

WEST BENTON REGIONAL FIRE AUTHORITY

Strategic Plan

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West Benton Regional Fire Authority

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Executive Summary

The following strategic plan represents the culmination of research into the improvement of fire and rescue service delivery of West Benton Regional Fire Authority. It has been determined that the need for improved fire and rescue service delivery is critical to the well-being of the community, and West Benton Regional Fire Authority does not currently have the funds to make the critical improvements.

An increase in the regular property tax levy for fire protection will bring the funds required to institute programs to decrease response times, increase the amount of community-based education and prevention and decrease insurance costs for property owners.

History

The City of Prosser Fire Department was established in 1903 in order to provide volunteer-based fire services to the newly established rural community. Nearly 50 years later, Benton County Fire District #3 (BCFD3) was created to provide fire services to residents living outside the city limits of Prosser.

Though these two agencies were separate legal entities, numerous joint ventures were undertaken throughout the years to increase efficiency and reduce costs. In 1997, a joint fire station was built in the City of Prosser which served as the headquarters for both agencies.

Not long after the joint station was built, the Fire Commissioners of Benton County Fire District #3 and the Prosser City Council determined that the partnership between their respective fire departments was ready to escalate to the next level. In 2001 the two agencies signed an interlocal agreement and created Prosser Fire District #3, a new joint-venture agency which provided fire and rescue services to both the City of Prosser and BCFD#3 response areas.

This joint agency continued to grow, and the operational staffing was increased in 2007 by hiring two full-time Captains. To aid with the busy summer fire season, two part-time personnel were hired in 2014. These personnel made a big impact by being immediately available to fight fast moving wildland fires by getting resources on scene quickly, keeping fires small. This practice of hiring seasonal firefighters continues to this day.

In 2013, Prosser Fire District #3 commissioned a Citizen Task Force to determine the level of service desired throughout the community, and a full report was issued outlining

their findings. The Citizens Task Force found that the interlocal governance model and funding mechanisms was hampering growth and recommended a change.

West Benton Regional Fire Authority, commonly known as West Benton Fire Rescue, was formed in 2015 by a vote of the people. This move officially joined the City of Prosser Fire Department and Benton County Fire District #3 to create the first Regional Fire authority in Eastern Washington. The creation of West Benton Regional Fire Authority, brought both agencies together under common administration, pooled together all assets and created a single funding source through a property tax levy payed equally by all property owners of the response area.

Citizens Task Force Report

The creation of West Benton Regional Fire Authority was a direct result of the recommendations of the Task Force. The Citizens Task Force was tasked with providing the City of Prosser/Benton County Fire District #3 Joint Fire Board with a independent observations and recommendations from their constituents. These recommendations identified gaps in service, current challenges of the organization, priorities and strategic initiatives to incorporate into planning and acknowledged the positive things taking place in the organization.

West Benton Regional Fire Authority continues to use the report as a guidance when planning for the future. Additional recommendations by the Citizens Task Force include:

- Create a level of service related business plan for 1, 5 and 10 years
- Develop purchase, improvement and maintenance plans for the fleet, facilities, equipment
- Develop cash set asides for fleet replacement, facility repair and improvement, equipment replacement and ensure that the department is fully funding the replacement plans
- Focus attention on finishing the upstairs dorms t promote night shift operations to improve call time response overall
- Develop a response staffing plan in conjunction with business plan

A copy of the *Prosser Fire District #3 Task Force Final Report 2013* is available online at www.westbentonfirerescue.org.

Protection Class

Washington Survey and Ratings Bureau assigns a “Fire Protection Class Rating” to all properties in the State of Washington. Insurance companies can subscribe to this independent rating agency to receive pertinent information regarding the level of fire protection that a property has and uses the information to set the insurance rate accordingly.

Ratings are set on a scale of 1-10, with 1 being the best fire protection you can get. Currently, properties located within the City Limits receive a fire rating of 6, and County properties in our jurisdiction receive either a 7, 8 or 9 depending on their exact location.

Current Operations

West Benton Regional Fire Authority provides fire, rescue and life safety services to more than 13,000 people located over 176 square miles of Benton County; including the City of Prosser and the unincorporated community of Whitstran. Our three full-time, two part-time seasonal and 26 volunteer emergency personnel responded to 618 emergency calls for service in 2018.

Recent changes in career staff positions were triggered by the retirement of the Fire Chief, who had held the post for 24 years. The new Fire Chief, a 17-year veteran of the fire service, was promoted from his position as Operations Captain. The Training Captain moved into Operations and the vacant Training Captain was filled from the volunteer ranks. Furthermore, the addition of a full-time Administrator saw all contracted administrative functions brought in-house.

