

May 6, 2023

House Committee on Revenue

Chair Nathanson, Vice chair Reschke, Vice Chair Walters, and committee members,

I am writing this letter in support of senate bill 1068 by adding testimony to my previously submitted testimony to hopefully help answer some questions that I have heard raised.

The majority of the rural fire protection districts are struggling financially and the majority of them have improved properties within their immediate response areas that are receiving services and insurance discounts but are not paying taxes. When you look at the equipment and regulations needed to provide these services and the costs associated with them you will see why we need everyone that is receiving services to help pay to have the equipment and personnel available and ready to respond to emergencies. Today the cost of a fire engine is approaching a million dollars, a set of protective structural bunker gear is two to three thousand dollars, self-contained breathing apparatus are over three thousand each, fire hoses range from \$150 to \$500 per section depending on size, even a portable radio can be over \$8,000 dollars and all of these items have life expectancy and replacement requirements for safety reasons. Then for those departments that are lucky enough to have a career firefighting staff you have increasing personnel costs. A structure fire can double in size every 30 seconds, a person's survival rate decreases every second that they do not receive life saving CPR, not to mention how fast wildland fires can grow, as we have all seen over the couple of years, so having well staffed and well equipped firefighters is a must. It has been said that fire departments have gone bankrupt due to lack of funds and this is a broad characterization as it would be difficult to find a true filing of bankruptcy, instead these departments have reduced numbers of firefighters that they are able to equip, have closed or browned out fire stations that they are able to equip and staff, or they have reduced or eliminated career staff. Some departments have looked for their neighbors to help, for instance Winston-Dillard fire District was a department with 15 – 18 firefighters and full administrative staff 4. Lack of funding put them into a position where they had to layoff all but 9 firefighters and all of the administrative staff, Their board of directors had to reach out to their neighboring fire district to contract for administrative services so that they could continue to operate. You can look across the state and find similar stories be it contracts, mergers, take-overs, or consolidations. No matter how it happens if station numbers or personnel numbers are decreased there is time added to getting the required personnel and equipment on scene of the emergency and looking at the numbers above this delay can be devastating be it a fire or a medical emergency.

It does not matter if a department is missing a couple thousand dollars in tax revenue or a million, those tax dollars could help purchase a portable radio, a flash light, a set of bunker gear, or help provide staffing at the fire station it is all important to public safety and it is fair to the people who are paying to have these services available for everyone.

This bill is not a land grab, it is not trying to tax timber or farm land it is trying to equitably tax all improved ;lands within the immediate response areas of the rural fire protection district. As it has been stated rural fire protection districts and the only taxing entities that new properties or new improvements are not automatically added to the tax roles, Cities annex all of the time without a vote of those effected and it is done by their elected government officials who are just like the elected officials that make up a fire district board of directors, who do not have these same rights. This bill does not fix the problem in it's entirety but it does stop the bleed and keeps it from getting worse and it does provide an avenue for it to fix the problem as certain items trigger the annexation of existing properties to occur, so please pass senate bill 1068 out of committee with a do pass recommendation to the House floor.

Respectfully,

Robert Bullock