

Mid Rogue Fire District FAQs and responses

How much is this going to cost?

The proposed fire district will cost property owners inside the district \$X.XX per \$1,000 on the assessed value of their property, but this only includes up to 5 acres of land. So, if the property owner had 20 acres of land she would be taxed on the improvements (structures) and 5 acres of land.

Will this Fire District cost us more than we are paying now?

Actually, this fire district will be a net savings for 65-70% of the property owners in the proposed fire district. Property owners will save even more if they file itemized tax returns (taxes paid are deductible). Property owners who subscribe to one of the two smaller private fire agencies, or currently have no fire protection contract, will see an increase in their annual household costs.

I already pay for fire protection in my taxes. Why am I being asked to pay more?

The fee for fire protection included in your tax bill is for the Oregon Department of Forestry. This fee funds wildland firefighters during the fire season only. These firefighters are mandated to protect the forest and natural resources on and around your property. They are not trained to fight structure fires or respond to the common types of life threatening emergencies normally left for fire districts, such as medical emergencies, car accidents, or rescues.

Aren't you hurting private enterprise and eliminating competition?

There is a good chance when the fire district is formed that all private fire agencies will eventually be asked to cease operations. Further, it is all but certain that if the elected board chooses to contract for fire protection instead of forming their own fire department, they would contract with a single agency. It is possible that the contract could go to one of the current three providers. However that decision would be the elected boards responsibility to make, in the best interest of the district's patrons. We believe the present system of individual companies contracting with individual property owners hurts the ability to have quality fire protection for the community. We believe allowing private companies to compete for contracts without regulation is an accident waiting to happen. To some degree it has already happened.

Any company that wants to say they are a fire department can do so regardless of training or equipment. They don't have to check in with the State or County. They don't have to prove they are capable of doing what they claim. They aren't required to follow any rules or regulations, such as even hair stylists or food service workers are.

Last year Josephine County's 911 agency received more than 2015 requests to respond to emergencies in the area proposed for the Mid Rogue Fire District. Only 212 of those emergency calls were fires. The rest were incidents such as car accidents, medical aids,

rescues, and fire alarms. Only one of the three private providers goes to all of these requests. Only one agency significantly covers the less profitable areas in the county. The other companies only respond to the fire calls, due to financial and/or certification reasons. That means one private fire agency responds to ten times the amount of calls that its competitors do, with little ability to recover costs for expenses. This is the only place in the United States that we know of where private fire companies compete from home to home on a neighborhood basis for subscriptions.

You are trying to force this upon us.

We are not. That's why it's going to a vote in November. The Josephine County Commissioners have fielded complaints about the current system for more than 30 years. An attempt was made to create a non-taxing Fire District in November of 2008. The hope was that forming a volunteer governing body would be enough to solve the current problems, but the district creation failed by about 700 votes. Time and again people opposed to the vote claimed it was a trick by the County to get taxpayers to give a "Blank Check" to local Government, and that voting on a district without any stated associated costs was a bad idea. Opponents failed to explain that members of the fire district could not legally be taxed for fire protection services, without a subsequent public vote on a tax base or levy.

We believe that the Board of County Commissioners had the best of intentions for proposing the formation of the Mid-Rogue Fire District. But some voters worried about future possible costs (taxes). We also believe the vote was close enough that a second attempt should be made that addresses the concerns of the opposition. This was why a tax base was added to this attempt to form the Mid-Rogue Fire District.

Isn't this just another level of bureaucracy for county government?

If and when this district passes, it will be a separate entity from Josephine County government. Just like the County's existing public fire and school districts, the Mid-Rogue Fire District would be an independent entity. The Board of County Commissioners will not control the Fire District's finances or operations.

Will you impose more laws on me?

This isn't the purpose of a fire district; however, the district would have the responsibility to enforce certain fire codes. Currently, fire codes in the proposed Fire District's area are only being enforced through the county planning department during the time of construction. Fire safety inspections for businesses and public places are currently optional, although many owners request them anyway, and may be required to by their insurance carrier.

People opposed to the previous vote made several statements that this new fire district would allow County Government to impose more rules on property owners and allow

government more power to impose regulations on private residences and private property. It is true that almost all fire districts have a fire marshal to enforce fire safety concerns. But their job is only to enforce fire safety rules on commercial property such as stores and schools. We don't know of any heavy handed enforcement for private residences that occurs in any fire district in Oregon. Oregon Department of Forestry regulates burning and fire safety issues during fire season already (and we are glad they do, for the safety of all of us).

Our current system is working and it's more efficient than a regular fire district.

