



Fire Services and EMS Assessment

Final Report

Prepared September 2025

Whatcom County, Washington

M MissionCriticalPartners

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Executive Summary

Whatcom County, Washington is a fast-growing county located in the northwest part of the state, approximately 90 miles north of Seattle. While Bellingham, the county's largest city, serves as the urban center, much of the area outside the designated Urban Growth Area remains predominantly rural. The county is home to approximately 235,000 residents and spans 2,503 square miles of land and water.

Twelve incorporated fire districts, one regional fire authority, and two cities currently provide fire/rescue and/or emergency medical services (EMS). Fire-suppression services are delivered through a combination of career and volunteer-staffed stations, while basic life support (BLS) EMS is provided by individual fire districts. Advanced life support (ALS) is offered by Bellingham and the city of Ferndale. Fire and EMS dispatch services are managed by a communications center in Bellingham, locally known as Prospect. This is a secondary communications center, as all 911 calls are initially received and transferred from What-Comm, the primary public safety answering point (PSAP), which handles all law enforcement dispatching.

In 2024, Mission Critical Partners® (MCP) was retained by Whatcom County (County) to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of the fire, rescue, and EMS systems that operate within its jurisdiction. MCP's subject-matter experts initiated the project in September 2024 by meeting with the County's project leadership team, followed by several months of information-gathering through phone calls, emails, and a site visit. Additional meetings were held with personnel from each fire district and city fire department, the County's EMS Administration, the two PSAPs, the professional firefighters' union, and other County staff.

MCP assessed the current and desired state of several critical factors—strategic planning, governance, organizational structure, staffing and personnel management, training, communications, and budget and finance—evaluating each against industry standards, best practices, and existing operating procedures and guidelines. The team also examined operational aspects impacting fire suppression, rescue services, and EMS delivery, along with the role of fire and EMS associations.

A central question emerged: Can the County continue serving a growing population while preserving the strong traditions of its fire and EMS services? More specifically, do the various fire service and EMS entities wish to move toward a more unified and collaborative system, or maintain their current independent operational models?

This assessment report outlines 19 detailed recommendations for evolving the County's fire/rescue and EMS systems, along with the rationale behind each.

The following table lists these recommendations. Each chapter that follows offers a detailed analysis and discussion of the relevant issues and the background supporting each recommendation.

Table 1: Recommendations

Recommendations	Section
The districts should continue operating under common standard operating procedures (SOPs) as outlined in the <i>Whatcom County Fire/EMS Operations Manual</i> . This promotes consistency and seamless operation during mutual aid responses.	3.4
Unincorporated areas of the county that have historically required fire department response but remain unassigned to a fire district should be formally assigned. A financial reimbursement mechanism should be developed for these assignments.	4.1.4

Consider the consolidation of operations between District 17 and District 7.	4.1.4
Consider the consolidation of operations between District 18 and the South Whatcom Fire Authority.	4.1.4
County government should host dedicated meetings with fire service leadership, separate from existing meetings. These meetings should occur at least quarterly to address critical fire and EMS service issues and to educate the County Council on system needs.	4.3
All districts, cities, and fire authorities should increase transparency in budgeting and governance. Public expenditures and meeting information should be easily accessible to residents.	4.3
While MCP has not identified a pressing need to expand the current ALS or BLS deployment models, an annual review should be conducted to assess emerging needs and address factors contributing to extended response times. The Deming area, in particular, should be continually monitored for delays and evaluated for the potential placement of a dedicated unit.	5.2
Shared fleet management should be explored to maximize cost-efficiency.	5.2.3
Each entity should evaluate its fleet size and align resources with operational needs. Underutilized apparatus still incurs maintenance and insurance costs.	5.2.3
Shared facility management should also be investigated to reduce costs and improve utilization of infrastructure.	5.2.3
Shared purchasing strategies for both fire and EMS should be implemented to take advantage of economies of scale. This is especially important for EMS, where supplies are consumed frequently and restocking is a daily necessity. The first levy plan identified this as a potential need.	5.2.3
Fire districts should discuss the potential for sharing command staff to reduce costs, promote standardization, and enhance regional cooperation.	5.2.3
A Class A burn building is needed to provide realistic fire training scenarios for both recruits and veteran personnel.	5.2.3
Grant application efforts should be regionalized to improve competitiveness for federal grant funding.	5.2.3
Prospect should be consolidated with, or co-located into, What-Comm to enhance operational efficiency.	6.2
The “banked capacity” and levy lift should be enacted for the remaining years of the current levy term to offset rising costs and potential funding reductions, including those related to Medicare and the Ground Emergency Medical Transportation (GEMT) program.	7.1

ALS levy funds should be reallocated in part to support BLS operations, ensuring that smaller agencies receive a minimal level of financial support.	7.2
Fire districts should share ALS billing information with the County EMS Administration and/or grant EMS Administration access to billing vendor portals. Current practices lack transparency. Greater visibility would enable a more comprehensive audit and improve the accuracy of EMS levy budgeting.	8.1
Paramedic training should be provided through local academic institutions to increase the availability of qualified personnel within the region.	9.1

These recommendations provide a roadmap for strengthening Whatcom County's fire and EMS system, ensuring it remains responsive, efficient, and financially sustainable. By prioritizing collaboration, strategic investment, and transparent decision-making, the County can better meet current and future demands while continuing to deliver high-quality service to the community.

1 Introduction

Whatcom County, with an estimated population of 234,954, is composed of seven incorporated cities, the largest of which is Bellingham. Fire departments within the county operate as independent political fire protection districts and have the authority to impose excess levies through a referendum, in accordance with the Revised Code of Washington (RCW) Section 84.52.130. The County maintains an EMS system—Whatcom County Emergency Medical Services (WCEMS)—which is responsible for high-level administrative functions and actions necessary to ensure continued, integrated, and uniform EMS service across the county. The PSAPs are managed by the Bellingham Police Department, which provides police call-taking and dispatch services for the primary dispatch center, What-Comm. The Bellingham Fire Department (BFD) maintains a secondary PSAP—Prospect—for the purpose of dispatching fire and EMS resources.

Table 2: Whatcom County Public Safety Stakeholders

Whatcom County Fire Departments	
- District 1 – Everson, Nooksack, Deming, and the Nooksack Indian Tribe - District 4 – Britton Road., Agate Bay, and Van Wyck - District 5 – Point Roberts - District 7 – Ferndale, North Bellingham, and Point Whitehorn - District 8 – Marietta, Gooseberry Point, and Lummi Nation - District 11 – Lummi Island - District 14 – Sumas, Kendall, and Welcome	- District 16 – Acme, Wickersham, and Van Zandt - District 17 – Sandy Point - District 18 – South Lake Whatcom, Glenhaven, and South Bay - District 19 – Glacier Fire and Rescue - District 21 – North Whatcom Fire and Rescue - Blaine - South Whatcom Fire Authority (SWFA) - City of Bellingham - City of Lynden
Whatcom County EMS Agencies	
All fire districts and authorities (BLS)	- Bellingham Fire Department (ALS) - Ferndale (ALS)
Whatcom County PSAPs	
What-Comm	Prospect

In Spring 2024, the County retained MCP to assess the current state of agencies and service levels within the County's fire and EMS systems. This assessment included a review of agency configurations, programs, budgets, staffing, interlocal agreements, administration, roles and responsibilities, service delivery, and other critical elements. Throughout the project, MCP prioritized stakeholder engagement to gather feedback and explore the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) facing the existing systems and structures.

Key stakeholders included all fire district administration, staff, and first responders; City of Bellingham and Lynden fire department administration, staff, and first responders; WCEMS administration, EMS Oversight Board, Technical Advisory Board, and WCEMS and Trauma Care Council; What-Comm and Prospect dispatchers; elected officials; unions and guilds; community leaders; and other relevant stakeholders.

This study focuses on the current state of fire and EMS services in the county, including a review and profile of the fire districts, EMS deployment configuration and administration, and corresponding program budgets, staffing, interlocal agreements, and roles and responsibilities of each.

2 Approach

Staff from Whatcom County government, each of the fire districts/authorities and city fire departments, Whatcom County Professional Fire Fighters International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) Local 106, and both PSAPs assisted MCP in this assessment by providing data and facilitating interviews.

Data Collection

Following a soft kickoff, MCP was onsite for a total of five days over two site visits, during which an in-person project kickoff meeting was held, and staff and stakeholders were interviewed (see Table 3) to gather information and data necessary to assess the current environment.

While onsite, MCP engaged with field operations personnel, IAFF 106 leadership, County leadership, communications representatives, and elected fire commissioners who wished to share ideas, thoughts, and/or concerns. Staff and stakeholders also provided statistics, documents, and additional information for MCP's review.

Table 3: Stakeholders Interviewed

Name	Agency
Rick Kowsky	Cascade Ambulance
Scott Farrell	IAFF 106
Mike Hilley	EMS Administration
Jason Van Der Veen	District 4
Rob Roy Graham Jerry DeBruin	Chiefs Association
Jim Petrie	District 17
Jerry DeBruin	District 14
Bill Hewett	BFD
Hank Maleng	District 16
Scott Crowe	District 18

Name	Agency
Michael Lish	District 11
Ben Boyko	District 7
Whatcom County Council	Council
Rachel Carlson	District 1
Mitch Nolze	SWFA
Mike Noonan	Lynden Fire
Mike Hilley	EMS Administration
Whatcom Fire Chiefs	WFCA
Curtis Metz	County FM
Chris Carlson	District 5
Josh Evans	District 19

Findings and Analysis

The findings and analysis section of this report includes information gathered through collection and research, describing the current state of the agencies and analyzing those findings in relation to national standards and best practices. For clarity, this report uses the following definitions:

- **Standard** – something established by authority, custom, or general consent as a model, for example¹
- **Best Practice** – a procedure that has been shown by research and experience to produce optimal results and that is established or proposed as a standard suitable for widespread adoption²
- **Industry Experience** – primarily involves a minimum of ten years of combined education, work experience, and specialization in a respective industry or market segment

The data and information provided ranged from quantitative data (hard numbers) to qualitative input (opinions and anecdotal feedback). For quantitative data, MCP relied on established public safety and private industry metrics to assess and evaluate factors related to fire and EMS operations. For qualitative data or where standardized metrics were not available, MCP applied its collective industry experience and awareness of best practices to develop appropriate benchmarks and assess the status of local agencies.

