

Providing All-Hazard Emergency Services to the Whitefish Area

December 2020

Updated 03/09/2021.

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ABSTRACT

This *white paper* looks at how the Whitefish Fire Department (WFD) can continue to provide all-hazard emergency services to the City of Whitefish (City), the Whitefish Fire Service Area (WFSA) and portions of the Flathead Fire Service Area (FFSA).

These all-hazard services include:

- Emergency Medical Services (EMS) at the Paramedic level.
- Structural firefighting.
- Wildland firefighting (initial attack and structure protection).
- Hazardous materials response at the operations level.
- A variety of rescue disciplines including:
 - vehicle extrication.
 - water and ice rescue.
 - low angle rope rescue.
 - confined space rescue.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The City, WFSA, and the portions of the FFSA protected by the WFD continue to grow in both the number and size of structures, resident population, and tourist population, along with the risks associated with a small city surrounded by both rural and remote areas. The Whitefish area also faces huge risks associated with our wildland fire urban interface, the BNSF rail line running through our City, and the unwanted attention by hate groups.

The problem facing the Whitefish Fire Department is its ability to continue to provide the necessary all-hazard emergency services with the constant increase in population and building expansions without an equal expansion in the staffing and equipment in the fire department. This problem is complex and does not include just one issue but rather a multitude of interwoven issues.

The issues the Whitefish Fire Department are facing are:

- 1- Staffing (career, part-time, resident, volunteer)
- 2- Adequate / Equitable Coverage (station locations, response time)
- 3- Adequate / Equitable Funding (Municipal, District, Service Area, Authority)
- 4- Equipment Needs (Ladder Truck / Rescue Boat)
- 5- Financial Support for a long-term Capital Improvement Plan

Issue 1 STAFFING

There is a shortage of firefighting personnel due to the loss of volunteers while facing a growing population and calls for service without growth in our staffing.

At the same time the WFD has experienced a growth in calls for service, they have also experienced a loss in the number of volunteers leading to the need to supplement our staffing with some career firefighters. Moving from an all-volunteer work force to a combination of volunteer and career firefighters has been costly. As the need for additional career staff increases so does the portion of the WFD budget that must be diverted from facilities, apparatus, and equipment to cover salaries and benefits.

Having career firefighters in the fire station 24-7-365 while costly does provide a much higher level of service to the public as response time is greatly improved.

Career Firefighters also have the time to obtain and maintain several highly skilled certifications that most volunteers find unrealistic. While this specialized training provided to the career staff is also offered to our volunteers, most volunteers find the additional time commitment too much.

Today, the small number of career Firefighter/Paramedics, typically four on duty each day, can handle the bulk of the calls for service, however the lack of depth once provided by our volunteers has dwindled. During some emergencies such as, structure fires, wildland fires, motor vehicle accidents, or simultaneous calls for service, we find ourselves short staffed. Maintaining the four Firefighter minimum staffing level with our current staff has created some fatigue as we often have to require our Firefighters to work extra hours beyond their already scheduled 53-hour average work week to cover for sick and injured colleagues.

Mutual aid from neighboring fire departments has proven to be unreliable as their response times are often lengthy and they are also experiencing similar volunteer recruitment and retention problems. There are times when some departments cannot even muster a crew to respond to help us at all. Many of our high-risk operations require proper staffing levels prior to commencing operations and our on-duty staff is faced with making some very tough decisions between conducting unsafe / risky operations or waiting for adequate staffing.

Issue 2 ADEQUATE / EQUITABLE COVERAGE

Properties outside of five road miles from a fire station have longer response times and higher insurance costs.

While the fire department's response areas have seen an increase in the number of housing units, they have not added the facilities and equipment needed to properly protect this growth. The lack of fire protection in these areas has resulted in property owners not only burdened by higher insurance rates but subject to longer response times which is always critical in emergency situations.

Emergency services is all about a timely response. During medical emergencies like strokes or heart attacks minutes count. Fires start out small and are easier to contain but grow at an exponential rate making them more dangerous and harder to control over time. As our calls for service continue to expand out into the rural and remote areas, servicing these calls from a single urban fire station results in a very unequal response time across our customer base.

Fire departments are often equated to insurance companies as they both are tied to property value. Insurance companies look at the risk vs. the property value when setting rates. One area they look at is fire protection and insurance companies rate each fire department's ability to protect the properties in their response area. A common tool used by the insurance industry is the Insurance Services Office's (ISO) Property Protection Classification (PPC). ISO rates fire departments on a scale from 1 (best) to 10 (basically no fire protection). While ISO evaluates several items like; staffing, equipment, training, and water supply, they also look at distance from a fire station. Properties beyond 5-road miles from a fire station are rated an ISO-PPC of 10, essentially no fire protection. This results in much higher insurance rates for these properties.

See [appendix A](#) for a map of Flathead County showing the dispersion of fire stations and their 5-road mile effective response areas.

A study I conducted a few years ago looked at a fictitious \$1,000,000 home located in our service area, north of town, to find out what the insurance rate would be if we had a fire station within 5-road miles of the home.