The current system is broken. As an example, there are no less than 3 companies operating 4 fire stations within 4 miles of Merlin Oregon. All of them have a chief, staff, fire engines, overhead, and expenses. All three of the private departments must use resources to market their services and individually collect their revenue. When one company shows up before another at an emergency, valuable time is taken when deciding who the homeowner is contracted with, who is in charge, and who has the legal right to be there. Sometimes the agency responsible for putting a fire out on the property doesn't show up for as much as 30 minutes to an hour behind its competitors. Sometimes one company's paperwork is wrong, making them believe that a home is actually their responsibility when it is not, or vice versa.

Won't smaller districts be more efficient? Perhaps just my own community instead of lumping me in with such a large area.

Our neighboring Jackson County once had 22 fire districts. Through consolidation they now have 8. Larger districts are able to operate more efficiently. Smaller districts must individually hire, recruit, and train their personnel. In most cases they rely on reserves to carry the weight of the responses. There is no guarantee how many firefighters can respond at any given time, within a smaller district. Larger rural districts usually have a force of both full time paid firefighters and volunteers/reserves. This way they can ensure there is an adequate response to all incidents. Larger districts also tend to have better insurance ratings which often lowers insurance premiums for its members than those of smaller districts (thus saving many taxpayers even more money).

What is going on with the Fire Standards I have been hearing about?

After the failure of the last attempt at forming the Mid-Rogue Fire District, the County Commissioners felt they should enact standards for private fire agencies that want to operate a business in the proposed district's area. This has been going on for some time and by all accounts the process is moving very slowly. One of the key questions that surrounds the issue is enforcement. Nobody seems to know how the county will be able to enforce any of the rules they propose.

But the standards do little to solve other issues within the boundaries of the proposed district. The largest issue is the recent declaration by the State of Oregon to no longer recognize private fire companies as public agencies. This was in part due to a review of

their rules because of the trouble brewing in Josephine County. The State of Oregon had no way of acknowledging the validity of the private fire agencies claims, so now no statistics from private fire departments are accepted when accumulating data for the state in regards to fire safety matters. And because the private agencies are not recognized they cannot call the Governor for a request to implement the Conflagration Act. This is the way Medford and Ashland received state resources to battle the fires in Jackson County last Summer, which started the day before fire season was over. Now, we have to get a vote from the County Commissioners before we can ask for help. Valuable time is lost. When the state does send resources the people with the most knowledge about the region (the current local private firefighters) will not be allowed to participate.

Another great case in point illustrating the consequences of no standards – is the series of suspicious fires on Cloverlawn, where a single home burned 4 times from December to January 2010. Soon after, a neighboring property also had a suspicious fire. Because the State does not recognize private agencies, the suspicious fires had to be handled by the State Fire Marshal 's office and Oregon State Police out of Central Point. Neighbors were frustrated with the limited attention granted to the investigation of these series of fires. In a normal Fire district a fire investigator has legal abilities to take on this type of problem full time.

Why call it the Mid Rogue Fire District?

This was the name used during the previous attempt to form the fire district. The name is not permanent. An elected board could change the name to whatever they wanted.

About us,

We are a group of local community members that feel the need to change the way the community receives fire protection outside the Grants Pass city limits. Some of the members in the group are new to the area and have just become aware of the issues. Others others have lived here for decades and have been aware for some time.

It is fair to say that the need for a fire district was first recognized by emergency service personnel working in Josephine County. And it was recognized farther back than most can remember. However, it's also a fair statement that the current committee putting the proposal together is made up mostly of people with little or no connection to the fire service. If you would like to help or play a part in the upcoming campaign feel free to contact us here.

History Page

Controversy is not new when it comes to fire protection in Josephine County. Citizens outside of Grants Pass never got the momentum together to create a fire district. Other communities nearby succeeded such as Illinois Valley, Wolf Creek, and Williams. in 1957 Grants Pass Rural opened for business to offer a fire department to subscribers. No

tax money was involved. That same year the company sold to the Millers who still play a major role in the company today. but they were sometimes plagued by bad press. And while they did what they could with what they had, stories were regularly told about their inadequacies. In 1979 Valley Fire Service opened for business seeing an opportunity to offer the community another option. About 15 years later Valley Fires Service sold to Rural/Metro, a NASDAQ company based in Scottsdale Arizona that provides privatized emergency services across the country. About 5 years ago (around 2005) Inland Fire, another private fire company saw an opportunity to make a living and provide service to the community. Today, all three agencies compete in approximately 280 square miles outside the city limits of Grants Pass. This area contains about 14,000 structures give or take.

Only one of the three agencies responds to emergencies other than fires. Two of the three have had financial difficulties at one time or another. At least two of the three have had civil suits brought against them for what the plaintiffs considered either poor service, or poor judgment. None of them are recognized by Oregon's State Fire Marshall's Office as an emergency service provider. This is in part because the state reevaluated how they do business with private agencies and effectively cut off relationships with firms in the private sector that operate as community Fire Departments.