Throughout this report, MCP clearly distinguishes where analysis and findings are based on measurable, quantitative data and where they are based on more subjective evaluations. MCP's years of experience have demonstrated that subjective assessments—when informed by thoughtful and unbiased comparisons with public safety and private industry best practices—can be just as meaningful as quantitative evaluations. Subjective

¹ "Standard," Merriam-Webster, 2024. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/standard>

² "Best Practice," Merriam-Webster, 2024. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/best%20practice>

input is valid when it is critically reviewed and not merely a repetition of unsubstantiated opinions. Both types of input play an important role in determining where public safety agencies currently stand and where they should focus their priorities—whether that involves shared services opportunities, consolidation, or other improvement strategies.

Report and Presentation

MCP met with the County's fire services to officially kick off the project in September 2024 and continued collecting data into 2025, when report writing commenced. MCP provided an update to the Whatcom County Council in December 2024 and again in June 2025 to share progress, highlight areas of cooperation, and present preliminary recommendations.

Unfortunately, MCP did experience some roadblocks during the data collection phase, which delayed the finalization of this report. Some data proved difficult to obtain, which impacted the project timeline.

Following submission of the draft report, MCP solicited feedback from the project team to clarify certain portions of the report and, where needed, modify or add new content. This final report will be presented to the County Council, with copies provided to key stakeholders.

3 System Overview

At the outset of the process, it became apparent that fire service personnel in Whatcom County were frustrated with the decision to hire a consultant for this report. Many fire service staff felt that the concerns raised by the County were already being addressed by the agencies and that progress was being made through existing collaboration and cooperation. Additionally, the district chiefs emphasized to MCP that the fire districts are autonomous and that, in general, the County does not have authority over how the districts operate. As a result, the start of the process was somewhat contentious.

Nevertheless, MCP would like to express appreciation to the agencies for their willingness to meet and discuss issues.

The following issues were raised—based on events and perceptions prior to MCP's engagement in late 2024—by the fire agencies, the County, and fire leadership:

- Nature of the way this study and report were initiated
 - The County Council did not approach the fire district commissioners, who are the elected representatives for the agencies, or the mayors/city councils for the municipalities
 - No input or participation was requested from the agencies
 - Fire chiefs received late notice of the Council's resolution creating this study and the impending vote
- Lack of representation for fire district elected officials
 - Chiefs expressed concern that district commissioners were not given the opportunity to represent their communities in the County Council's decision to evaluate fire district and EMS services
 - Tools and processes for data collection were considered ineffective, and agencies were not given the chance to provide input

- Fire district commissioners felt that their authority was being undermined
- Misinformation and incomplete information
 - Concerns were raised that decisions about the future of the county fire service were being made using inaccurate or incomplete data
- Concerns with supporting documentation
 - Several agencies expressed concerns about the accuracy of information contained in the memo that supported the Council resolution initiating the study
 - They noted a lack of coordination with County government in conducting fact-finding
- Funding concerns
 - Fire chiefs expressed concern about where funding for future recommended changes might come from
 - They stressed that EMS levy funds must not be used for purposes other than those approved by the community
- Issues with identified stakeholders
 - Fire chiefs opposed including private ambulance services as part of the “stakeholders” group
 - Prospect was not originally included on the interview list or considered a stakeholder
 - The County Fire Marshal’s Office was omitted from the Council’s original request for the study, despite being the County’s primary fire entity

MCP found it critical to hear and understand the perspectives of both fire and EMS entities, as well as those of the County government.

To ensure diverse perspectives were presented, MCP took the following steps:

- Visited each fire district in the county—except District 5, whose Chief was interviewed in person at a different location—to conduct leadership interviews
- Conducted additional stakeholder interviews with:
 - EMS Administration
 - Cascade Ambulance Service
 - Whatcom County Fire Marshal
 - Whatcom County government representatives

3.1 Overview

Whatcom County is a mix of urban and rural areas with a rapidly growing population, located about 90 miles north of metropolitan Seattle. According to the 2020 U.S. Census, the county had a population of approximately 226,847, with an estimated 234,954 residents in 2024, spread across 2,503 square miles.

Fire and EMS services are provided by 12 fire districts, one regional fire authority, and two cities. Fire suppression services are delivered through a mix of staffing models: fully career (paid firefighters), hybrid (career and volunteer), or all-volunteer departments. EMS is provided by both career and volunteer emergency medical technicians (EMTs) and paramedics. ALS services are staffed by personnel from BFD and Whatcom County Fire District 7 (Ferndale).

Public safety communications for fire and EMS is managed at BFD Headquarters. This PSAP is responsible for answering fire, emergency, and rescue 911 calls and dispatching responders. It functions as a secondary PSAP; all 911 calls are first routed to What-Comm, which handles law enforcement dispatching, and then transferred to Prospect for fire and EMS needs.

The following figure represents the rural and urban breakdown for the state of Washington, as determined by the Washington State Office of Financial Management.

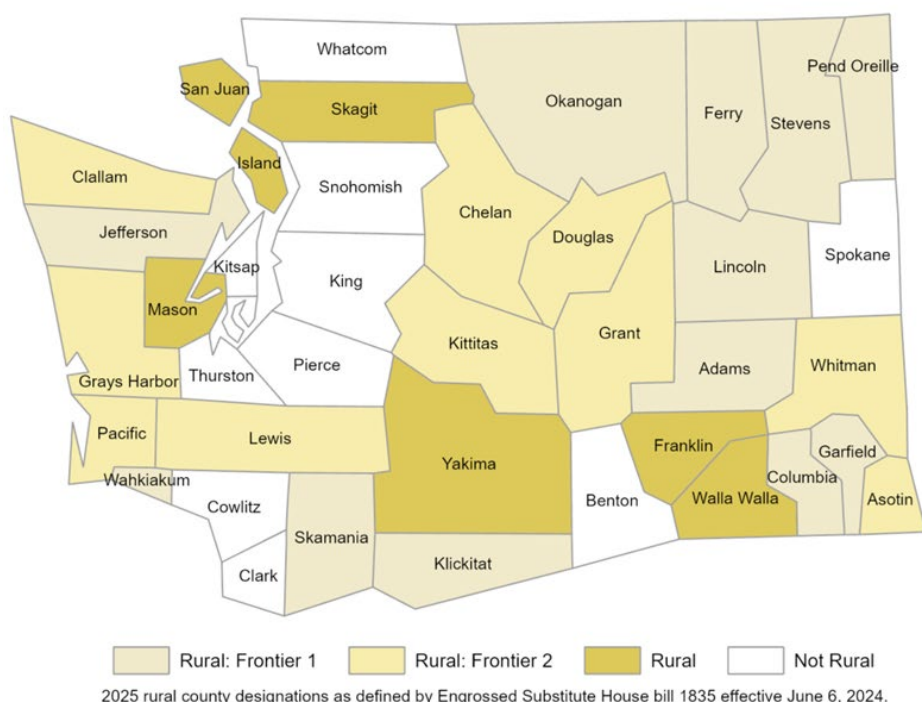


Figure 1: Rural/Urban County Map for Washington

While many residents may not view Whatcom County as urban, this designation carries important implications for fire and EMS services and public safety. Urban classification can influence regional policy and lobbying efforts, as well as eligibility for certain grant programs. In general, justification for grant funding tends to favor larger urban areas, and state-level technology improvements or funding initiatives are often geared toward higher population centers.

