

# **Sauvie Island Fire District No. 30**

## **Multnomah County Tax Supervising and Conservation Commission Public Hearing Minutes**

Thursday, October 17, 2024 – 7:00 pm  
Sauvie Island Fire Station  
18342 Sauvie Island Rd.  
Portland, Oregon

### **Five-Year Local Option Levy for Operations (Measure 26-206) November 5, 2019 Special Election**

#### **Present:**

#### **TSCC:**

Chair Harmony Quiroz, Commissioner Mark Wubbold, Commissioner Burton (Via Zoom Meeting), Executive Director Allegra Willhite, and Budget Analyst Tunie Betschart

#### **Absent:**

TSCC Commissioners Allison Lugo Knapp and Matt Donahue

#### **Sauvie Island Rural Fire Protection District:**

Board Secretary-Treasurer Chet Orloff  
Fire Chief Chris Lake

Chair Harmony Quiroz opened the public hearing by explaining the role of the commissioners in this local option levy hearing for the district. She explained that it was a requirement that the TSCC hold a hearing for any tax measure proposed by a municipal corporation in Multnomah County before the election, allowing the voters an opportunity to learn more about the tax measure and make any comment they wish to make. This hearing would meet that requirement. Concerning Tax Measure 26-257 that the district has put on the November 5, 2024 ballot, the commissioners are neutral and will not take any action this evening.

Then she asked the TSCC Commissioners and staff to introduce themselves, followed by the Sauvie Island board and staff.

Following introductions, she asked if any member of the public had signed up to give testimony. No one had. So, with that, she moved on to the prepared questions.

**TSCC Questions:**

**Commissioner Mark Wubbold asked the following questions:**

You have a history of very high passage rates for this levy. Congratulations on that success. What activities have been done or are planned to inform voters why the local option levy is necessary? What response have you heard from community members so far?

Mr. Lake said staff started conversing with the board early in the year. In March, the district decided to put this on the ballot in November. The district belongs to a solid, tight community. The fire district has an online newsletter that is read by the majority of the residents on the island. The district has put information about the levy in the newsletter. Staff and the board members have attended local events and discussed the levy.

The island also has a community picnic, which was well attended. Some residents asked some excellent questions about renewing the levy. The grange meetings are another place where staff has talked about the levy.

Staff has sent a postcard about the local option levy to all the mailboxes in and around the island. The district is asking to continue the local option levy with no changes. The board members are getting the word out about it amongst the volunteers so that they can accurately discuss what the district is asking for when asked questions.

And as far as feedback, staff and the board have heard some. Overall, from what has been reported, it's been positive. Residents appreciate what the fire district does and the fact that this protection is available on the island, and they want to continue that service. Staff and the board have not heard any negative comments about it.

The announcement about the levy is on the website, too. When you log in, you will first see the local option levy renewal information.

Mr. Chet Orloff added a lot of people on the island realize and understand that the guy next door might be a volunteer firefighter because there are enough people scattered around the island and elsewhere off the island who come onto the island and volunteer. These people help people here understand this organization's role in public safety, emergency management, and fire suppression on the island. And, by and large, as an

agricultural preserve, the island is agricultural. There's a strong sense of that, even though Sauvie Island is close to the city.

**Chair Quiroz asked this follow-up question:**

Can you tell me how many people are on the island and how many volunteer firefighters you have?

Mr. Lake said there are around 15 to 18 hundred full-time residents. In the summertime, the island has over a million visitors. The district currently has 30 volunteer firefighters. He said when he became chief a few years ago, there were only about 21.

Mr. Orloff added that almost half of the volunteers live off the island. They are required to live within a specific response time of the island. They are all very active in the district.

Mr. Lake added that about half of the volunteers responded to significant events.

**Commissioner Burton asked the following question:**

You've lowered the local option levy tax rate in the past, and this time, you plan to hold it at the same rate as the last renewal. Knowing that operating costs continue to increase, including for basic resources such as fuel and electricity, do your projections show the current rate will be sufficient, given the increases in inflation we've seen since the last renewal? Do you believe an increase in the rate might be needed?