The headquarter fire station, located in Prosser, is staffed during the daytime Monday through Friday. Our Whitstran station has no daytime staffing and is manned 100% by volunteers. When emergencies occur in the evenings or on the weekends, firefighters respond from their homes or places of employment, to the station where they change into their equipment and drive fire apparatus to the incident.

Personnel provide services utilizing a very diverse fleet of emergency vehicles including 3 structure engines, 1 ladder truck, 3 water tenders, 4 grass trucks, 4 command vehicles, 1 water rescue package (response vehicle, raft and equipment) and a heavy equipment package (semi-truck and trailer, ATV, bulldozer and disc).

Services provided by West Benton Regional Fire Authority include structural firefighting, wildland firefighting, hazardous materials response, swiftwater rescue, vehicle and machinery extrication and emergency medical care and treatment.

Community programs offered include child fire safety education, fire extinguisher training classes, car seat installation and inspection, smoke detector installation and soon will include a community life jacket loaner program.

West Benton Regional Fire Authority provides and receives firefighting assistance throughout Yakima, Benton, Franklin, Walla Walla and Columbia Counties. Additionally, partnerships are in place with WA Department of Natural Resources, US Fish and Wildlife and the Bureau of Land Management.

Financial

The annual budget for West Benton Regional Fire Authority is \$1,185,414.58 for 2019. 89% of our budget is to cover the cost of operations, leaving very little dedicated to replacing our aging facilities, apparatus or equipment or increase staffing.

West Benton Regional Fire Authority is funded primarily through a voter approved levy, paid through property taxes, to provide fire, rescue and other emergency services. This limits the department to essentially the same amount of revenue each year, plus a one percent increase as allowed by law. With inflation currently running between 2% and 4%, this means that fire departments must, from time to time, ask the voters for additional revenue. If the demand or cost for emergency services exceeds the available revenue, voters are asked to increase funding by returning the levy rates to a previously approved amount through a "Levy Lid Lift."

West Benton Fire Rescue operates under a balanced budget and has passed all independent audits by the state and most capital purchases are planned for and paid for out of the annual budget. Any debt that we have taken on to pay for apparatus or fire stations has always been paid off early, saving taxpayers thousands. We partner with neighboring agencies to save money on training costs and have recently lowered our administrative costs by actively pursuing more cost-effective methods of doing business.

Needs

Staffing

Over the last 10 years, emergent calls for service have increased by 83%, while operational staffing has only increased by two-part time seasonal staff. Recruitment of new volunteers has been effective to maintain volunteer ranks, but not increase it to create a more effective response force. Volunteers must devote over 400 hours to training in their first year. Many find devoting that much time difficult, if not impossible.

West Benton Regional Fire Authority has a goal, guided by national standards backed by community input, to reach an emergency incident within 8 minutes. Unfortunately, the time it takes for personnel to respond to the station, put on their protective equipment and respond on an emergency vehicle takes up the majority of the 8 minute target time. Staffing the headquarter station with 24/7 staffing is a priority to ensure prompt service to our citizens.

Equipment

Much of the equipment at West Benton Regional Fire Authority is near the end of its service life, with no dedicated funding for replacement. Thermal imaging cameras, hydraulic rescue tools, radio equipment, chain saws and water rescue suits all have a life expectancy

One example is the self-contained breathing apparatus which we use to enter smoke filled atmospheres. They have less than 3 years of service life left and will cost nearly \$250,000 to replace. Without this vital piece of equipment, we will no longer be able to enter burning buildings, handle hazardous atmospheres or even effectively respond to a carbon monoxide alarm at a residence.

Apparatus

Fire trucks are much more than transportation to an emergency scene, rather highly specialized pieces of equipment with a host of intricate systems to provide fast, reliable service to the user. Multiple laws and standards detail the maintenance, operation and testing of these specialized vehicles. The older the apparatus is, the more maintenance they require to keep them within acceptable limits.

The National Fire Protection Association states apparatus over 15 years should be placed in reserve status, and vehicles over 25 years old should be removed from service. Additionally, Washington Survey and Rating Bureau gives less credit for

apparatus over 15 years old, and once a unit hits 25 years old you get no credit for having it, negatively effecting the protection class rating and potentially increasing fire insurance costs.

West Benton Regional Fire Authority has one structure engine that is 25 years old, and two that are 21 years old, with no dedicated replacement dollars.

Areas of improvement

The Fire Commissioners and Staff have investigated and identified multiple different areas of service delivery which must be improved. Utilizing a holistic approach, the current level of service was investigated, and areas of needed improvement were identified.