3.2 Agency Overviews

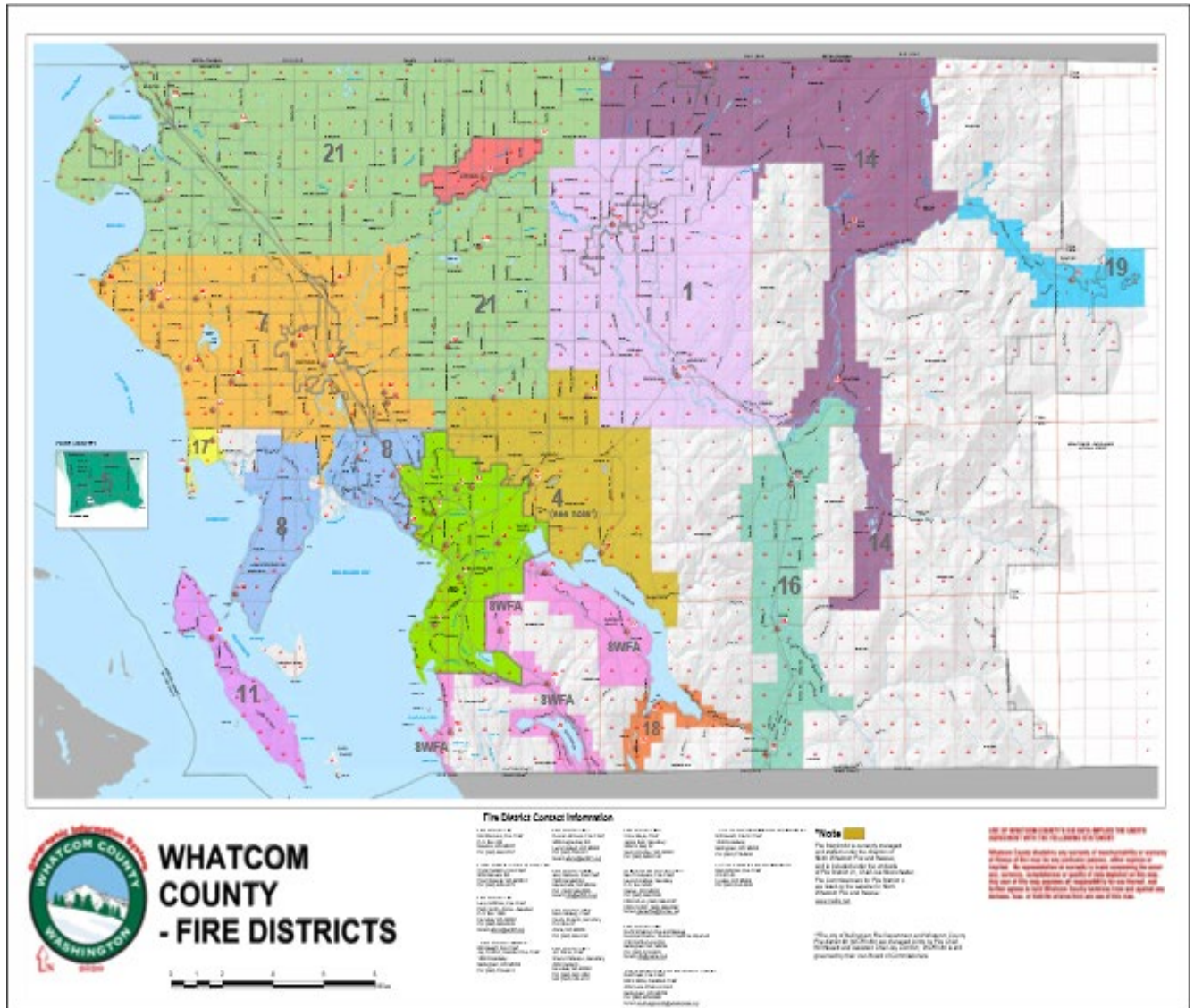


Figure 2: Whatcom County Fire Districts

The following sections provide a brief description of each operational agency within Whatcom County. Additional details for each agency can be found in Appendix A: Fire Department Profiles.

3.2.1 Fire District 1

Whatcom County Fire District 1 serves the central-eastern portion of Whatcom County, encompassing the rural areas surrounding the city of Everson and extending south toward State Route 542 and east toward the western base of Sumas Mountain. The district is bordered by District 21 to the west, District 14 to the northeast, District 16 to the southeast, and other smaller districts to the southwest. The terrain includes agricultural lands, residential clusters, and portions of mountainous terrain near the district's eastern boundary.

District 1 operates two fire stations: Station 81, located in the northern part of the district near Everson, and Station 82, positioned toward the southern end of the district.

The area includes a mix of farmland, low-density housing, and light commercial activity, with a relatively balanced distribution of 2024 fire events throughout the central region.

District 1's proximity to key transportation corridors and the Everson urban area positions it as a central response agency within the county's fire service network.

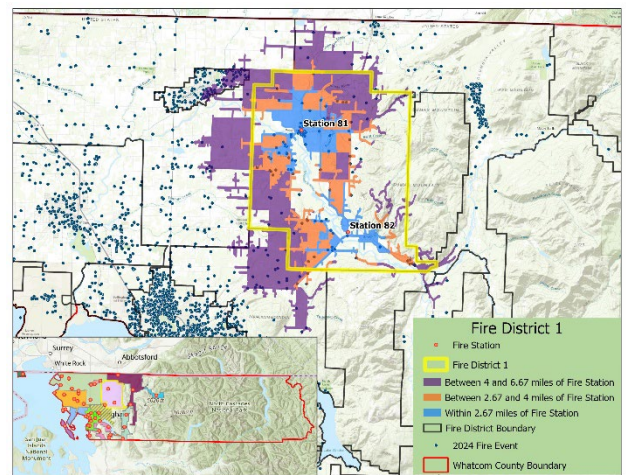


Figure 3: Whatcom County Fire District 1

3.2.2 Fire District 4 (Managed by Fire District 21)

Whatcom County Fire District 4 serves the eastern suburban and rural interface surrounding the city of Bellingham, extending north toward District 21 and District 1 and eastward toward District 16 and the foothills of the Cascade Mountains. The district covers an area that borders Lake Whatcom in the south and includes portions of the urban-wildland interface, with a mixture of residential development, forested hillsides, and rural properties. The district is adjacent to several high-demand service areas, including the city of Bellingham and SWFA.

District 4 operates two fire stations: Station 12, located near the southern edge of the district close to Lake Whatcom, and Station 13, positioned in the northern part of the district near the District 1 boundary.

The district experiences a moderate volume of fire and EMS activity, particularly in the northern and western portions closest to urban density. The combination of suburban expansion, rural topography, and proximity to high-traffic corridors creates a diverse response environment for the district.

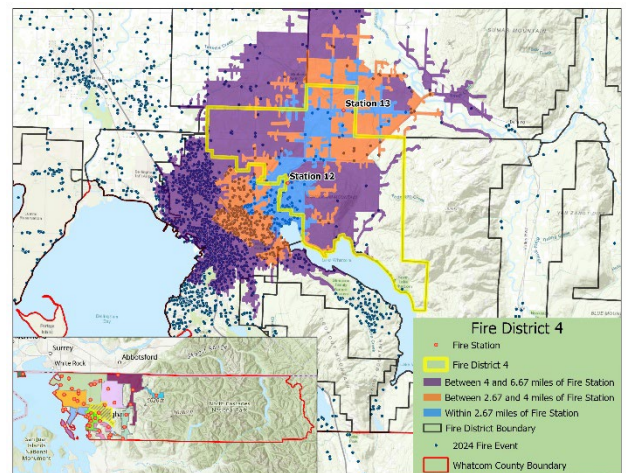


Figure 4: Whatcom County Fire District 4

3.2.3 Fire District 5

Whatcom County Fire District 5 encompasses the entirety of Point Roberts, a geographically isolated exclave of the U.S. located at the southern tip of the Tsawwassen Peninsula, just south of the Canadian border. The district is surrounded by Boundary Bay and the Strait of Georgia and separated from the rest of Whatcom County by international boundaries—only accessible by land via Canada, or by air or sea. This unique geopolitical situation requires coordination with U.S. and Canadian border services for transportation, logistics, and emergency response planning.

District 5 operates from a single location—Point Roberts Station—located near the central portion of the peninsula.

The area consists of residential neighborhoods, recreational and seasonal homes, and coastal open space, with limited commercial development and infrastructure.

The 2024 fire event data indicate a moderate call volume, consistent with the area's small population and seasonal fluctuations. The district's isolated geography and cross-border access challenges create distinct operational considerations for emergency preparedness and mutual aid.

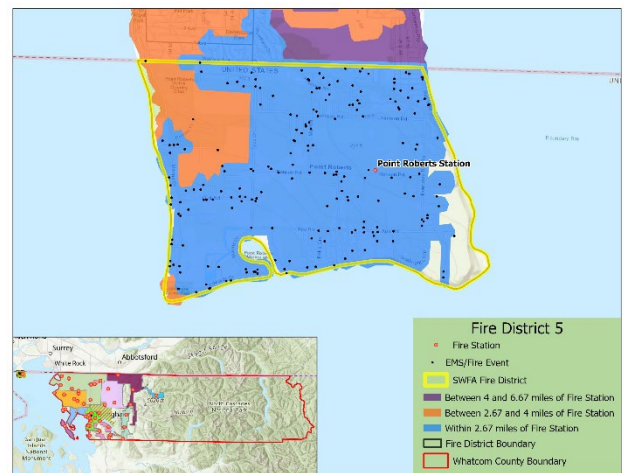


Figure 5: Whatcom County Fire District 5

3.2.4 Fire District 7

Whatcom County Fire District 7 serves the northwestern quadrant of Whatcom County, encompassing the rapidly growing communities of Ferndale and the surrounding rural and suburban areas. The district spans from the coastline of Birch Bay on the west to the eastern farmlands near District 21 and District 4, and from the Canadian border in the north to the southern boundaries adjacent to District 17 and District 8. This large, diverse area includes coastal, residential, agricultural, and semi-urban environments, making it one of the more active and complex service areas in the county.

District 7 operates six fire stations:

- Station 41 (Headquarters) – centrally located and serving as the district's administrative headquarters
- Station 42 – in the north-central region
- Station 43 – toward the southeast corner of the district
- Station 44 – near the western coastal edge
- Station 45 – positioned in the northeast
- Station 46 – located near the central corridor of fire activity

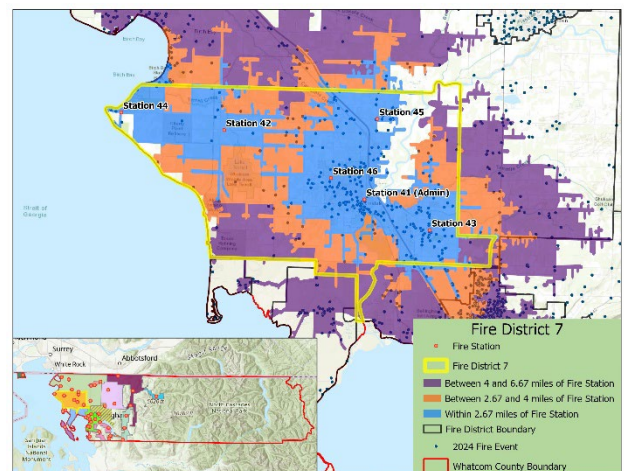


Figure 6: Whatcom County Fire District 7

The district has a high density of 2024 fire events, concentrated around the urban center of Ferndale and adjacent communities.

The district's diverse landscape and development patterns require dynamic response strategies, making it one of the most active fire districts in Whatcom County.

3.2.5 Fire District 8 (Managed by BFD)

Whatcom County Fire District 8 serves the Lummi Peninsula and surrounding coastal areas in western Whatcom County, extending from north of Gooseberry Point southward to the tip of the peninsula, and bordered to the east by the Bellingham city limits. This district includes residential, tribal, and natural lands along the coast of Bellingham Bay, as well as access routes to Lummi Island, which appear to be supported as part of the broader regional mutual aid structure.

District 8 operates two fire stations: Station 31, located near the northeastern shoreline, near the highest concentration of 2024 fire events within the district, and Station 34 on Gooseberry Point.

District 8 is characterized by a relatively low to moderate density of fire events, with a majority occurring in the northern and central portions of the district.

The district is geographically defined by water boundaries on multiple sides, with limited roadway access into and out of the area, presenting unique challenges for emergency response and mutual aid coordination.

