



DOUGLAS COUNTY FIRE DISTRICT No. 2

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Committee Chair Meek, Vice Chair Boquist, and committee members please accept my written testimony in support of SB 1068.

When rural fire protection districts were first put into place, they were intended to be a place holder to provide fire protection to a few structures until cities grew. Well, people had other ideas and more people began moving to areas outside of cities and forming rural residential areas, some as densely populated as the cities themselves. Unfortunately, as these rural residential areas continued to grow the laws surrounding rural fire protection districts did not evolve with them. Many of these laws were written in the 1950's. The current laws do not allow for rural fire protection districts to annex bare land so many of the large open lands were not annexed into the fire districts as the population spread out, forming islands of unprotected lands. As the large open lands began to sell and become developed, many were not annexed into the fire districts. As by current law, annexations are an owner-initiated process. Many of these properties realized that they were able to receive the fire protection and insurance benefits without having to pay taxes for it and thereby continuing to refuse annexing their property. To compound these issues, many of the large open land tracts are looking at ways to gain revenue and are opening operations as wine tasting rooms, wedding venues, or large event gathering facilities. These are commercial occupancies but are being operated as agricultural and are often not in a fire district, so they are not being held to fire code and or building code requirements. Now you have locations with a lot of people congregating but with no fire protection.

Along with the growth of rural residential properties the job of rural fire protection districts has changed to meet the needs of the citizens. Rural fire protection districts no longer just provide structural fire protection. Many of the agencies provide medical fire response, some transport to hospitals, vehicle extrication, rescue services, wildland firefighting, and are often the front line on large conflagration fires. These are service that anyone may need at anytime and should be everyone's responsibility to ensure they are available when needed.

The current way of annexation not only creates an inequity among the taxpayers but also creates confusion on emergency response scenes. There may be 2 or 3 properties in a rural residential area not in the fire district comingled with 10 properties that are in the district. How is that decision made during an emergency? The 911 dispatch centers are not able to determine if the fire is at a structure that is not in the fire district or the one next door that is in the district. You don't want the first responders trying to make the decision in the middle of an emergency. The reality is that first responders are going to do their job regardless as that is how they are wired and trained. Unfortunately, the property owners and the insurance companies know this, so they continue status quo. Many of these property owners will state "we will pay if we need your services". If everyone took that stance then there would be nobody or equipment available to respond.

Rural Fire Protection Districts are the only taxing districts where it is optional to be part of the district. Schools, law enforcement, counties, and municipalities do not give that option. So why are Rural Fire Protection Districts funded this way? If people were given that option for all the other services how

would governments get funded? If that was the option, we would still be the Wild Wild West for law enforcement and the Gangs of New York for firefighting, but we are not, and public safety should be a funding priority as it affects us all in one way or another.

When I was early in my firefighting career I heard about this issue but was led to believe it was only a local issue. But as I have moved through and up in my career I have been made aware this is not a local issue but found throughout the state. Many rural fire protection districts are just now becoming aware of it. Others are still not aware of it as everyone just assumes if a new structure is built, it is being added to the tax rolls. That is not always the case. Even if it is across the street from the fire station. This is truly an issue for the majority of rural fire protection districts in the state.

This bill would allow fire district to establish reasonable boundaries and require properties within that boundary to annex into the district when certain criteria is met. This bill would also ensure that any newly developed lands adding structures would be annexed into the fire districts ensuring the problem of un-protected or under-protected properties within a fire district does not continue to increase. This does not attempt to annex small woodland or timber property unless it becomes improved through the addition of structures that can be damaged by fire.

There are some who will say that this will encourage rural fire protection district to run out and build a new fire station just to expand their coverage area. This is unrealistic. The cost of building a fire station, buying and maintaining the equipment, not to mention finding staffing is significantly more than the property tax revenue that would be collected from the rural residential areas. The assessed value and property density would not make it a feasible financial endeavor. A conservative fire station will be over \$1,000,000 and a fire engine that 10 years ago was \$350,000 is now \$900,000. Rural fire protection districts are not going to run out and build new fire stations from this legislation.

Another argument that has been heard is about the tax rates for rural fire protection districts. As you are aware these rates were set by the voters of Oregon with Measures 5 and 50. These measure have also limited the value increase to 3% per year. The cost of doing business has far exceeded this 3% growth, especially over the last 3 years. This has put a financial crunch on rural fire protection districts which has magnified the fact that there are people receiving the services and insurance discounts that are being paid for by their neighbors.

While this bill will not fix the immediate problem it will stop the bleed and make sure the problem does not become bigger. It will over time, eventually fix the issue as properties sell, add buildings, go through zoning changes, or any of the other criteria listed in the bill.

Committee Chair Meek, Vice Chair Boquist, and committee members thank you for giving me the opportunity to provide testimony in support of SB 1068. I respectfully ask that you unanimously pass this bill out of committee and support it's passage on the Senate floor. I also ask that you reach out to your House of Representative partners and ask for their support.

Respectfully submitted

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert Bullock". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "B" and "L".

Robert Bullock