Mr. Orloff said the simple answer is yes. The district depends on grants and extra funding, also. So, the combination of these resources makes a difference in how the district can finance the island's fire district.

Those grants and other resources are those sources that you have relied on in the past and will be able to obtain?

Mr. Orloff said no, not really. He explained that he volunteered at the district several years ago because of his knowledge of grant writing and has continued to do so. However, recently, staff decided to hold off on asking for grant funding because it is consuming more time than the chief realized.

So, if the other resources are unavailable, will you still be able to operate as you'd like?

Mr. Lake said the district would be sustainable for now and probably the next year or two, depending on how the economy goes. If it is a gradual increase like it typically is, the district can weather that. If there is no change to the island demographics, Sauvie Island Fire should be fine and be able to continue to look for other funding sources to help with capital items. Then, the tax income is used to manage normal day-to-day operations. There may be a time when the district will ask for that extra ten cents back. But he said he didn't believe that would happen for at least five or more years. The district is in good shape at this time.

**Commissioner Wubbold asked this follow-up question:**

Is zoning flexible enough that demographics could shift?

Mr. Lake said nothing is in stone. The demographics could change. He gave the example of South Hillsboro. It changed from agricultural areas to apartments. Farmers are adversely affected by the economy. Someday, this may not be all farmland. Developers could come in and change all that.

However, Oregon Fish & Wildlife owns about a third of the island, and it is a wildlife preserve, so that is stable.

**Chair Quiroz asked the following questions :**

Are you seeing any change in the district's emergency calls? I appreciate the graph and the data you provide about the types of incidents, the numbers, and how they change over time. We also were just curious. All of Oregon is paying more and more attention to wildfires. Are you seeing more fire events in recent years due to climate change? Do you anticipate that increasing?

Mr. Lakes said yes, he believes it is increasing and will continue to do so. The volunteers are not super busy because of emergency alarms on the island. The district is in two counties, Columbia and Multnomah. They receive information from the entire area. St. Helens fire district is seeing 7,000 calls a year. That is 20 calls a day. Sauvie Island is quiet in comparison. As of now, the number of volunteers is good. More volunteers would be needed when the district reaches 300 to 400 alarms a year.

Sauvie Island was more involved with the state, participating in some of the conflagrations that occurred. They participated in seven wildfires. The crews were gone about a month and a half off the island. They were in Baker twice, Medford once, and Central Oregon four times. That definitely impacts Sauvie Island Fire District, but not necessarily here, but as a system.

The district's caller volume is increasing marginally. Little increases are significant percentages for the Sauvie Island Fire. Currently, it is around a 17% increase in call volume, which is a lot for the statistically. Staff will need to keep watching it. But if it reaches the 200 mark, consistently, then increasing staff would be considered.

**Commissioner Wubbold asked this follow-up question:**

Does the state reimburse your costs when you go off-island and participate in one of these conflagration interventions?

Mr. Lakes explained that they pay the volunteers' wages and per diem. They also pay the district for any vehicles used to fight the fires. The district purchased two vehicles from Cal Fire, which are four-wheel drive mini engines. Participating in the wildfire events enabled the district to pay for them.

The district's grant funding includes income from the state fire marshal. The seasonal program pays the district \$35,000 to cover cost, and it can be used however the district chooses. Sauvie Island Fire District hired two full-time employees to work on the island during the busy weekends. From July to September, the district has two extra employees.

**Commissioner Wubbold asked the following questions:**

When the Commission met with you in 2019, they discussed how you might track the spending of local option levy dollars. Have you instituted a tracking system? Can you share specifics on how you spent local option levy funds for the past five years and how you communicate the spending back to taxpayers?

Mr. Lake said they have not done any tracking, but some of the expenses they use local option funds for are the half-time fire chief, the state emergency response dispatch, and some mandatory testing added in the last five years. The levy also helps to cover some basic operations such as medical exams for volunteers and testing and certifying fire engines.