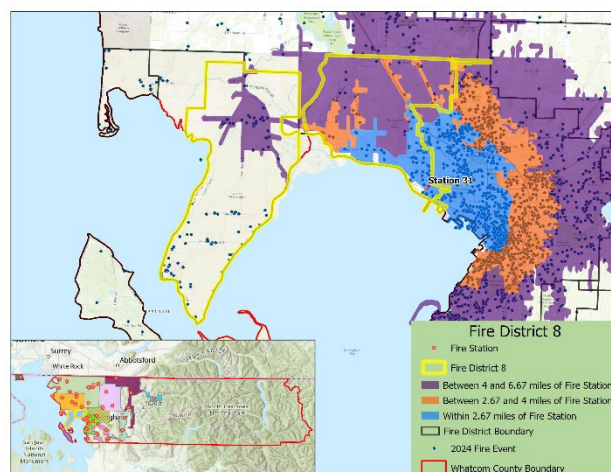


Figure 7: Whatcom County Fire District 8

3.2.6 Fire District 11

Whatcom County Fire District 11 serves the entirety of Lummi Island, which is an isolated island community located west of the Lummi Peninsula in Bellingham Bay. The district is geographically isolated because it is fully maritime-bound, accessible only by ferry or watercraft, and is responsible for providing emergency services to a mix of residential, recreational, and forested terrain across the island.

District 11 operates from a centrally located station, Lummi Island Fire, which supports the surrounding population and structures.

Fire event data for 2024 indicates a low-to-moderate volume of incidents, mostly concentrated along the eastern coastline and road-accessible areas of the island.

The district's isolation, limited access, and natural geography create unique operational challenges for emergency response, interagency coordination, and mutual aid deployment.

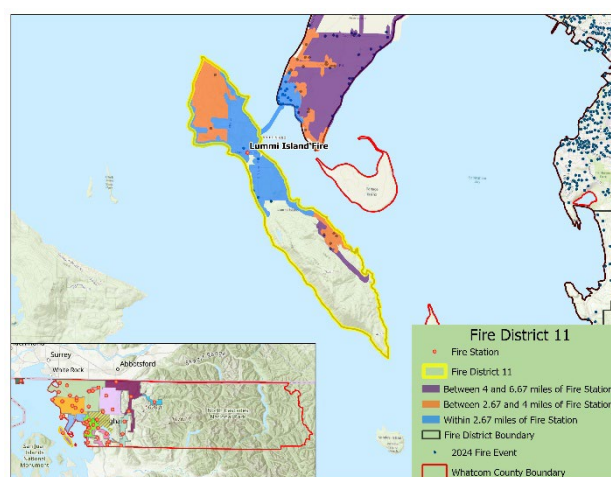


Figure 8: Whatcom County Fire District 11

3.2.7 Fire District 14

Whatcom County Fire District 14 serves the Middle Fork Valley region of eastern Whatcom County, generally along and surrounding Mount Baker Highway (State Route [SR] 542) and extending northward to the U.S.–Canada border. It includes rural and mountainous terrain, encompassing areas east of Lynden and north of District 1, and shares boundaries with Districts 1, 4, 16, and 19, as well as parts of District 21. Major natural features include the Nooksack River's Middle Fork, Sumas Mountain, and adjacent mountainous forestland.

District 14 operates three fire stations: Station 91 in Sumas (near the Canadian border), Station 92 (District Office) in the northern portion of the district, and Station 93 farther south, near the border with District 16.

The district covers a wide area along the Canadian border that transitions into a narrow, elongated area of eastern Whatcom County, stretching from the U.S.–Canada border in the north to areas south of SR 542, near the Van Zandt area. Its terrain is characterized by forested hills, mountainous regions, and rural valleys, with limited road access and a sparse distribution of fire incidents compared to western districts.

The district is governed by a three-member commission, with administrative support for the district provided by a full-time fire chief, assistant fire chief, and training officer, and a part-time district secretary (vacant at the time of this report).

Emergency incidents are supported by a small complement of career firefighters (staffing Station 92 24/7) and a volunteer membership base, trained primarily for structural and wildland firefighting, BLS medical response, vehicle accidents, and a variety of other incidents.

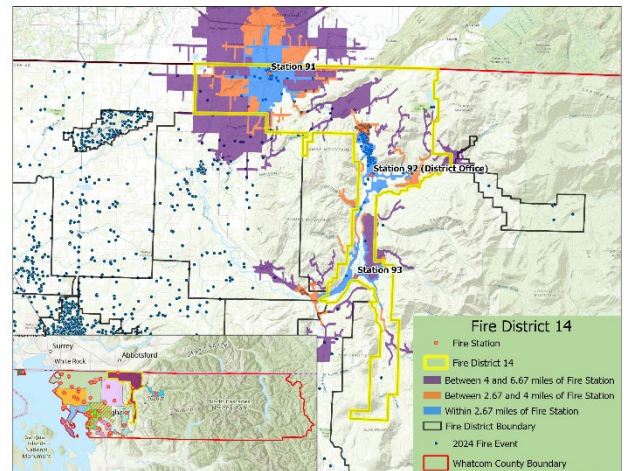


Figure 9: Whatcom County Fire District 14

3.2.8 Fire District 16

Whatcom County Fire District 16 serves the South Fork Valley of the Nooksack River along Valley Highway 9 south of SR 542. This area includes Acme, Wickersham, and Van Zandt, each with an unmanned station: Acme Station 86 (headquarters), Van Zandt Station 87, and Wickersham Station 88. Most of the district is comprised of agricultural land. The district is unique in that it is partially isolated from the rest of the county by mountain ridges along its eastern and western boundaries. There is limited zoning in the district, thus resulting in extremely limited potential for future growth (residential, commercial, or industrial).

The district is governed by a three-member commission, with administrative support provided by two part-time employees, a fire chief and a secretary.

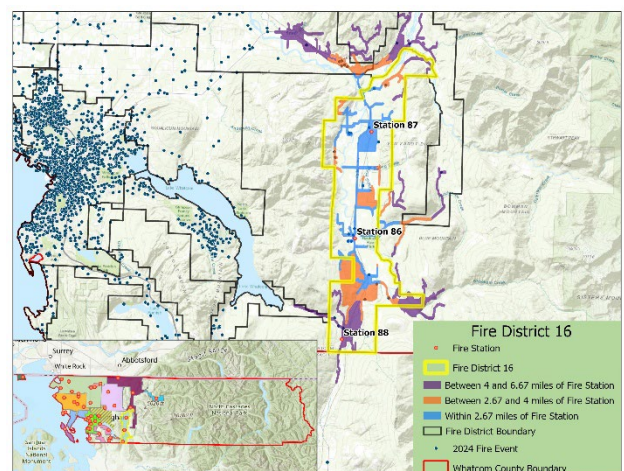


Figure 10: Whatcom County Fire District 16

Emergency incidents are supported by an all-volunteer membership base of approximately 20 individuals, trained primarily for structural and wildland firefighting and BLS medical response. ALS response coverage, as with the other districts in the county, is provided by Bellingham Medic One.

3.2.9 Fire District 17

Whatcom County Fire District 17 serves the northwestern coastal region of Whatcom County. The district's boundaries include Lummi Bay and the Strait of Georgia, along with District 7 to the north and District 8 to the east. The area is characterized by a mix of coastal residential neighborhoods, seasonal properties, and rural open land. It also resides within the Lummi Reservation.

District 17 operates two fire stations: Station 56, located in the Sandy Point Shores area, and Station 57, located inland near the center of the mainland portion of the district in Sandy Point Heights.

Geography presents unique logistical and response challenges due to the potential for serious flooding, which has occurred at times over the course of the past few years.

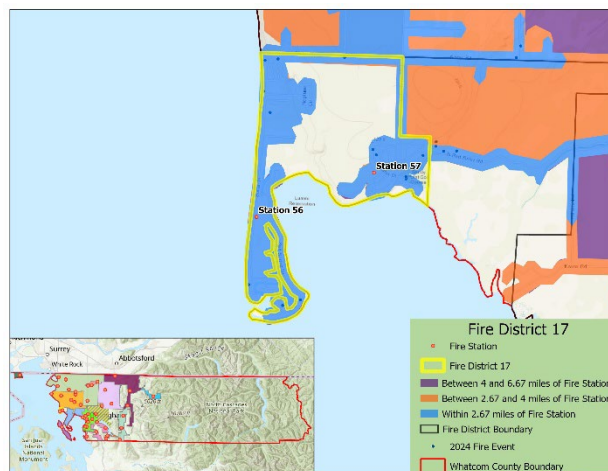


Figure 11: Whatcom County Fire District 17

3.2.10 Fire District 18

Whatcom County Fire District 18 serves the southeastern shoreline and southern hills surrounding Lake Whatcom, extending southward toward the Skagit County line. The district lies east of Lookout Mountain and west of District 16, encompassing rural, forested terrain, and residential clusters near Cain Lake, Lake Whatcom, and the South Bay area. It borders SWFA to the north and includes access routes through winding rural roads that serve scattered residential and recreational properties.

District 18 operates two fire stations: Station 25, located in the northern portion near Lake Whatcom's South Bay, and Station 26, situated further south near the district's rural residential core.

The area is primarily comprised of forested hillsides, lakeshore residential areas, and limited-access terrain, which can pose response time and accessibility challenges. The district's layout is defined by natural features such as hills, creeks, and lake boundaries, with minimal commercial or industrial development.