Based on the two quotes I received from a single insurance company:

If beyond 5-miles, it receives an ISO-PPC of 10 and quoted \$5,126.00 annually.

If within 5-miles, it receives an ISO-PPC of 5 and quoted \$2,452.00 annually.

This is just one home and while I do not expect this kind of savings across the board it shows further study is needed. Recently a study was conducted by the Kearney Student Lab Program at Carnegie Mellon University. Their results will be published shortly.

Issue 3 ADEQUATE / EQUITABLE FUNDING

City residents are paying approximately 55 mils for emergency services, the outlying areas are paying about 19 mils or less for the same service, except for distance traveled.

Compounding the problems is the fact that the Whitefish Fire Department provides emergency services to several different governing bodies.

Operationally the fire department sees our response area as one area. Other than distance traveled our response is the same, however funding is far from equitable.

Typically, the fire service, like the insurance industry, is funded based on the property value they protect. With the addition of emergency medical services, we are now seeing a cost of “readiness” model providing funding for EMS. Essentially this model calculates the cost to have a service available to respond at any time 24-7-365.

There are a few different ways the fire service is organized and funded in Montana.

- Municipal Fire Departments are funded through the City’s General Fund which is derived from a mil levy against taxable value.
- Fire Districts are funded through a mil levy against taxable value.
- Fire Service Areas are funded by a fixed fee per structure.

Within Flathead County there are 3 Municipalities, 17 Fire Districts, and 2 Fire Service Areas. Each of these fire organizations provide a different type and level of service to their communities. The taxpayer support that each fire agency receive also varies.

See appendix B for a list of Flathead County fire department taxpayer support.

The governing bodies that provide funding to the Whitefish Fire Department are:

City of Whitefish: The WFD is a City department, all firefighters are either city employees or they volunteer for the City. The City owns, maintains, and insures all the vehicles. Financial support from the City for the fire department comes from several sources:

- a 24-mil taxpayer supported levy on properties within the City.
- a portion of the City’s general fund.

In 2019 the sum of these two was about 55-mils for the fire department. Additionally, fees for service from the WFSA and the Flathead County EMS listed below are added.

Whitefish Fire Service Area: The WFD provides fire protection to the WFSA via an interlocal agreement. As a Fire Service Area, they collect a fixed fee of \$144 per year per *residential structure equivalent* for fire protection. The WFSA does own, without mortgage, and maintain a fire station building and training tower in the south east corner of their area. They do not own any vehicles or equipment and they have no employees or volunteers currently.

In 2019 the money they collected equated to just under 19-mils total. However, of the approximate 19-mils they collected, the WFSA paid the City only approximately 12-mils for fire protection services.

Flathead Fire Service Area: The WFD provides fire protection to a small portion of the FFSA on an as needed basis. As a Fire Service Area, they collect a fixed fee of \$90 per year per *residential structure equivalent* for fire protection.

The FFSA has no fire stations, apparatus, or firefighters so they depend on the closest fire department to protect the homes in their area. However, the FFSA does NOT send any of the \$90 dollars they collect to those fire departments in remuneration. Fire departments can bill for service after the fact, but that rarely happens.

As some areas in the FFSA have seen significant development, they should be annexing out of the FFSA into the closest fire department's area but there is no requirement to do so

Flathead Emergency Medical Service: The WFD provides EMS services to portions of Flathead County via an interlocal agreement with Flathead EMS. The WFD covers an area that includes the City of Whitefish, the WFSA, portions of the FFSA, and the Olney Fire District combined. The WFD also, on occasion, assists departments as far away as Eureka.

The Fire Department does receive a small per call contribution from Flathead EMS and also bills the patients they transport for the ambulance service provided. However, these revenue sources do NOT cover the full cost of running an ambulance service. The City's general fund contribution makes up the difference for the entire coverage area.

Issue 4 EQUIPMENT NEEDS

Ladder Truck - Building within the City has outgrown the WFD's ability to adequately fight fires in many of these taller and larger structures because WFD does not have a Ladder Truck.

The City continues to grow with taller and larger buildings surpassing our ability to properly place a master stream device in service for firefighting or even reach the upper floors or roof line with our ground ladders.

Fires not quickly handled in a large building can spread to adjacent buildings and also produce ember showers, that in addition to threatening nearby buildings, can during hot dry windy days, become a huge wildland fire risk.

Without a ladder truck many of our commercial businesses are now paying higher insurance premiums than they should. The insurance industry (ISO) credits a ladder truck to serve buildings within 2-1/2 road miles of its fire station. The insurance industry (ISO) will seek credit for a ladder truck when there are at least 5-buildings:

- 3-stories or more than 32 feet high.
- with a needing a fire flow greater than 3,500-gpm.
(Needed fire flow considers a building's length, width, height, construction materials, occupancy, exposures, and alarm system.)

Currently mutual-aid departments with ladder trucks are Big Mountain, Columbia Falls, West Valley, Evergreen, and Kalispell. Unfortunately, none are close enough for Whitefish to receive any ISO credit or to have a timely enough response to make a true firefighting difference.

