.

He wants the community to consider whether they want a stable fire and ambulance service with reliable and increased response times, improved services, and better outcomes for fires and loved ones? Or are they okay with the current system that is declining?

“We are at a crossroads to determine the pathway,” he said. “We need help to serve you.”

More information can be found at [YesForFirefighters.com](http://YesForFirefighters.com).