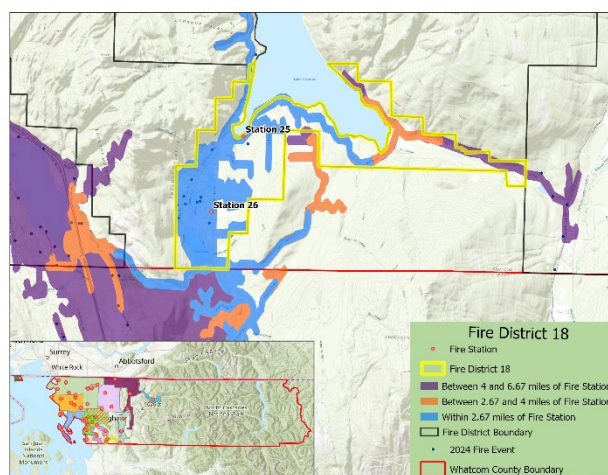


Figure 12: Whatcom County Fire District 18

3.2.11 Fire District 19

Whatcom County Fire District 19 serves the remote, mountainous region of eastern Whatcom County, centered around the community of Glacier and extending along the North Fork Nooksack River corridor. The district spans a narrow, linear geographic area bounded by rugged mountain terrain, including Church Mountain, Slide Mountain, and the foothills of Mount Baker, with access primarily via SR 542 (Mount Baker Highway).

District 19 operates from a single fire station, identified as Glacier Fire and Rescue, located near the heart of the service area.

Due to its high elevation, forested landscape, and seasonal weather extremes, the district faces unique challenges in emergency response related to wildfire potential, remote property access, and winter conditions.

Fire event data from 2024 indicates a low incident density, which aligns with the district's sparse population and largely undeveloped land use.

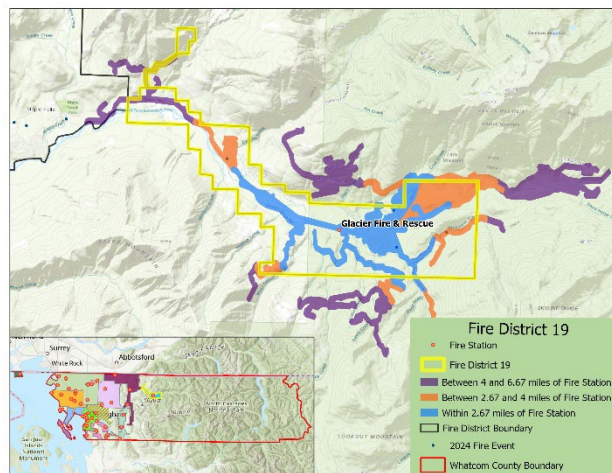


Figure 13: Whatcom County Fire District 19

3.2.12 Fire District 21

Whatcom County Fire District 21 encompasses a large, predominantly rural and agricultural region in northwestern Whatcom County, including areas west and south of the city of Lynden and extending to the shoreline of Birch Bay and Semiahmoo Bay. The district includes small unincorporated communities and farmland, with multiple state highways and rural roads intersecting its boundaries. District 21 borders Canada to the north and spans a significant portion of the county's northwest quadrant.

District 21 operates eight fire stations:

- Station 61 (northwestern corner near Semiahmoo)
- Station 63 (Birch Bay area)
- Station 64 (southeast of Birch Bay)
- Station 65 (central district)
- Station 68 (southern area along the border with District 7)
- Station 69 (southeastern portion)
- Station 71 (within the city limits of Lynden, serving a high-density population cluster)
- Station 72 (northeast of Lynden, near the border of District 14)

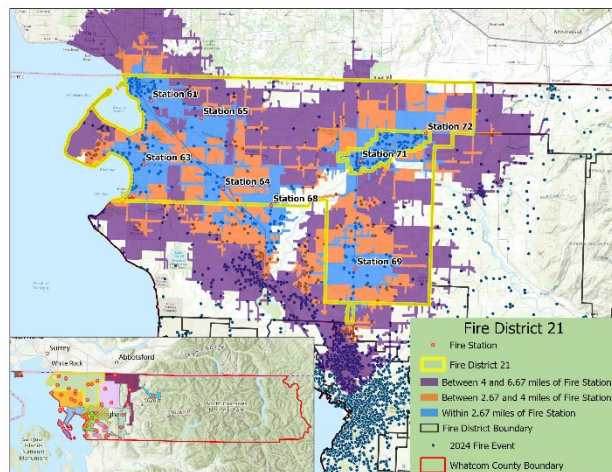


Figure 14: Whatcom County Fire District 21

District 21 includes the incorporated city of Lynden, though the city's limits and fire protection zone appear as a nested, distinct service area on the map. The district's topography is generally flat with widespread agricultural use, interspersed with suburban development near Lynden and the coastal communities.

The district experienced a high-density of 2024 fire events, concentrated in Lynden and the Birch Bay area, indicating a combination of population-driven call volume and development intensity.

3.2.13 South Whatcom Fire Authority

SWFA serves the southern portion of Whatcom County along the western slopes of the Chuckanut Mountains and eastern shorelines of Lake Whatcom. The district encompasses a mixture of residential subdivisions, lakeside communities, and forested, mountainous terrain. The area includes several unincorporated communities such as Geneva, Sudden Valley, Chuckanut, and Lake Samish.

SWFA has four fire stations, one of which is not operational:

- Station 18: Chuckanut Station (western portion along Chuckanut Drive) – not operational
- Station 21: Geneva Station (northwest portion of Lake Whatcom)
- Station 22: Sudden Valley Station (Administrative Office; east-central side of Lake Whatcom)
- Station 28: Lake Samish Station (central southern part of the district near Lake Samish)

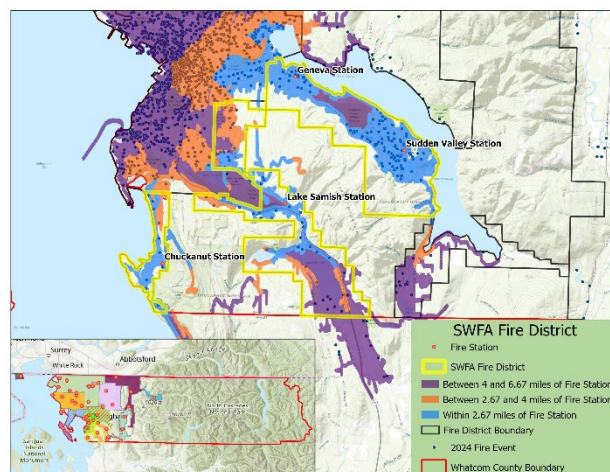


Figure 15: South Whatcom Fire Authority

SWFA's jurisdiction is bordered by District 4 to the north and District 18 to the southeast, with a large swath of unincorporated areas surrounding the entire district. This configuration places SWFA in a transitional zone between densely populated areas near Bellingham and remote, mountainous sections extending toward the Skagit County line.

Topographically, the area features steep inclines, winding roads, and limited access routes that may pose challenges for emergency response, particularly during inclement weather or wildfire conditions. Despite its rugged terrain, the district had a relatively high number of dispatched calls for service in 2024, clustered around the Geneva, Sudden Valley, and Lake Samish residential zones.

3.2.14 Bellingham Fire Department

BFD serves the incorporated city of Bellingham, the largest and most densely populated jurisdiction in Whatcom County. The city is centrally located on the county's western shoreline and includes both urban core and suburban neighborhoods, as well as portions of industrial and waterfront zones.

BFD operates seven fire stations:

- Station 1 (central/downtown core)
- Station 2 (southern boundary)
- Station 3 (central urban corridor)
- Station 4 (eastern neighborhoods)
- Station 5 (north central)
- Station 6 (northern boundary)
- Satellite Medic Station 75

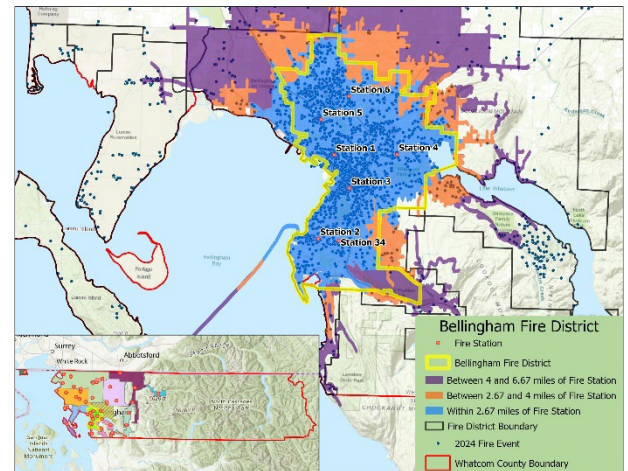


Figure 16: City of Bellingham Fire Department

The city's fire district is defined in bright green on the map and is surrounded by multiple fire protection districts, including Districts 4, 8, 21, and SWFA.

This urban service area shows a high density of 2024 fire events, indicating a very active call volume across a range of residential, commercial, and institutional occupancies.

The geography includes:

- The full urban footprint of the Bellingham city limits
- Key transportation corridors, including I-5 and major arterials
- Waterfront, college campus zones, and industrial areas
- Borders with SFWA and District 4, indicating potential areas of mutual or automatic aid

BFD functions as a full-service municipal agency and serves as a regional partner for specialized services (e.g., hazardous materials response, ALS transport). Through a public-private partnership known as the Specialized Emergency Response Program (SERP), the department houses the countywide hazardous materials response team, comprised of industry, fire, and police personnel. Since mid-2010, this team is a countywide collaboration and can be showcased as a model for other localities nationwide.

3.2.15 Lynden Fire Department

The Lynden Fire Department (LFD) serves the incorporated city of Lynden in north-central Whatcom County. The district is compact and urbanized, situated entirely within the broader boundaries of Fire District 21, with service primarily focused on residential neighborhoods, commercial corridors, schools, and light industrial areas.

LFD operates a single centrally located fire station, Station 75, which provides response coverage across the entire city. The surrounding area to the west, north, and east is served by District 21, with shared borders and likely mutual or automatic aid agreements.

The district is characterized by dense development relative to surrounding rural zones. A significant number of 2024 fire events have occurred throughout the city, indicating a high call volume and a diverse range of emergency service needs.

Due to the city's location and layout, access routes are well-developed, and road connectivity supports efficient emergency response. However, the surrounding agricultural zones and proximity to rural fire districts necessitate ongoing coordination with regional fire and EMS partners.

