Too Little, Too Late: Rural Fire Protection in Lane County
Economic aspects of fire districts

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While sifting through the ashes on Feb. 15, Shaun Phay searched for salvageable items, discovering the bones of his neighbor’s perished dog. The remnants were from the blaze that burned the house to the ground at 37673 Row River Road in Dorena the previous day. Neighbors fought the fire with garden hoses, while waiting on a fire department that never arrived.

Neither the occupant of the burned home, nor Phay, nor many of the neighbors are inside a fire protection zone. That means that when a house catches on fire, no one comes to the rescue. “It really opened our eyes on how remote you are out here, Phay said. “You are and on your own.”

In addition to municipal fire departments, rural fire protection districts cover a large portion of Oregon. Out of the 315 fire departments in Oregon, 158 of them are primarily rural. In Lane County alone, there are 70 fire departments – 19 of which are predominantly rural and volunteer based. Most rural fire protection departments have small paid staffs and rely on volunteers to protect the lives and property of rural landowners.

But fire protection is not cheap.

Special fire districts are different from municipal fire departments because they receive their funding from property taxes and additional tax levies instead of the city budget. That means fire districts don’t need to compete for funding with public libraries, police departments, or other public services. On the flip side, if a person lives in an area that did not vote to pay taxes for fire protection, their home is outside of a fire district. According to John Wooten, Fire Chief for South Lane County Fire and Rescue, in Lane County alone, there are approximately 10,000 unprotected structures.

Even though South Lane provides fire protection for approximately 13,500 homes in the 132 square mile area of Cottage Grove, Creswell and rural South Lane County, it can’t protect everyone. Joe Raade, Fire/ EMS Training Division Chief for South Lane County Fire and Rescue, said that the lack of fire protection is a reality in the Cottage Grove area where approximately four to five houses burn down each year because they are outside of a fire protection district.

Because fire district’s funding is determined by taxes, each budget is different. In Eugene, the tax rate is TAX RATE, and in Springfield, the tax rate is TAX RATE. But in South Lane, the third lowest tax rate in Oregon, residents pay $1.03 per thousand dollars of assessed value. For example, homeowners of a $150,000 home would pay $154.5 in
fire protection taxes. The amount of money generated in each district determines what kinds of services are offered, and causes each budget to be different.

Raade said that the majority of his $2 million budget comes from ambulance fees and tax revenue. When compared to Eugene’s fire department’s $33.8 million budget and Springfield’s $17.7 budget, it’s clear that South Lane’s $2 million spending plan provides challenges when it comes to offering fire protection.

Two of the largest costs for fire and medical services are staff salaries and equipment. At South Lane, there is approximately $1.9 million dedicated to staff salaries and overtime. Capital expenses can also become costly. Raade said that fire engines cost about $300,000-$400,000, ambulances about $200,000 and fire trucks with a ladder can cost up to $1 million. At South Lane County Fire and Rescue, there are three fire engines, four ambulances and one fire truck. That is approximately $2.85 million in vehicles alone.

In order to maintain those vehicles, Raade said that South Lane spends about $98,500 on equipment maintenance each year to keep the equipment lasting as long as possible. He said that fire engines can last 15-20 years and ambulances only approximately four to five years. This is because ambulances run about 5,000 to 6,000 miles a month. The total fuel cost to run all the vehicles is about $53,000 each year.

“It’s not cheap to do business anymore if you’re a fire department,” Raade said.

For people not in a district, there are few options. One of these options is protection from the Department of Forestry, which covers the areas outside of fire protection districts. Rod Nichols, Public Information Officer for the Department of Forestry, said that the increasing population in forested areas changes the way that wild land fires are fought.

“We have to use a lot more fire fighting resources – more hand crews, more fire engines and in many cases helicopters,” Nichols said. “It costs a lot more.”

It’s not just the cost of services that are going up. The demand for fire and medical services is growing in Lane County too.

Terry Ney, Fire Chief for Lane Fire Authority, which protects an area west of Eugene, said that this past year, calls went up 10% from 4,300 to 4,700. According to Raade, calls to South Lane County Fire and Rescue also increased by about two or three a day.

Yet, even with this well-documented increase in demand, fire districts can’t increase their budgets because of voter-approved limitations on how much the tax rates are allowed to go up. This means that even though the number of calls for Lane Fire Authority is increasing by 10% yearly, Ney can only increase his budget by 3% each year.

“You have a loss of revenue on one side, and the inability to increase taxes to make up for that,” Ney said.
That can be a challenge when writing a budget. “When I sit down each year to write our budget for the next year, I have to do it backwards,” Ney said. “Instead of figuring out what I need, I have to go, “here is what we’re going to get, and how do I make our operations fit within that limit.”

Although volunteers reduce salary expenditures, they are not without costs. For South Lane, all volunteer firefighters are expected to attend a basic training for eight weekends in a row. “It’s everything from explaining this is a fire hose to this is how you put a fire out,” Raade said.

Additionally, volunteers continue training on Tuesdays as long as they are with South Lane County Fire and Rescue. “All firefighters are required to have a basic level of certification,” Stanton Nelson, former volunteer firefighter, said. “That’s the same whether you’re in the city or a volunteer situation in the country.” Raade estimated that it costs approximately $4,000-$5,000 to initially train a single person.

Volunteers and career personnel have to have the same gear too. It costs $6,000 to outfit a firefighter, regardless of whether the person is volunteering or being paid. In total, a volunteer still costs the fire department about $10,000 before they leave the station on their first call.

Fire Chief John Wooten for South Lane County Fire and Rescue said that the easiest way to battle small budgets is to pass tax levies, such as the levy passed in 2012 that raised the tax for fire districts from $1.04 to $1.50. That gave South Lane an extra $700,000 each year.

“If we didn’t get that levy we were going to be losing up to six of our career firefighter/paramedics, which means a drastic reduction in service,” Wooten said. “That is one ambulance per day that no longer responds [and] two less people on a fire truck that respond to a fire.”

But Wooten acknowledges it is hard to gain support from voters in deeply rural areas, such as Dorena.

“You can’t impose taxes on people that don’t vote for them,” Wooten said. “That’s why this issue has been tied up for so many years in Oregon because voters in those areas continuously, and routinely, vote down paying taxes for fire protection.”

For Shaun Phay, Dorena resident who fought his neighbor’s blaze with a garden hose, believes that many area residents continue to reject taxes for a fire protection district because they are either retired or low income, and paying more taxes is simply not an option.
“Probably the only option that people would really look at for increasing taxes out this way is if we had something local to us that was readily available that may or may not be volunteer based,” Phay said.

Wooten said that no change would come about without a change in the attitude of taxpayers. “The only thing that will change this is the voters deciding in those areas that they want fire protection and they vote to pay those taxes.”

Terry Ney of Lane Fire Authority agrees that stable funding is needed.

“What I would like to see in the future is some kind of consistent funding for all emergency services – fire, police, and emergency medical,” Ney said. “We really need to look at how we fund public safety statewide, not just locally, and come up with something to provide a stable adequate funding source.”

Phay and area residents are looking into options on how to protect the community of Dorena. Several people, including Phay, are interested in serving as a volunteer.

“It would be nice to have some sort of support from either a county or state fire district,” Phay said. “Or at least the backing of them for training, and maybe we can get a volunteer department here locally.”