Fan Boat - Replace the two current water rescue vehicles owned by WFD that are either not suitable for the need or are out of service at this time.

Our hovercraft located at City Beach is used for ice/open water rescue. The hovercraft operates great on a partially frozen lake however it is not large enough to bring a patient onboard.

Our old inflatable rescue boat's engine is too old to service and it has air leaks thus currently is Out-Of-Service and beyond repair.

An appropriately sized fan boat could serve as both an ice/water rescue boat and can be used on the river and lakes within our response area.

Issue 5 FUNDED VEHICLE REPLACEMENT PROGRAM

The WFD currently has no long-term vehicle replacement fund which has resulted in being unprepared to replace our expensive vehicles on schedule.

Our current five-year Capital Improvement Plan has left us unprepared for the replacement of our more expensive vehicles especially when they age out at the same time. I've laid out a long-term replacement schedule for our fleet. The different types of vehicles in our fleet reflect the diversity of our mission and the risks we face within our response area.

Funding cannot be obtained in short term budgets. There are costly vehicles in our fleet and the cost needs to be spread out over the long term to prevent unmanageable spikes in funding needs.

Our current fleet consists of:

*(Note: * denotes 1 or more vehicles is beyond their replacement date.)*

- (3) Ambulances 1st-out, 2nd-out, and Reserve also used as our COVID-19 bus.
- (3) Engines* 1st-due, 2nd-due, and Reserve.
- (2) Brush Trucks Smaller vehicles for 2-track or off-road wildland firefighting.
- (2) Command* Chief and Asst Chief's cars.
- (1) Utility* Snowplow plus used to haul contaminated equipment from a fire scene.
- (1) Tender Carries water for initial attack.
- (1) Rescue Truck* Carries rescue equipment.
- (1) Fire Boat* Docked in the Lake during summer months mostly for water rescue.
- (1) Hovercraft* Housed at City Beach used for ice rescue.
- (1) 6X-UTV Used to help transport patient off road or support wildfire attack.
- (1) Rescue Boat* Used for lake and river rescue or hazmat boom deployment.

Reference: 1st-out is the vehicle that will be used first by our staff.
2nd-out is the vehicle that will be used for either a simultaneous call or when a second vehicle of this type is needed.
Reserve vehicles are used to fill in when a 1st or 2nd due vehicle is out of service for maintenance or repair.

See appendix C for my vehicle replacement plan and our current vehicle status.

PLAN

We need to work together to improve the level of service and meet the growing risks facing the Whitefish area. This is not a City vs. Rural issue, or Career vs. Volunteer issue. There are already several different projects underway and with continued cooperation, the synergy of our collective efforts will help us plan and implement a true fire department master plan that addresses our current and future needs.

The projects underway now are:

- The Kearney Student Lab Program at Carnegie Mellon University has been looking at the need for satellite stations and insurance savings.
- A Fire Department Master Plan funded in my FY21 budget and is out for quotes from experienced emergency services consulting firms.

I am a City employee, and the Whitefish FD is a City Department, however myself and our Firefighters truly view and respond to our combined service areas as a single area. Current plans do not seek to divide us but rather strengthen our cooperative efforts.

STAFFING

Staffing is by far the biggest concern. Besides not meeting industry standards during larger events like structure fires, we often leave our station empty due to simultaneous ambulance calls. Our Firefighters often are left to do more with less, taking huge risks and increasing the chance for injuries. Staffing is not a career vs. volunteer issue, we are and will continue to be a combination fire department with both career and volunteer firefighters. Hiring more firefighters sounds like an easy answer but until we find an additional funding source this is not possible.

RESIDENT VOLUNTEER PROGRAM

A Resident Volunteer Program is a solution that would work for WFD. This program offers college students a place to live for free in exchange for on-duty time. This is a program that has proven successful all across the country but does require a few requirements on our part:

- Career staff and Resident staff cannot reside in the same living facility because the shifts and living situations are not compatible.
- Resident facilities need to meet dorm style requirements because this is where the Resident Volunteers will live, even when off shift.
- Proper supervision is required by either a senior Resident or a Career member.

The Resident Volunteer program requires the addition of 6 bedrooms at one or more future satellite fire stations and/or adding the bedrooms onto station 22, the WFSA's existing station in the south east corner of their protection area.

Two Resident Firefighters would be on-duty each day matching the career staff's A, B, and C shifts. In addition to dorm style living, WFD would contribute some portion toward the Paramedic school tuition.

In the future, these bedrooms could be repurposed for career firefighters. Programs like this have proven to be an excellent vetting process for future Firefighter hires.

The plan calls for the WFD to provide a fire academy during the first summer prior to Paramedic school starting and then assigning the Resident Firefighters to their shifts. They would be on-duty two out of every six days unless attending school.

VOLUNTEER / PART-TIME PROGRAM

WFD needs to continue to recruit and train volunteer and part-time firefighters. For a volunteer to truly help us, they need to be at the station or very close to have a reasonable response time. While we do encourage volunteers to spend time at the station, they cannot be compensated for that time.

VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTER

Currently we reimburse our volunteers a set "stipend" per emergency call to cover their expenses. Because any additional compensation runs into FLSA and IRS complications, we are unable to compensate volunteers for their training time. This has proven to be a deterrent in volunteers finding the time to devote to training.

UNSCHEDULED PART-TIME FIREFIGHTER/EMS-PROVIDER

This part-time job is designed for trained volunteers to move to a part-time employee status and thus paid an hourly rate when they attend an emergency call, attend required training or assisting with a fire department event.

Another issue that a City Fire Department will face in the future is the fact that a class-1 City in Montana, population over 10,000, must have an all-career fire department, thus no more volunteers.

Most of the building we are seeing in Whitefish tends to be for second homes and short-term rentals thus not effecting our population numbers. The move to more Unscheduled Part-Time Firefighters or a Fire Authority would render this concern moot.

ADEQUATE / EQUITABLE COVERAGE

I receive a number of phone-calls each week from insurance companies looking for a specific property's ISO rating. Many of these properties are beyond five road miles from either of our fire stations, thus an ISO-10, which in some cases means the insurance company will not write a policy for that location. A look at [appendix A](#) shows the saturation of fire stations in the lower part of the county and the lack of coverage to a huge part of our response area north and west of the City of Whitefish.

I became aware of the Kearney Student Lab Program at Carnegie Mellon University, CMU Program, where graduate students work on a real-world problem. I put a team together with the City of Whitefish GIS Coordinator, a local insurance agency, and a few rural area representatives who live beyond five road miles from a fire station. Together, we applied for and were accepted as a client organization for the Kearney Student Lab Program. During the fall-2020 semester a group of graduate students using GIS data, identified the structures within the WFD's primary response area that were not within five road miles of a fire station. They then calculated optimum locations for possible future satellite fire stations that would bring as many structures as possible within the five road miles. This part of the project was all fact based.

The next part of the project was a little harder as the insurance industry really does not want to reveal their secret formula for setting rates. With the help of a property owner survey and some insurance industry tools the students were able to calculate probable insurance savings if new satellite fire stations were built to bring more homes within five road miles.

They also looked at trend data for growth in the area and no surprise, the Whitefish area has seen and continues to see substantial growth. The CMU Project concluded with a zoom presentation on December 17th. This presentation was recorded and is available on the City's website under the fire department's page. The final report will be posted on the Fire Department's page on the City's website and provided to the selected fire service consultant firm for our Master Plan Study.

ADEQUATE / EQUITABLE FUNDING

The public's feedback from:

- The CMU's survey of homeowners
- Public comment at WFSA meetings, and subsequent emails

showed many homeowners are willing to pay more for improved emergency services.

While determining what is the "right" amount is a huge topic for discussion, the amount needs to be equitable. Currently a city taxpayer on one side of the street is paying about 55-mils while a neighbor across the street in the WFSA is paying roughly 19-mils for the same service.

The WFSA should move from a fee-based system (Service Area) to a mil rate-based system (District). Moving to a mil-rate has a few advantages:

- 1- As property values move up or down so does the amount received thus eliminating the need to seek County Commissioner's approval to stay current with any cost-of-living changes.
- 2- The people who can least afford to pay will no longer be overburdened. Those with more lucrative properties will see an increase which would, at the very least, be partially offset by insurance premium savings if we build satellite fire stations.
- 3- The mil rate would be the same across the whole area we serve.
- 4- With similar or identical mil rates across both the City and WFSA, the move to a Fire Authority would be much smoother.

The Fire Authority model, that will hopefully make it through the State Legislature this year, will allow the creation of an organizational / funding model to essentially move the fire department out from under the City and merge with the Fire Service Area, and any other areas interested, to create a new local government similar to a fire district. Consolidation eliminates duplication and improves service.

As we explore a Fire Authority, we can check with other areas for interest in joining:

- Big Mountain Fire District that may be annexed into the City of Whitefish.
- Those homes in the Flathead Fire Service Area protected that would be within 5-road miles of a new satellite fire station.
- Possibly the Olney Fire District who has already turned over ambulance service to Whitefish.

The Regional Fire Authority bill failed in the State Legislature, see below.

CONCLUSION

Armed with the results of the study by the Kearney Student Lab Program at Carnegie Mellon University, the Whitefish Fire Department is seeking the help of an emergency services consultant firm to help layout a master plan for providing all-hazard emergency services to the Whitefish area.