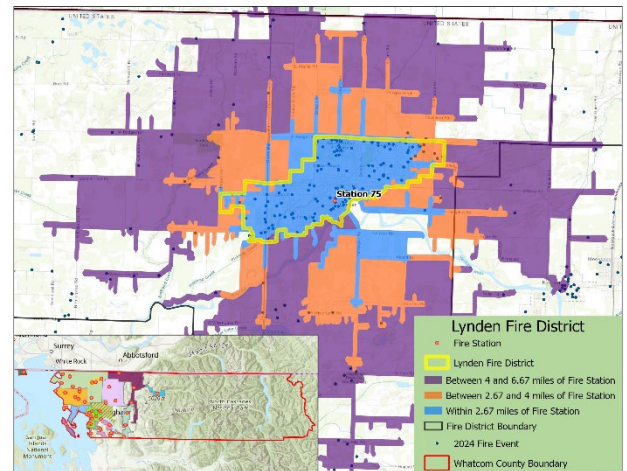


Figure 17: City of Lynden Fire Department

3.3 Standard Operating Procedures

According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), a standard operating procedure is “an organizational directive that establishes a standard course of action.” SOPs are guidelines that define expectations and requirements for fire service personnel in performing their duties. A comprehensive set of SOPs establishes how an organization or department intends to operate. When all members of the fire and EMS organizations adhere to the same SOPs, the result is improved operational efficiency, greater accountability, and reduced liability.

Within Whatcom County, all agencies indicated that they maintain SOPs. While agencies operate independently and follow their own administrative protocols, a countywide operations manual—adopted by the Fire Chief’s Association—governs fire scene operations and incident management policies. This ensures operational consistency across agencies regardless of incident location. Additionally, the County has an appointed jurisdictional medical director who establishes SOPs and criteria for the EMS division, which operates under protocols directed by the medical director.

MCP recommends that all fire departments continue to operate under the *Whatcom County Fire/EMS Operations Manual* to ensure consistent incident management and scene operations. MCP also encourages the development of collaborative, countywide administrative policies to promote administrative consistency and reduce vulnerability to lawsuits, unnecessary costs, personnel issues, and reputational harm. For example, a member leaving one department for unacceptable circumstances should not be able to transfer to another department without appropriate review.

Finally, policies should be reviewed and updated regularly to ensure alignment with current industry standards and best practices and to maintain relevance for the County’s evolving needs.

3.4 History and District Cooperation

The Whatcom County fire service has evolved since the early establishment of fire districts. Some of the key advances in cooperation are outlined below. While there is still room for additional collaboration, it is encouraging to see that districts are proactively planning and forming new partnerships.

- **Improved Equipment and Training:** As early as the 1980s, Whatcom County fire districts began investing in upgraded apparatus, improved communication systems, and formal firefighter training programs. Around this time, some districts also began hiring part-time and full-time paid staff.
- **Integration of EMS:** EMS became a core function of fire districts. Districts began offering BLS, and ALS capabilities were expanded as part of the County's EMS coverage plan.
- **Consolidation Efforts:** To improve efficiency and enhance service delivery, some districts merged. For example, SWFA was formed through the consolidation of District 2 (Geneva), District 6 (Chuckanut), District 9 (Lake Samish), and District 10 (Yew Street).
- **Whatcom County Fire Chiefs Association:** Districts in the county established formal associations to improve coordination, training, and strategic planning across agencies.
- **Regionalization and Cooperation:** Fire districts, particularly those with limited resources, have increasingly relied on shared services, joint training facilities, and mutual aid partnerships to strengthen capabilities.
- **Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) Fires:** With increasing development near forested areas and the growing threat of wildfires due to climate change, Whatcom County districts have prioritized wildfire preparedness and continue to enhance firefighting strategies for WUI incidents.
- **Modern Agencies:** Today, Whatcom County is served by a combination of municipal and rural departments. Some are fully staffed with career firefighters, others operate under a hybrid model of career and volunteer personnel, and some remain predominantly volunteer-based with limited paid staff or administrative support.

4 Fire and EMS Management

Strong management is essential to shaping the future direction of the County's fire services and EMS. MCP believes that effective management rests on several key factors, each of which is addressed in this section:

- Strategic Planning
- Governance
- Communication

4.1 Strategic Planning

4.1.1 Current and Past Initiatives

Countywide Fire and EMS Study (2023–2024)

In 2023, the County issued a Request for Proposals (RFP #24-10) for a comprehensive countywide fire and EMS study. The objective was to evaluate current service delivery models and explore opportunities for

collaboration, consolidation, and efficiency improvements. This final report from the study is intended to guide future strategic decisions regarding fire and EMS systems throughout the County.

2005 EMS Recommended Plan

In 2005, an EMS Working Group was convened at the request of the Whatcom County Executive. The group—composed of fire district commissioners, chiefs, city representatives, private ambulance providers, paramedics, and medical community members—developed a recommended plan to strengthen the County's EMS system. The goal was to ensure the community continued to receive high-quality emergency medical services.

2016 and 2022 EMS Levy Plan

In 2016, the Whatcom County Council and the City of Bellingham Council adopted an ordinance/resolution setting the EMS levy rate at up to \$0.295 per \$1,000 of assessed property valuation.

In 2022, this levy was reintroduced at the same rate and subsequently approved by voters in both the county and city. Each levy plan is effective for six years. Meaning the next levy update is due in 2028.

North Whatcom Fire and Rescue Strategic Planning

North Whatcom Fire and Rescue (NWFR) serving Fire Protection Districts 21 and 4—has also engaged in strategic planning efforts. In 2019, NWFR developed a Master Plan that included strategies for organizational improvement, including the consideration of legal consolidation of the two districts.

4.1.2 Strategic Planning Landscape

These initiatives reflect Whatcom County's ongoing commitment to evaluating and enhancing its fire and EMS services through strategic planning. During interviews, leaders acknowledged the importance of strategic planning within their disciplines (fire service and EMS) but admitted that, historically, insufficient time has been devoted to strategic planning at the systemwide level.

MCP considers five key components—Current State, Future State, Barriers to Success, Case for Change, and Strategy—when assessing strategic planning. The graphic below illustrates this framework, which serves as a roadmap for understanding the present environment, envisioning the desired future, identifying obstacles, making the case for change, and outlining the initiatives that will help move the County's fire and EMS systems forward.

Current State	The current landscape of county fire services, EMS and 911/public safety communications
Future State	The hopes for the future of the county fire services, EMS and 911/public safety communications
Barriers to Success	The challenges that would be faced in trying to realize the desired future state
Case for Change	The compelling reasons for reaching the desired future state
Strategy	The priority initiatives that will move these organizations forward

4.1.3 Current State

The current state of fire and EMS services in Whatcom County can best be described as functional; however, in some areas, they are still facing significant challenges. One interviewee summarized the situation by stating that the County and its agencies have done the best they can with the resources available but can still do better.

Ahead of stakeholder interviews, MCP anticipated encountering a variety of perspectives but expected to find broad agreement on potential paths forward. Instead, opinions proved to be highly varied, with compelling arguments presented for multiple potential directions.

While many interviewees recognized opportunities for improvement, some also acknowledged that they—and at times the County as a whole—have been resistant to change. A recurring theme was the existence of silos created by the presence of 13 separate, independent departments. These were often described as territorial “sandboxes” that sometimes struggle with collaboration depending on the topic. As one interviewee observed:

“We’re very siloed into fiefdoms: 13 agencies, 13 missions, 13 different bosses, and not one single focus.”

It is important to acknowledge, however, that while the independent districts do not operate under a single governing body or set of bylaws, they do demonstrate coordination and cooperation in a number of ways—such as joint training, consolidations, and mutual aid agreements. Examples include:

- Consolidation of Districts 8 and 15 (1995)
- Consolidation of the City of Blaine and District 13 (1999)
- Consolidation of Districts 3 and 13 forming District 21 (2006)
- Consolidation of Districts 2, 6, 9, and 10 to form SWFA
- Incorporation of the Whatcom County Fire Chiefs Association as a non-profit entity (1996)
- Multi-agency grants, including:
 - Mobile data terminals (Districts 7, 8, and 21)
 - Lummi Island Radio Site (Districts 8, 11, and 17)
 - HazMat Equipment (Districts 1, 5, 11, 14, 16, 19, and NWFR)

All fire districts in the county support one another through a countywide mutual aid agreement, established via interlocal agreement. Some agencies also maintain memorandums of understanding (MOU) that allow for cross-district mutual aid or auto aid, although on a more limited scale. Overall, these agreements contribute to seamless and efficient cooperation among districts. For example, District 11 has an interlocal agreement with District 7 to assist with BLS transport.

Several themes consistently emerged from stakeholder interviews:

- Departments have a strong sense of pride, duty, selflessness, and heritage.
- The long-standing tradition of volunteer fire service is under pressure due to population growth, aging volunteer ranks, recruitment challenges, and the draw of busier departments.
- A strong desire exists to retain the current system, paired with concern that this assessment might recommend a transition to a fully career fire service, further consolidation, or changes to the EMS structure.
- Significant financial stressors exist—both for staffing and capital improvements.

- Persistent friction remains between some agencies and the County government.
- There is a perception that the County Council does not fully understand or support the value of the existing fire service.