Response Time

The Citizen Task Force Report (2013) outlined the need for improvement of our response times. The majority of people surveyed by the Citizen Task Force reported the desire to have trained firefighters on scene 8-10 minutes after calling 911.

For firefighters to reach an emergency, there are four major components of the response that must be completed:

1. Call Processing Time - The amount of time it takes from the initial 911 call and that call being dispatched out to firefighters.
2. Turnout Time - The time it takes firefighters to respond to the call after being dispatched.
3. Drive Time - The amount of time it takes for the fire truck to get from the fire station to the scene.
4. Effective Response Force - The amount of time it takes for an appropriate number of responders to arrive at an emergency.

Our responses meet the 8-minute goal 53% of the time. After investigating each category listed above, it was found that our Volunteer “respond from home” personnel model would never allow us to meet our goal, indicating the need to staff our headquarter station with 24/7 personnel to be ready to immediately respond to an emergency. The move to staff personnel 24/7 is estimated to decrease the overall response time by 3-5 minutes.

Fire Protection Class

In 2016, the Washington Survey and Rating Bureau visited West Benton Regional Fire Authority to inspect the operation and update the Fire Protection Class Rating which they assign to fire departments.

The Washington Survey and Rating Bureau is an independent information gathering and publishing organization, who provides their findings to insurance companies. The insurance companies who utilize the WSRB service take the Fire Protection Class Rating into account when determining insurance premiums for their customers. Fire Protection Class Ratings are on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 indicates exemplary service and 10 indicates insufficient capabilities to qualify for any insurance credit.

West Benton Regional Fire Authority had historically been issued a Protection Class rating of 5 in the City and areas directly surrounding, and either an 8,9 or 10 in the county, depending on distance away from the fire stations. The report that was issued in April of 2017 showed that WSRB had recorded a drop in the protection class of the City (6), but issued an increase in the rating for the County (7,8,9)

The grading system covers 4 main topics:

- Water Supply - Hydrants, pumps and supply in the City and water tender capacity in the County
- Fire Department - Station distribution, pumping capacity, personnel and training
- Emergency Communications - effectiveness of the emergency communication system used
- Fire Safety Control - Inspection and code enforcement process

To summarize the last report on the graded categories, some areas were improved upon while some fell victim to stagnation and failing to increase the service relative to the demand. Specific improvements and deficiencies are summarized as:

- ✓ Water Supply - The City of Prosser has done a great deal of improvement on the water storage and distribution, as well as hydrant maintenance and upgrades in much needed areas. The water supply in the rural areas is sufficient with the number of water tenders that are deployed, and residents receive an additional tender credit, which is a benefit.
- ✓ Fire Department - Failure to plan and grow became evident in this category. Age of apparatus, lack of 24/7 department staffing, training and lack of personnel on scene were categories where WSRB issued the most deficiency points. Major improvements are needed in this heavily weighted category to bring the Fire Department in line with the size of the response area and growth of the City.

- ✓ Emergency Communications - Good performance in this category is a direct result of dispatching services being provided by Benton County Emergency Services (SECOMM).
- ✓ Fire Safety Control - With the creation of the Regional Fire Authority in 2015, requirement and authority to conduct all Fire and Life Safety Inspections within the city limits of Prosser became the legal responsibility of the City. Lack of a proper Fire and Life Safety Program caused a large deficiency in this category.

Facilities

Our Headquarter Fire Station was built in 1997, followed by our Whitstran Fire Station opening in 2001. These facilities are in average to good condition but repairs on building systems are becoming more frequent and costlier. Unfortunately, throughout the years, no funds have been put into a reserve account for the repair or replacement of aging systems, causing money to be taken out of the operating budget. For example, to make much needed HVAC repairs, \$40,000 had to be removed from the operating budget for 2019.

Capital Facilities needs have been identified for the next 30 years, and funding is needed to put into a Capital Facilities Reserve Account to ensure that facilities are maintained and repaired as needed.

To house staff 24/7 at our Headquarter Fire Station, resident quarters must be built, and other legally required upgrades must be made.

Fleet

The current fleet is aging, and much like our facilities, no funds have been set aside for the replacement of fire trucks. Having 3 structural engines at or near the end of their life, which cost between \$500,000 and \$600,000, funding these purchases out of our operational budget is impossible. With dwindling discretionary areas of the budget, the voters are the only way apparatus will be replaced.

As the Citizen Task Force identified in their report, an Apparatus Replacement Fund must be created and maintained in order to ensure that West Benton Regional Fire Authority always has the proper equipment to respond and mitigate incidents.