Today the Whitefish Fire Department response area includes a number of different local governmental agencies:

- The City of Whitefish

- The Whitefish Fire Service Area

- Portions of the Flathead Fire Service Area

- Possible annexation of the Big Mountain Fire District

- EMS up into the Onley Fire District

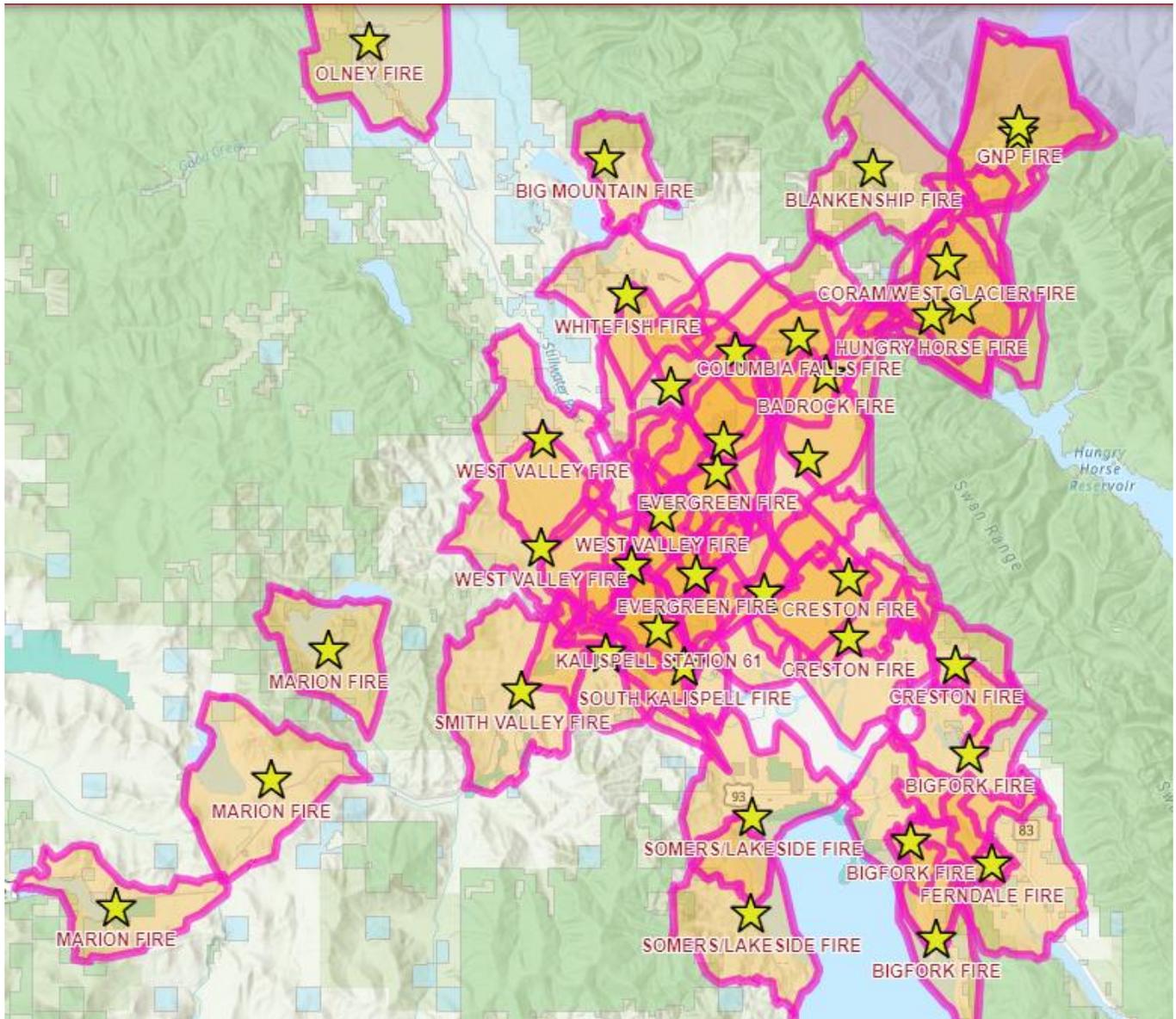
The Fire Department Master Plan should lay the groundwork for a cooperative effort amongst these individual organizations hopefully leading to the creation of a Regional Fire Authority.

The Regional Fire Authority bill failed in the State Legislature so it's a least 2-years away from passing. Another avenue to look at is if the WFSA were to move from a Fire Service Area to a Rural Fire District (fee based to mil based) the new Fire District could, with City agreement, provide fire protection for a class 2 city. If later Whitefish does become a class 1 city (population over 10,000) and were already protected by a Fire District they could continue the relationship.

APPENDICES

Appendix A = Map of Flathead County with the current Fire Station locations and service areas.

Each star is a fire station, and the pink boundaries show the 5-mile response area from each station. Note the lack of coverage northwest of the City of Whitefish.