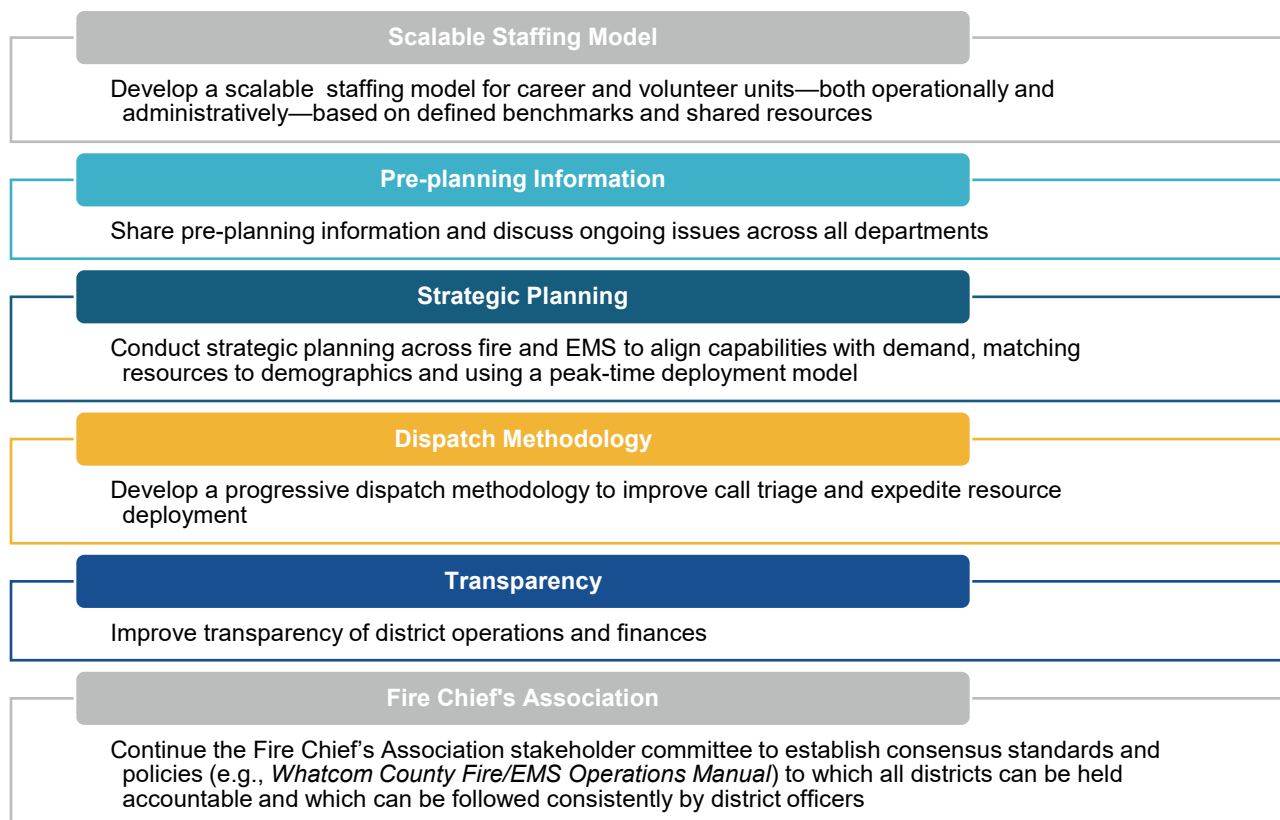
The table below offers a high-level snapshot of the current strengths and weaknesses.

Table 4: Current Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths	Weaknesses
Strong, experienced leadership	No single chief with full oversight or authority; disconnect from the County council
Strong interagency relationships	Siloes and territorial “sandboxes” still divide some departments
Legacy and pride in volunteer service	Recruitment and retention challenges; insufficient personnel
Cutting-edge technology and modern apparatus	Difficulty mustering adequate resources quickly for major incidents
Independent districts and agencies	Little accountability across the system
Dedicated career and volunteer EMS personnel	Occasional friction between the EMS system growth and union considerations
Sufficient funding and financially solvent departments	Ongoing need for voter-approved levies creates concern about long-term sustainability
Comprehensive and thoughtful governance structure	Inconsistent transparency; clash between traditional and progressive mindsets; perceived favoritism
Determination to deliver quality fire and EMS services	Risk of insufficient staffing and delayed service in areas with dwindling or absent volunteer coverage without career staff supplementation

4.1.4 Future State

While County leaders initiated this report to understand how fire and EMS services are delivered in Whatcom County and whether those services are provided efficiently, it is equally important to discuss strategic planning for the future. The image below identifies elements of a best-in-class future state, based on national standards, industry best practices, MCP’s professional expertise, and feedback gathered during stakeholder interviews. These elements cover key issues related to planning, staffing, finances, technology, and response.



Unincorporated Areas and Service Delivery

Another outstanding issue is the presence of unincorporated areas with no formal jurisdictional assignment, which means that no funding is allocated to the districts handling calls in those areas. District maps reveal many locations in the county that are effectively “no man’s land” in terms of service coverage. These are typically areas with little or no housing and, therefore, no levy income. Nevertheless, they are frequently used for recreation, and incidents do occur (e.g., injured mountain bikers or backcountry skiers requiring multi-hour rescues).

Currently, PSAP telecommunicators know which districts to send these calls to, but the areas are not officially assigned to those districts. If an incident occurs within an assigned levy area, the agency responsible is compensated; for incidents in unassigned areas, no compensation is provided. MCP was told that the County does receive some form of reimbursement for these incidents, but that compensation is not passed along to the responding agencies.

To that end, MCP recommends the following:

- Assign all unserved areas to the nearest fire district through the appropriate annexation process, as outlined in RCW Title 52.³ Geographic information system (GIS) tools can be used to determine the closest district for each area.

³ <https://app.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?Cite=52>

- Provide remuneration to districts handling incidents in those areas. While EMS can bill individuals, fire and rescue services generally cannot.

If annexation is not feasible, the County should negotiate agreements with the responsible districts, either as annual contracts or on a per-call basis to compensate them for the services provided.

An example of this approach is the agreement between SWFA and the City of Bellingham, which compensates SWFA for incidents in the Galbraith recreation easement area (an interlocal agreement must still be finalized). This agreement was reached after SWFA threatened to cease response to this area due to a lack of progress on a remedy.

MCP recommends that the County address this issue proactively. Outdoor recreation is growing in popularity, and the Bellingham area has been recognized nationally by the Matador Network as the best adventure destination in the country. With increased recreation comes higher incident volumes, and solutions should be implemented before frustration escalates to the point where agencies refuse to respond to incidents outside their area of responsibility.

Consolidation of Districts

Consolidation of fire, EMS, and even 911 districts has become more common nationwide over the past 10 to 15 years. While not always appropriate for every locality, consolidation can offer significant benefits:

- **Operational Efficiencies:** Reduces duplication of services or facilities (e.g., multiple administrative offices, apparatus in multiple districts that cannot be staffed simultaneously), streamlines command structures, and standardized procedures (e.g., procedures not currently included in the Whatcom County Fire/EMS Operations Manual).
- **Cost Savings and Resource Sharing:** Creates opportunities for more effective deployment of staff and shared capital investments (e.g., building centralized fire stations, purchasing apparatus). Consolidation may also allow volunteers to serve at the stations closest to their homes, even if those stations are in a different district.
- **Improved Service Delivery:** Enables more consistent response coverage by aligning service areas so the closest unit responds to each incident.

MCP acknowledges that consolidation discussions can be challenging, involving levy equalization, increased administrative overhead, and concerns about district identity. These decisions should be approached openly, with the shared goal of improving service delivery, making the best use of public resources, and building a more resilient system.

Recommended Consolidations

District 17 and District 7

District 17's Sandy Point station is prone to flooding and was severely impacted twice in 2022, with additional threats in early 2024. The district lost private insurance coverage and now relies on federal flood insurance. A new station site has been secured through a 100-year lease on 11 acres from Phillips Petroleum, funded by a levy that passed in August 2024. Construction could be complete by the end of 2025.

MCP recommends that now is an ideal time to discuss consolidation with District 7 (Ferndale), given their shared border and the strategic value of the new station's location for coverage.

MCP realizes that relinquishing a district's independence is a difficult decision and does not minimize that challenge. However, given the current circumstances, the timing is appropriate to begin discussions focused on potential consolidation.

District 18 and SWFA

District 18 is geographically small and surrounded by SWFA. MCP recommends considering consolidation to strengthen resources and manpower in this area. Although prior discussions have not produced a path forward, a neutral third party could facilitate a solution. A feasibility study should also be conducted to address labor costs, levy differences, and community education prior to a vote.

Again, MCP acknowledges that these are difficult decisions; however, this consolidation represents a logical step toward eliminating duplicative costs and leveraging the advantages of a larger, more efficient organization moving forward.

Recommendations Against Consolidation

MCP recommends no changes to Point Roberts and Lummi Island Fire. Both are geographically isolated and deeply embedded in their communities. Consolidation could negatively impact local identity and community engagement. These districts provide critical services that larger agencies might not be able to sustain, and therefore, they should remain independent at this time.

4.1.5 Barriers to Success

Potential barriers must be identified and mitigated early to avoid undermining efforts to move toward the desired future state. Barriers include:

- Lack of a countywide strategic plan
- No single leadership voice guiding all fire and EMS services
- Complex decision-making layers that slow or halt good ideas
- Change fatigue or loss of stakeholder engagement over time
- Apathy or resignation ("This is just the way it is")
- Lack of stakeholder buy-in, even when the change is logical
- Reluctance of siloed districts to sacrifice autonomy for systemwide improvements
- Perceived lack of County Council support
- Personal or historical grievance between individuals or agencies
- Risk of future levy failures impacting funding

Proactively addressing these challenges is essential to avoid stagnation and ensure that fire and EMS services become more collaborative, efficient, and sustainable.

4.1.6 Case for Change

The case for change explains why transformation is necessary and what is at stake if the current system remains unchanged. MCP asked leaders to consider: *What are the compelling reasons for change? What are the risks of maintaining the status quo?*

The answers to these questions form the foundation of the case for change. In some instances, the case for change is developed after an organization evaluates its opportunities and threats. While most people recognize

that “nothing changes if nothing changes,” it is critical to articulate why change is worthwhile—particularly since change can be challenging.

The fire and EMS services in Whatcom County should consider targeted changes so that they can:

- Ensure appropriate staffing of apparatus, aligned with national, state, or self-imposed standards
 - Improve operational efficiencies and deliver faster, more robust service
 - Increase financial transparency
 - Expand collaboration and resource sharing
 - Right-size fleet inventories to match actual utilization
- While many positive developments have already occurred, opportunities for improvement remain and will be addressed in upcoming sections.

4.2 Governance

4.2.1 Current State

As mentioned previously, in Whatcom County, fire protection and EMS are primarily managed by independent fire protection districts and regional fire authorities. These entities are classified as special-purpose districts under state law and operate separately from county and city governments. They have their own governance structures and can initiate fire levies via voter referendums. The EMS levy, however, is controlled by the County government.