The local option levy makes up 31% of the district's budget. Does the public ask where the dollars go?

Mr. Orloff said they never ask what it is used for. They know it is used to maintain the district so the volunteers and staff can continue doing what they do and assist the residents.

**Chair Quiroz asked the following questions:**

If the levy doesn't pass, what services would end? What would you have to cut or forego?

Mr. Lake said his hours would need to be cut after some time, and fleet maintenance would be reduced. However, they would have enough reserves to function as they currently are for a while.

**Commissioner Wubbold made the following observation:**

The district has a healthy ending fund balance. These reserves may be sufficient to carry the district until you could again put the measure before the voters.

Mr. Orloff said this is true, and that is what they would do if it were to fail in November.

**Commissioner Burton asked the following question:**

What has been your experience finding volunteer firefighters? Are there any difficulties in recruiting and maintaining sufficient numbers?

Mr. Lake said they are fortunate. Across the nation, volunteerism is down and has declined for the last 20 years. There were 6,000 volunteers in Oregon last year. The numbers are down from 6,600 the previous year. The majority, about 73%, of the fire departments in the nation are volunteers. So, that is a crisis in itself. Oregon is no different. For Oregon, about 80% of the fire departments are volunteers or some form of volunteering personnel.

The metro area does not have any volunteer programs. So, Portland has only career firefighters, no volunteers, and no cadets. Gresham is the same. Tualatin Valley Fire and Rescue is a volunteer organization, but its volunteers do not get to do a lot of firefighting. They roll hose and do support. Clackamas Fire is similar. Those are the big metro area organizations. They don't provide volunteerism. Volunteering is essential for most firefighter's career because it gives them experience and helps build some credentials to get in the door for a job. So Sauvie Island Fire's relationship with Portland is excellent because Portland sends people to the island to volunteer. Two or three times a month, staff receives word that someone wants to be a volunteer.

The difficulty is the district can only have so many. The residents on the island consist of an older population. Many volunteers are 50, 60, and 70 years old and will age out soon. That is also a concern. The other piece is

that many people on the island are transient, meaning they work and then leave the island, they don't live on the island. This makes it harder for them to volunteer. So there are some challenges.

The district receives a lot of inquiries, but the potential volunteers don't always fit the criteria. The district can retain enough to keep the numbers up. Other agencies are still struggling.

**Commissioner Wubbold asked this follow-up question:**

Do you feel your program has unintentionally become a feeder program for other jurisdictions, such as the city and others?

Mr. Lake said last year, the district lost two to the City of Portland. It was a transition for them. The district is very proud that these firefighters are qualified to transition to Portland.

Mr. Orloff added that it also works the other way around. The city sends volunteers to the island.

**Commissioner Burton asked this follow-up question:**

What training is required to become a volunteer firefighter?

Mr. Lake said Oregon is an NFPA (National Fire Protection Association) state that uses the National Fire Protection Association NFPA standard. To become a firefighter, each volunteer must follow that for all their credentialing. To be certified, each must take the class and demonstrate the ability to perform specific physical actions. Once demonstrated, they receive a task book to demonstrate the skills without being coerced or coaxed to prove their competency. Next is certification. The process takes a lot and can take as long as four years. In addition to residential fires, the volunteers receive training for wildfires. Since the district also responds to many medical calls, there is a different set of qualifications for this activity.

Volunteers must live within 14 miles of the fire station.

**Commissioner Wubbold made this observation:**

We had one last question about mandatory testing, but you answered that question earlier in our discussions.

Chair Quiroz said that's all of our formal questions, and there are no members of the public present to speak. Is there anything the district would like to share with voters before they fill out their ballots?

Mr. Lakes said he had nothing additional about the levy to share. But he did want to say he appreciated the support they have always received from the residents and asked that they get out and vote.

With that, Chair Quiroz closed the hearing.