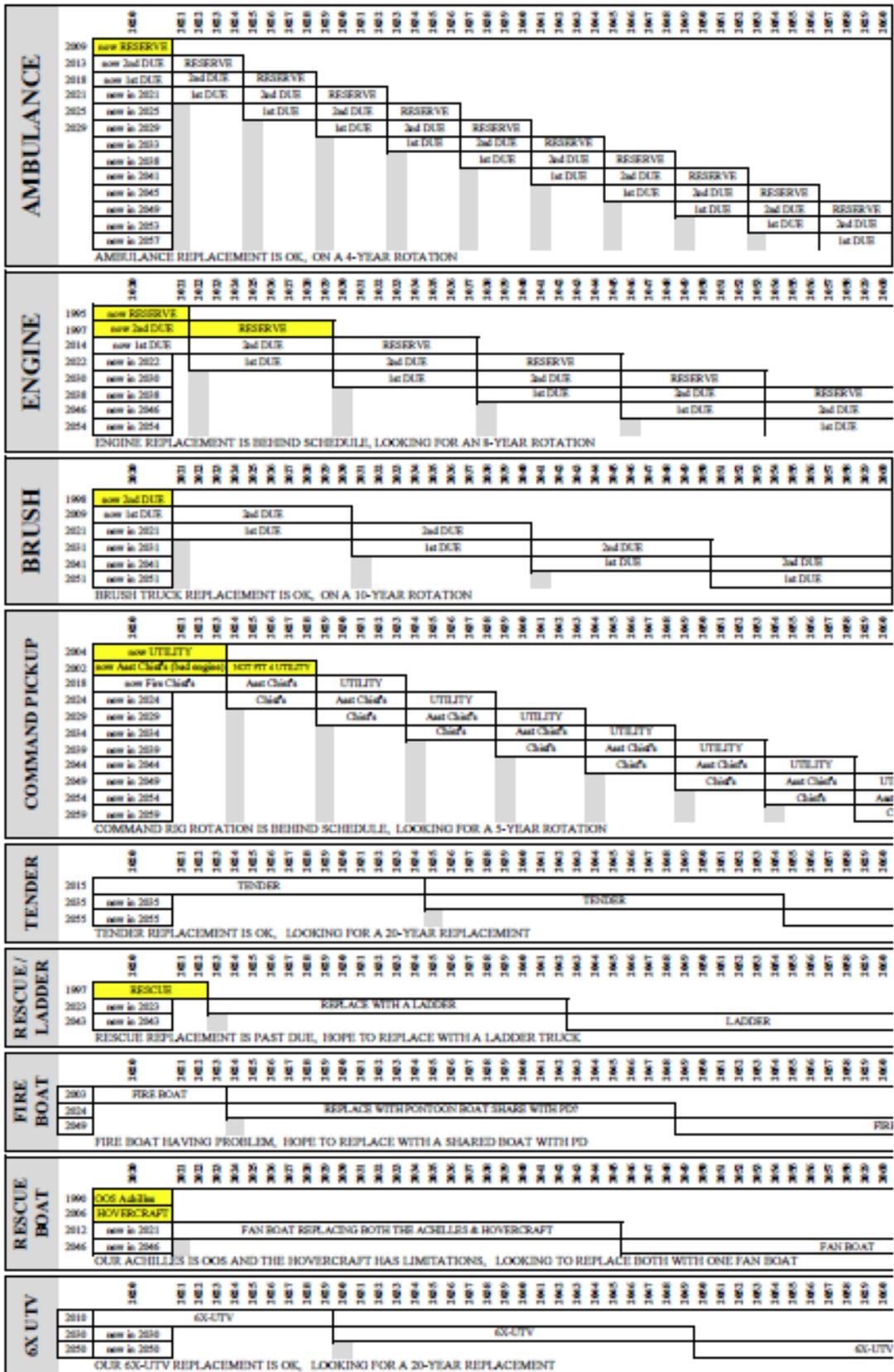
Appendix B = List of Flathead County fire agencies, value protected, and mil rate charged.

2019 DATA

	FIRE DEPARTMENT 2019 numbers	TAXABLE VALUE PROTECTED	MILL RATE	STAFFING	EMS
1	CITY OF KALISPELL	\$48,698,439.00	General Fund	career dept	ALS EMS
2	OLNEY FIRE	\$325,480.00	0.12290	all volunteer	no EMS WFD provides ALS EMS
3	BIG MOUNTAIN FIRE	\$5,266,811.00	0.08225	career dept	ALS EMS
4	EVERGREEN FIRE DISTRICT	\$18,821,006.00	0.06006	combination	ALS EMS
5	CITY OF WHITEFISH	\$39,066,006.00	0.05495	combination	ALS EMS 24 mils + \$700,380.00 from GF
6	HUNGRY HORSE FIRE	\$1,136,517.00	0.04811	all volunteer	no EMS 3-Rivers provides EMS
7	MARION FIRE	\$5,775,900.00	0.04619	combination	ALS EMS
8	MARTIN CITY FIRE	\$822,829.00	0.03954	all volunteer	no EMS 3-Rivers provides EMS
9	BLANKENSHIP FIRE	\$903,678.00	0.03554	all volunteer	no EMS 3-Rivers provides EMS
10	BIGFORK FIRE (just Flathead)	\$19,467,859.00	0.03212	combination	ALS EMS
11	SMITH VALLEY FIRE	\$10,443,317.00	0.02929	combination	ALS EMS
12	CORAM-WEST GLACIER FIRE	\$3,857,934.00	0.02076	all volunteer	no EMS 3-Rivers provides EMS
13	WEST VALLEY FIRE	\$14,805,899.00	0.02075	all volunteer	BLS EMS Kalispell provides ALS
14	SOUTH KALISPELL FIRE	\$5,088,744.00	0.02009	all volunteer	no EMS Lakeside QRU provides EMS
15	WHITEFISH FIRE SERVICE AREA	\$23,743,342.00	0.01874	by WFD	by WFD FY19 revenue \$445,079.00
16	CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS	\$8,124,055.00	General Fund	all volunteer	no EMS 3-Rivers provides EMS
	COLUMBIA FALLS RURAL FIRE	\$13,801,472.00	0.01719	all volunteer	no EMS 3-Rivers provides EMS
17	BADROCK FIRE	\$7,439,377.00	0.01650	all volunteer	no EMS 3-Rivers provides EMS
18	CRESTON FIRE	\$14,380,064.00	0.01520	all volunteer	no EMS Evergreen / Big Fork
	WHITEFISH FIRE SERVICE AREA	\$23,743,342.00	0.01237	by WFD	by WFD 2019 paid to WFD \$293,718.00
19	SOMERS FIRE	\$19,370,054.00	0.01140	all volunteer	no EMS Lakeside QRU provides EMS
20	FERNDALE FIRE (just Flathead)	\$2,863,307.00	0.01008	all volunteer	no EMS Big Fork provides EMS
	FLATHEAD FIRE SERVICE AREA	\$17,703,328.00	fee of \$90.00	NO FIRE DEPT	no EMS covered by closest FD

