

December 2019

Letter to editor:

This was a really tough year for property tax increases, and just when we think that we might have a breather, along comes notice that the Wasatch County Fire Protection Special Service District is proposing to increase its property tax revenue by 44.32%. It's enough to drive you crazy, right? But before you react negatively, let's take a closer look. You might remember that several years ago, Wasatch Taxpayers Association (WTPA) carried a petition to deny a 73% tax increase for the Fire District, The tax did not go into effect mostly as a result of an incorrect procedure in approving the tax as pointed out by the Utah Tax Commission. But we think that WTPA made its point: that unless the Fire District communicated with the public about the plan for using such a large tax increase, the public would speak out against it! Chief Giles then went to the local governments with a presentation explaining why the tax increase was needed, and the next year the tax did go into effect without protest. That was 2014. Communication between the Fire District and WTPA and taxpayers has improved dramatically since then.

Many changes have been made at the Fire District. Under the leadership of Chief Ernie Giles, we now have a Fire Advisory Board of distinguished fire professionals lending their expertise (without pay) to assist our Fire District in its transition from its mostly volunteer status to professional full time Firefighter/EMS personnel. A Needs Assessment was procured in 2018, and the District has done its very best to comply with the recommendations from the study. One of the highest priorities has been to merge our Fire and EMS services to streamline their functions for improved service to the public, and this is a process that will take a year or two to fully accomplish. Many other improvements have been made by the District, and more are in the works. In fact, in order to lessen the burden on taxpayers, the District has implemented an impact fee on new development that will go into effect in January 2020. These funds will be used for future station development and equipment purchases over \$500,000, but these funds cannot be used for operations or maintenance by law.

While EMS has traditionally been funded mostly by the Wasatch County General Fund, it will now be funded entirely by the Fire Special Service District. These are two entirely separate taxing entities, and that means shifting the tax burden from Wasatch County over to the Fire District--a tax increase of \$1.4 million-- which will replace the current funding (\$900,000) received from Wasatch County once it is in effect in 2020. This amount will also fund the hiring of 6 new fulltime Firefighter/EMS cross trained personnel (approximately \$500,000) which are much needed by the District to service the needs of the public as the county population continues to grow. It's a good start on the path of fulfilling the recommendations of the needs assessment.

Wasatch County Fire/EMS serves a population of approximately 33,000, with huge special event populations, much flow-through traffic which may at any time require emergency service, and a service area of over 1,200 square miles (all of Wasatch County) with just about every kind of recreation activity and hazard you can imagine. We all want the very best response to 911 that we can afford! In our opinion public safety is what we call a NEED of the highest priority and NOT a WANT. This increase will not be able to fund all the necessary improvements needed in the long run, but it is a good start and \$1.4 million (the 44.32%) is a modest amount for us to pay compared to the good that it will do for all of us. WTPA supports this tax increase and hopes that you will, too. For additional information you may go to wasatchtaxpayersassociation.com.

Wasatch Taxpayers Association Board