Staffing

More staff is needed to handle the ever-increasing call volume as well as to improve the amount of time that Firefighters are available to lead community education and outreach programs.

The 24/7 staffing model that has been identified to work best with the identified needs of our community is a Resident Firefighter Program, a model that is successfully deployed in 3 other Benton County agencies.

Resident Firefighter Programs provide housing, training and college tuition reimbursement in exchange for them being on shift and responding to calls. The resident program would be mutually beneficial between the personnel and the community while providing young people in the community an opportunity they may not otherwise have.

In addition to a resident program, hiring a full-time Captain/Resident Coordinator is critical to ensure that the residents have a mentor while training and someone helping while they grow professionally.

Building upon a resident program, additional paid Firefighters would be hired to compliment the 24/7 staffing arrangement. These Firefighters would provide professional level oversight and guidance to the Residents 24/7, oversee emergency responses and perform Company Level Fire and Life Safety Inspections on business occupancies within the City of Prosser through an interlocal agreement.

Funding

To meet the above stated goals, the funding of the Regional Fire Authority must be investigated and improved. There are many funding mechanisms that can be used to repair, maintain and replace fleet, facilities and equipment, but few are at no cost to the taxpayers. Below are some of the funding mechanisms that were acknowledged during the planning process:

1. Grants - In 2018, WBRFA received over \$12,000 of grants through various entities and are still waiting on word back on over \$250,000 worth of grant requests. Unfortunately, grants are scarce, and the amount of capitol needed to fully fund the emergency services we provide needs to be reliable.
2. Voter-Approved Bonds - Via ballot measure, these bonds are a loan, paid back by the voters through property taxes in excess of what an agency already collects. These bonds are charged interest.
3. General Obligation Bonds - These are not approved by the voters, and are loans paid back through an agency's regular property tax collection. No increase in tax is seen by the voter and the agency must have the ability to make the payments. These bonds are charged interest.
4. Levy Lid Lift - This is a voter approved increase in property tax. Regional Fire Authorities can only levy up to \$1.50 per \$1000 of assessed property value for

fire protection. Every dollar levied goes directly to the agency and interest does not apply.

After exhaustive research into funding sources was completed, it was determined by the Governance Board that the proper method of fully funding West Benton Regional Fire Authority was to ask the voters for a Levy Lid Lift. Furthermore, West Benton Regional Fire Authority needs to levy their full statutory amount in order to make the necessary improvements to emergency service delivery. Without a voter approved increase in funding, there will likely be a drop in the level of emergency services that the community depends on.

In order to keep the overall tax burden of the voters at a minimum, West Benton Regional Fire Authority determined that a sliding levy implementation should be employed. This would increase the regular fire levy to \$1.30/\$1000 for the first year, followed by 4% increases over the following 4 years.

This method of taxation would create cash reserves for apparatus replacement, equipment replacement, facilities repair and maintenance, 24/7 staffing via a Resident firefighter program and paid staff as well as putting West Benton Regional Fire Authority on a path to being fiscally solvent.

Implementation

Upon receiving additional levy funds, many new projects and programs will be instituted covering staffing, fleet, facilities, equipment and program improvement. To detail the improvements, West Benton Regional Fire Authority has adopted the following strategic initiatives.

Many of the initiatives will be instituted within the first few years of receiving funding, in which citizens would realize the benefit through shorter response times, lower insurance rates and an increase in community support programs.

Strategic Initiative #1

Plan and construct sleeping quarters to house 24/7 emergency personnel at headquarter fire station.

Benefits

- ✓ Provides an area for staffing 24/7 by paid, part-time, volunteer or resident emergency responders,
- ✓ Provides an area in which firefighters can be housed in case of natural disaster to ensure continuity of emergency services,
- ✓ Upon completion, current volunteer staffing will be given the opportunity to staff station 24/7 on a rotation shift basis.
- ✓ Reduce insurance rates and improving fire protection class rating by having 24/7 staffing ready to respond to emergencies

Timeline

Ready to house 24/7 personnel early-2020

Cost

\$250,000-\$350,000 based upon previous costs analysis.