within the FFSA there are 189 homes with a MARKET Value of \$29,699,400.00 (NOT TAXABLE VALUE) protected by Whitefish FD

C = Whitefish vehicle replacement schedule.



Ambulance Replacement Plan:

Obtain a new ambulance every 4-years and rotate down from 1st Due, to 2nd Due, to Reserve status.

Ambulance Status:

We have a 2018, 2013, and 2009.

We are about to go out for bids for a new ambulance which will replace the 2009.

An order was just placed for a new ambulance when it gets here the 2018 will be sent out for warranty paint work. Once the 2018 id back we will then sell the 2009.

Engine Replacement Plan:

Obtain a new engine every 8-years and rotate down from 1st Due, to 2nd Due, to Reserve status.

NFPA states front line fire vehicles (1st & 2nd due) should be no older than 15-years.

Engine Status:

While our 1st Due (a 2014) is on schedule to be replaced, our current 2nd Due and Reserve are way behind replacement.

I submitted a AFG grant application for a Type-3 engine but not holding my breath.

Brush Truck Replacement Plan:

Obtain a new brush truck every 10-years and rotate from 1st Due to 2nd Due.

Brush Truck Status:

We are replacing the 1998 this coming year which will put us on schedule.

Ordering a new chassis from Dodge when in we will have RES swap the bed onto the new chassis.

Command / Utility Replacement Plan:

Obtain a new Command Rig every 5-years and rotate down from the Chief to Assistant Chief and then to our Utility / Snowplow.

Command / Utility Status:

Our 2018 is in good shape. Both the 2004 and 2002 are beyond repair and need to be replaced. The 2002 is a Ford Explorer and cannot be repurposed as the Utility / Snowplow.

Tender Replacement Plan

Obtain a new Tender every 20-years.

Tender Status:

We are on schedule with our 2015 Tender

Rescue Truck / Ladder Replacement Plan:

Replace the Rescue Truck with a Ladder Truck both of which have a 20-year replacement.

Rescue Truck / Ladder Status:

Our 1997 Rescue Truck is past due for replacement. We need a Ladder Truck, and we can distribute the rescue equipment between our Engine and a new Ladder Truck

Fire Boat Replacement Plan:

Obtain a new Fire Boat every 25-years.

Fire Boat Status:

Our 2003 Fire Boat is having problems. We plan to work with the Police Dept to share a pontoon boat.

Rescue Boat Replacement Plan:

Obtain a new Rescue Boat every 25-years

Rescue Boat Status:

Currently we have a 1990 Achilles Inflatable Boat that is Out-of-Service and beyond repair. We also have a 2006 Hovercraft that has limitations. The plan is to replace both these boats with a new Fan Boat in 2021.

6X-UTV Replacement Plan:

Obtain a new 6X-UTV every 20-years.

6x-UTV Status:

Our 2010 6x-UTV is in good shape and on schedule.

REFERENCES

Montana Code Annotated

Title 7, Chapter 33, Part 21. Rural Fire Districts

Title 7, Chapter 33, Part 24, Fire Service Areas

Title 7, Chapter 33, Part 41, Municipal Fire Departments

The Regional Fire Authority bill will be presented in the 2021 State Legislature.

National Fire Protection Agency (NFPA)

1720, Standard for the Organization and Development of Fire Suppression Operations, Emergency Medical Operations, and Special Operations to the Public by Volunteer and Combination Fire Departments.

