

# Vote needed for formality of dissolving old fire districts that merged

By ARLA SHEPHARD  
MASON COUNTY LIFE

Last fall, North Mason voters elected to merge their local Belfair and Tahuya fire districts into one regional fire authority, and come this November, they'll be asked to formally dissolve the former government entities.

Mason County Fire District No. 2, based in Belfair, and Tahuya's Fire District No. 8 still technically exist, which creates a bit of confusion in the area, said North Mason Regional Fire Authority Chief Beau Bakken.

"Those two districts essentially just exist on paper," Bakken said. "If the vote doesn't happen, they will continue to exist on paper. There is a trickle of less than \$1,000 per district that is spent to keep up with the administrative work."

The North Mason Regional Fire Authority has been fully operational since January, when it took control of both fire districts and their assets. The fire authority is governed by a seven-member board, made up of commissioners from the two previous fire districts.

Occasionally, the need arises when the board of one of the former districts needs to meet, which then requires that those commissioners be paid their stipends, Bakken said.

For example, under state law, the districts must file annual financial reports even if there is no longer any money flowing through the districts. At that time, the board of that specific district must convene to approve the financial report.

Both districts also have to approve a budget ev-

ery year, even if there is no money coming in, Bakken added, and while District 2 commissioners have voted to waive their stipend for such special meetings, District 8 commissioners are still paid \$104 per meeting.

Eliminating the districts would remove formalities such as that, Bakken said.

Whether or not the vote to dissolve the districts moves forward, Bakken is pleased with the progress the North Mason Regional Fire Authority has made in the past eight months and where the fire authority is headed in the future.

Since Sept. 1, the NMRFA has been able to staff a firefighter/EMT at the Tahuya fire station during the day, seven days a week.

The fire authority has also formed a 22-person trained Community Response Team of volunteers and has increased its presence on the Tahuya Peninsula with a door-to-door fire prevention campaign encouraging residents to update smoke detectors and improve address signs.

Starting this fall, two AmeriCorps volunteers will work 40 hours per week on a campaign to ready people for natural disasters and fire emergencies.

The AmeriCorps volunteers will hold four disaster preparedness fairs in the North Mason area and go door-to-door with disaster preparedness materials.

The formation of the regional fire authority helped to secure the grant for the AmeriCorps positions, Bakken said.

"We moved up in the grant selection criteria because of our (new) size and our ruralness," he said. "It helped our chances."

Other positive changes within the fire authority include increased staffing at the Collins Lake substation, which is now staffed just under 65 percent of the time, compared with 30 percent of the time a year ago, and a greater sense of community throughout North Mason, Bakken said.

"Through a whole series of events in Tahuya, there had been a lack of confidence in the fire department," he said. "I think that we have done a tremendous job with relationship building. It's far exceeded my expectations. We are truly working to get confidence back."

NMRFA firefighters and EMTs from Belfair and Tahuya took part in the Tahuya Salmon Bake, Tahuya Day, Tahuya's Eas-



PHOTO BY ARLA SHEPHARD

*The North Mason Regional Fire Authority serves residents formerly within the Mason County Fire Districts Nos. 2 and 8. Voters will be asked to formally dissolve the defunct districts this fall.*

ter pancake breakfast and Taste of Hood Canal this year, and Bakken has even joined the Tahuya Community Club, along with outreach captain Jeromy Hicks.

Next up, the fire authority's board will need to come up with a plan to whittle itself down from seven to five board members by May 2015, otherwise a "complicated election process" goes into place, Bakken said.

Under that scenario, the

three most newly elected commissioners will be able to keep their positions, with the other two positions filled via an at-large election.

In the coming months, the fire authority will also proceed on a number of other fronts: Increasing the number of its volunteer firefighters from Tahuya, evaluating and prioritizing its facility needs and hosting a series of community forums to address the old Tahuya store.

The regional fire authority inherited the store, which serves as a storage unit, from District 8 and has worked to keep the building intact as best as possible, despite a failing roof and septic system, minimal heating and water damage.

"We've got work to do at the fire authority," Bakken said.

For more information on the North Mason Regional Fire, visit [www.northmasonrfa.com](http://www.northmasonrfa.com). ■

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