Strategic Initiative #2

Hire one FTE, Captain/Resident Coordinator to staff

Benefits

- ✓ Administers Resident Firefighting Program, coordinating staffing, training, college course work and professional development of resident firefighters.
- ✓ Additional staffing for emergency incidents, fire prevention and community support
- ✓ Command level support and response
- ✓ Create and maintain Explorer Program for Volunteer Firefighting in joint venture with Prosser High School
- ✓ Reduce insurance rates and improving fire protection class rating by having more command staff and more staffing to respond to incidents

Timeline

FTE to be added January of 2020

Cost

\$105,000 *estimated per year

Strategic Initiative #3

Hire six Resident Firefighters to provide 24/7 staffing at headquarter station

Benefits

- ✓ 24/7 staffing to provide reduced response times to emergency incidents
- ✓ Provide increased staffing for new and expanded fire department programs
- ✓ Reduce insurance rates and improving fire protection class rating by having 24/7 staffing ready to respond to emergencies

Timeline

Projected full program staffing Mid-2020

Cost

\$172,000 per year

Strategic Initiative #4

Expand first-aid/CPR program, fire safety education and community prevention projects

Benefits

- ✓ Provide quality first-aid/CPR training throughout the community on a more frequent basis
- ✓ Conduct Exit Drills in the Home (EDITH) training in schools during fire prevention week
- ✓ Provide expanded access to fire station tours, home based fire drill planning and smoke detector program
- ✓ Create and execute wildland fuels projects in fire prone areas with fuel reduction, fire break and community education
- ✓ Reduce insurance rates and improving fire protection class rating by improving Fire Safety Control programs

Timeline

Projected full program staffing Jan 2021

Cost

\$50,000 per year

Strategic Initiative #5

Establish and maintain a fully funded apparatus replacement plan

Benefits

- ✓ Keep fleet up to date and compliant with National Fire Protection Association and Washington Survey and Ratings Bureau requirements
- ✓ Ensure that firefighters have safe, reliable equipment to respond on emergency incidents
- ✓ Reduce insurance rates and improving fire protection class rating by having apparatus compliant with National Fire Protection Association guidelines
- ✓ Reduce annual maintenance and repair budget
- ✓ Cash purchases save the taxpayers interest

Timeline

2020 - 2022 Replace 26-year-old structure engine, replace 34-year-old water tender, replace 20-year-old grass truck, replace 16-year-old grass truck, replace 10-year-old command vehicle

2023 - 2024 Replace 11-year-old command vehicle, replace two 25-year-old structure engines, replace 41-year-old dozer

2025 and beyond, apparatus replacement based on fully funded replacement model, reevaluating every year to ensure validity of model

Cost

\$326,600 per year

Strategic Initiative #6

Establish and maintain a fully funded equipment replacement plan

Benefits

- ✓ Replace equipment to ensure firefighters have up to date, fully functional and compliant with recognized best practices, industry standards and laws
- ✓ Deploy equipment that is standardized to the region, increasing interoperability and safety while handling emergencies
- ✓ Reduce equipment maintenance budget by purchasing up to date, warranted and low cost of ownership items
- ✓ Reduce likelihood of occupational firefighter cancers by instituting best practices determined by the International Association of Fire Chiefs
- ✓ Reduce insurance rates and improving fire protection class rating by having equipment compliant with current National Fire Protection Association standards

Timeline

2020 - 2023 Purchase new Thermal Imaging Cameras, Self-Contained Breathing Apparatus, mobile radios, portable radios, chain saws, positive pressure fans, fire hose, structural firefighting clothing and installing a fire station vehicle exhaust system

2024 and beyond, equipment replacement based on fully funded replacement model, reevaluating every year to ensure validity of model

Cost

\$37,253 per year

Strategic Initiative #7

Establish and maintain a fully funded capital facility repair and upgrade plan

Benefits

- ✓ Continue to provide our meeting space for non-profit community and governmental organizations
- ✓ Provide safe, efficient and organized work space for firefighters to perform daily work, firefighter training and community classes
- ✓ Ensure that facilities continue to operate during times of natural disaster or mass service outages
- ✓ Provide firefighters well-maintained facilities that support the mission of emergency services
- ✓ Reduce insurance rates and improving fire protection class rating by ensuring that building systems operate independently during times of disaster

Timeline

2020 - 2023 Replace HVAC controls at headquarter fire station, install new floor coverings, install new emergency communications network, replace apparatus bay doors, replace emergency generator, replace office equipment, pave the storage area lot and resurface parking lots

2024

Cost

\$84,142 per year

Strategic Initiative #8

Hire two FTE Firefighters and two additional Resident Firefighters, move paid staff to a 24-hour shift rotation.

Benefits

- ✓ More 24/7 staffing allows for a more effective initial response force to emergency incidents
- ✓ Provides career staff leadership at fire station 24/7
- ✓ Reduction in amount of command vehicles needed
- ✓ Reduction in overtime budget
- ✓ Company Level Fire Inspections performed on business occupancies in the City of Prosser through an Interlocal Agreement
- ✓ Reduce insurance rates and improving fire protection class rating by improving Fire Safety Control programs

Timeline

Mid 2021

Cost

\$225,000 *estimated per year