Insurance Services Office, Inc. (ISO)

Fire Suppression Rating Schedule

This report was authored by:

Chief Joe Page

37-years in the fire service, with 5 different fire departments in 4 different States.

Joe started in the fire service in 1983 when he joined the Vista Volunteer Fire Department in South Salem, New York. After obtaining his NY State EMT Joe rose through the ranks and was elected Fire Chief for two terms.

When a career relocation took him to New Hampshire he volunteered with the Amherst Fire Department from 1998 to 2000. Another relocation took him back to New York where Joe volunteered with the Carmel Fire Department from 2001 to 2003.

In 2004 the family relocated to Conifer Colorado where Joe volunteered for the Elk Creek Fire Department. In 2006 Joe accepted a career change and was hired as Elk Creek's Training Officer eventually serving as District Administrator / Acting Fire Chief.

In 2013 Joe accepted the Assistant Chief / Fire Marshal position with the City of Whitefish. In 2015 he was promoted to Fire Chief of the Whitefish Fire Department, a position he holds today.

HISTORY

The Whitefish Fire Department once a strong all volunteer fire department has morphed into a mostly career combination fire department now staffed with a combination of volunteers, part-time and full-time Firefighters. As the City has changed from a railroad town into a retirement community with a huge influx of seasonal tourists the pool of potential volunteer firefighters has decreased while the types and need for services has steadily increased.

The calls for medical services had grown to a point that an all-volunteer service wasn't able to respond in a timely manner and the level of required training continued to increase leading the WFD in January of 1996 to hire two career Firefighter/EMTs to supplement WFD's volunteers. The career members worked day times and responded from home on assigned nights. In January of 1999, the WFD added two Firefighter/Paramedics increasing the staffing and improving the level of medical care offered.

By April of 2003 two more Firefighter/Paramedics were hired bringing the WFD to 2-shifts of three. Then in July of 2005 two more Firefighter/EMTs were hired bringing the WFD to 2-shifts of four Firefighters.

In April of 2009 with the help of a voted 24-mil levy by City taxpayers and a SAFER Grant from FEMA, seven more Firefighter/Paramedics were hired to allow the WFD to move to a 24-hour a day staffing using a 3-shift system. So today, 11-years later, the WFD is still staffed with 5-career Firefighter/Paramedics per shift with a minimum staffing of 4-career Firefighter/Paramedics.

Along with the growth of the WFD's career staff we have experienced a significant drop in the number of volunteers, not that we don't want them, we do, rather we continue to have a harder time recruiting and retaining volunteers. This drop can be contributed to several issues like:

- Increase in the time commitment due to the number of calls for service.
- Increase in the training requirements and certifications needed.
- Increase in medical-physical requirements.
- The feeling of not being needed (the paid guys will get it).
- The feeling of not being able to participate (the paid guys get there too fast).

While the issue of declining volunteer firefighters mirrors a national fire-service problem, exacerbating our issue here in the Whitefish area are:

- Second home and tourist populations have increased our calls for service but are not the type of people who typically volunteer.
- The lack of affordable housing often requires residents to hold a 2nd job leaving them no time to volunteer.

In an attempt to recruit and retain more volunteers the WFD has broken the all-encompassing job of a Firefighter/EMS-Provider into what we hoped were a few manageable chunks:

- Ambulance Driver
- EMS Responder
- Exterior Firefighter
- Interior Firefighter
- Driver / Operator

Each of these jobs has its own set of training and participation requirements which are much less than the all-encompassing Firefighter/Paramedic that our career staff maintains. In the couple of years that the WFD has offered these options to their volunteers there has been very little interest in these jobs as most who seek to volunteer are looking for a foot in the door for a future career and attempt to meet the all-encompassing Firefighter/Paramedic job.

The WFD has also seen a shift in the type of volunteer. In the past the typical volunteer firefighter was a community member responding from work or home to protect the lives and property of their family, friends, and neighbors. Today most of our volunteers do not live within a reasonable response time to either fire station and are typically Paramedics or Paramedic students from FVCC looking for fire training, experience, and a job. Bringing in volunteers often feels like a train and release program as our better volunteers are trained and then find employment elsewhere.

While many of the WFD's career staff did come from our volunteer ranks, many were on more of a short internship programs with the carrot of a career position in their foreseeable future. Unfortunately, there are no foreseeable positions in our future.

WFD's management has struggled with developing training programs for the volunteers. Unlike communities where most volunteers work a typical M-F 8 to 5 type job and the fire department can train on a given week-day evening or Saturday morning. WFD volunteers tend to work in the health care or service industry and have varied schedules, some available during the day while others are available evenings, compounded by the fact many of their work schedules differ week to week. These varied schedules have led to some trainings being minimally attended creating logistical issues.

While staffing is probably the highest priority for the WFD, adding more career firefighters is very expensive. To add one Firefighter/Paramedic per shift would mean hiring three, one per shift, and at cost of about \$100,000 per firefighter annually and our current budget cannot handle that. Adding more volunteers while very desirable, is just not happening in the numbers truly required. The turnover in volunteers continues to put a huge strain on our limited staff.