

Chair Nathanson

Vice Chairs Pham and Reschke

Committee members

For the record My name is Paul Ritter, and I am the Assistant Fire Chief for Riddle Fire Protection District.

Let me start by saying SB 1582 is an important piece of legislation that helps close a loophole of current legislation and effects fire districts around the state.

Rural Fire Protection Districts were originally created to fight fires in the rural areas outside of cities and were essentially a subscription service and at that time the fire department most likely knew everyone they served, and they were possibly also volunteers for the fire department. They protected rural farm and ranch lands. As populations have grown so have rural communities. With urban sprawl, residential rural 2.5- and 5-acre developments, the population density has increased. Along with this growth so have the responsibilities and tasks of the rural fire protection districts. Increasing call volumes as well as an increase in providing first response medical, while waiting for ambulances. While yes there are still some rural fire protection districts that solely protect rural farming and ranching properties, the majority are experiencing the increased rural residential growth to include not just single-family dwellings but multi-family housing, manufacturing, strip-malls, and more.

Unfortunately, current statues have left loopholes where people can choose to be or not to be in the fire districts. This loophole has created many issues. The first issue is that many of the properties are mixed in with properties that have chosen to be in the fire district, how do you determine in an emergency if that property is in or out and who wants to take the liability of making a mistake. The second issue is that these properties that have chosen to be out of the fire district are receiving the services but have not contributed to the infrastructure needed to provide these services. Third, many of these properties not only receive a response, but they also receive the insurance benefits because of their proximity to a fire station. I have been told firsthand by both property owners and insurance companies that they know they will get a response so why join the Rural Fire Protection District and pay taxes.

It is surprising that if I build a house, I automatically get assessed County taxes, school district taxes, water district taxes, sewer district taxes, and road maintenance district taxes if they are available in the area I build in, but I have a choice on fire and life safety. Can you imagine if everyone was given a card each year to choose what taxes they wanted to pay and yet receive the services either way, how would we fund anything?

Yes, a fire district can bill a property owner for the response if it is determined that they are not in the fire district but collecting is a different story and many fire districts are not equipped to pursue this. If everyone took the send me a bill if I use the service, there would be no service to provide, we need everyone to contribute to the infrastructure so that it is available when needed.

This bill does not change the type of properties a fire district can collect taxes on, it still follows the chapters within ORS 477 and 478, this just allows fire district to bring in the island properties and fringe properties that are receiving services yet not contributing to the infrastructure.

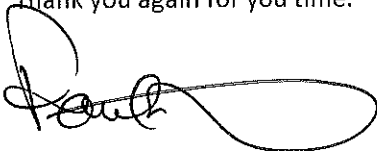
This bill also does not require a fire district to use it, if they do not feel they can provide a service to their residents then they can choose not to use it. While it is understood that some of the more rural departments have ISO ratings of 8 or 9, many of the fire districts have ISO ratings of 4, 5, and 6 and a few are even in the 2 to 3 range. It also does not mean fire districts are going to run out and build new fire station to create a land grab, fire stations are expensive to build and equip vs the tax dollars from a few residents.

We have heard on several occasions that it would give fire district a power no other local government has, yet cities regularly annex land into the city without a vote of those affected. When these city annexations take place, it takes tax dollars away from the fire districts, but those same lands continue to contribute county taxes.

Speaking directly to the issues in my district. We have many residents that have sprung up outside the original boundaries of our district. We also have a commercial facility that produces sand blasting media that has opened at the old Hanna Nickle Mine site. None of the residents or this commercial facility are paying for fire protection, but they are all reaping the rewards of our ISO rating and services provided by the district. Yes, we can bill them for services provided but honestly, I have a hard enough time getting everything else accomplished with an all-volunteer staff to deal with billing for services. This bill would make the cost of these services equitable to all who receive them.

In closing I would like to point out that this bill is being supported by OFCA, OFFC, OFDDA, SDAO, and there has been written testimony in support of this bill from several fire departments from around the state. I ask that this committee move SB1582 out of committee with a do pass recommendation to the House Floor.

Thank you again for you time.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paul Ritter", with a large, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Paul Ritter