Governance of fire department operations is guided by Title 52 RCW, which establishes fire districts and fire authorities. This title defines powers and responsibilities for mergers, annexations, and operations. It also governs financial management, identifies funding mechanisms, allows for levy creation, and enforces the collection of assessments and taxes, among other provisions.

Whatcom County government staff have little to no direct authority over the day-to-day operations of the fire service and cannot mandate specific initiatives. However, the County Council plays an indirect role in ensuring public safety through legislation, budget approval, and oversight, as established under the County Charter and state laws⁴. Operational responsibility for providing services rests with the County Executive and Sheriff under the charter and state statutes.

To ensure the Council has a deeper understanding of the current state of fire service and its needs—so that any law or ordinance they enact supports positive change, it is important that Council members gain direct, first-hand knowledge of county fire and EMS operations. This would also enable them to answer constituent questions more accurately.

IMCP recommends that the County government hold at least quarterly meetings with fire service leadership to share information and build trust. These meetings should be separate from regularly scheduled chiefs’ meetings, levy committee meetings, or County Council sessions. Initially, meetings should be informal and educational, focused on helping Council members better understand fire and EMS operations. This mutual exchange of information can strengthen relationships and foster trust, which is currently lacking.

⁴ RCW 36.16.110, RCW 36.28.010, and RCW 36.32.120

4.2.2 Governance Structure

Each fire district is overseen by a Board of Fire Commissioners, typically comprised of three elected members. These commissioners are responsible for setting policies, approving budgets, and overseeing fire and emergency services within their respective districts. Commissioners are elected by district residents and serve staggered terms to ensure continuity in leadership.

Whatcom County also includes SWFA, which was formed through the consolidation of several former districts. Regional fire authorities are created by voter approval and are governed by boards composed of elected officials from participating jurisdictions. The composition and terms of these boards are defined in the formation plan approved by voters.

Fire districts and regional fire authorities are primarily funded through voter-approved fire district levies. Some districts may also receive funding through voter-approved bonds, typically used for capital projects. These funds support a mix of career and volunteer firefighters, EMTs, and administrative staff. Operational structures and staffing levels vary among districts depending on the size and needs of the communities they serve.

A simple majority vote (50% plus one) is required to increase or change an operational levy. For capital expenditures requiring long-term bonds, a supermajority vote (60%) is required for approval.

4.2.3 Agreements

Whatcom County fire districts primarily use MOUs and memorandums of agreement (MOAs) to facilitate cooperation between agencies. Below are the most common cooperative agreements, along with a brief explanation of their purpose:

Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA)

An intergovernmental agreement (IGA) is a contract between two or more public agencies or public procurement units for services or for the joint exercise of any powers common to the agencies. When a grant program requires collaboration between a state entity and a local entity (agency or procurement unit) exercising joint powers, an IGA may be the most efficient funding mechanism.

Except for the joint exercise of powers granted under state statute, an IGA does not confer any additional authority or power upon the public agencies involved.

Interlocal Agreement (ILA)

An interlocal agreement (ILA) is a written contract between local government agencies—such as a city, county, or constitutional office—used when one authority or district provides or receives a service from another local governmental entity. Any time a public service involves joint operations or budgets of two or more local government agencies, an ILA must be drafted and approved by all parties. Typically, ILAs require board approval, with each governing body enacting the agreement by vote.

Memorandum of Agreement (MOA)

A memorandum of agreement (MOA) is a written document outlining a cooperative relationship between two parties wishing to work together on a project or to meet an agreed-upon objective. An MOA serves as a legal document and defines the terms and details of the partnership. It is more formal than a verbal agreement but less formal than a contract. Organizations may use MOAs to establish collaborative arrangements, service partnerships, or agreements to provide technical assistance and training. An MOA may be used regardless of whether money is exchanged.

Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)

A memorandum of understanding (MOU) is often the first step toward a formal agreement, defining how the parties will work together and clarifying each party's expectations and responsibilities. An MOU is often considered a "handshake agreement" formalized in writing. While MOUs may not always be legally binding, they express the parties' commitment to move forward with negotiations by defining the scope and purpose of the discussions.

Under RCW, an MOU can be enforceable as a contract when the following conditions are met:

- Mutual assent (offer and acceptance are present)
- Consideration (something of value is exchanged)
- Definite terms (clear obligations, subject matter, and timing are specified)
- Intent to be legally bound ^{5 6 7}

MOUs can be an important first step toward long-term agreements, helping to keep negotiations on track. They allow each party to review terms, address disputes or miscommunications, and make revisions before signing a binding contract.

4.2.4 Oversight and Coordination

While fire districts operate independently, they coordinate with the Whatcom County Fire Marshal's Office, which provides services such as inspections, code enforcement, and fire investigations. In addition, all emergency calls are routed through a centralized PSAP in Bellingham, ensuring coordinated response efforts across the county.

Because fire services in Whatcom County have operated under a district or authority system for many years, their governance remains autonomous to each district. Each district commission is elected by voters within that fire district. In this way, the commission serves as the governing body for the district, working in partnership with operational leadership to establish finances, policies, and resource allocation.

As shown in the figure below, the Whatcom County Fire Chiefs Association, while not a direct decision-making authority—serves as an advisory body that helps standardize many aspects of county fire service operations. This promotes greater operational efficiency, particularly given the extensive cross-boundary mutual and automatic aid agreements in place.

The figure below depicts the current governance structure, with the Fire Chief's Association represented as an advisory body to the county fire districts (dotted line).

⁵ Washington Civil Jury Instructions – Contracts (WPI 301). *Corbit v. J. I. Case Co.*, 70 Wn.2d 522, 531, 424 P.2d 290 (1967).

⁶ *Rorvig v. Douglas*, 124 Wn.2d 846 (1994).

⁷ Bomsztyk, A. S. (2019, February 24). Do you have an enforceable contract in Washington State? TBR Law.

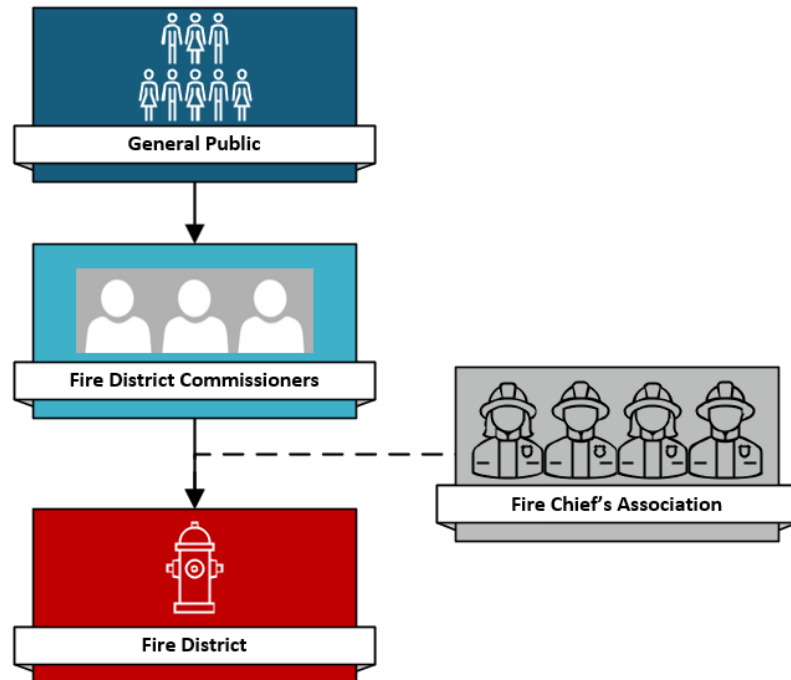


Figure 18: Existing Fire Department Countywide Governance Structure

4.3 Communication

Improved communication could positively influence many of the issues identified by fire and EMS members across the county. Stronger communication efforts could help:

- Increase members' understanding of the system's governance and decision-making processes
- Build trust and foster greater buy-in
- Improve understanding of policies, leading to enhanced accountability
- Reduce interdepartmental politics
- Break down cultural silos and perceptions of favoritism

Communicate Transparently and in a Timely Manner

In most organizations, transparency builds trust. Because several stakeholder interviewees expressed a lack of trust regarding how decisions are made, increasing communication about both how and why decisions are made can improve understanding, foster buy-in, and reduce misinformation. All levels within the governance structure should strive to clearly communicate decision-making processes.

To support this goal, MCP recommends that fire and EMS associations ensure their meetings are publicly accessible—either by sharing recordings or posting meeting minutes on district or County websites.

Additionally, all fire districts should be transparent with their finances. Some districts already provide budget information and other helpful resources on their websites, while others provide no financial information at all. While districts can argue that financial data is available through other channels, the public should not have to search extensively for this information. Fire levies represent direct taxation of property owners, and taxpayers

have a right to know how their money is being spent. MCP recommends that all districts publish their budgets online to improve accountability and public trust.

Strengthening Communication with County Council

The County Council and fire district leadership have an opportunity to build stronger relationships, fostering mutual understanding of the value and financial challenges faced by the districts. MCP recommends that fire service and EMS leaders schedule time with the Council (or a designated Council representative) after this report is finalized to review conclusions and discuss the opportunities identified.

Ideally, these meetings should occur bimonthly or quarterly. The Council may also wish to designate a fire and EMS liaison to focus on developing and strengthening these relationships. The more the Council can see and hear firsthand the challenges districts face, the more likely they are to understand and support fire and EMS service needs—particularly if future funding is requested for additional career staff, apparatus purchases, or station construction.

The initiation of this report itself illustrates how better communication could have resulted in a smoother process and a stronger sense of collaboration from the outset.

5 Planning for Fire and Emergency Medical Protection

5.1 Current State

5.1.1 Station Locations and Response Times

Whatcom County is served by 12 individual fire districts, one Regional Fire Authority, and two city fire departments, collectively responding to emergency calls across 2,503 square miles of land and water. The locations of these stations—and the response times they can achieve—are critical to the safety of nearly 234,000 residents.

Additionally, Cascade Ambulance, a fully licensed contract provider for EMS care, is located within the county and provides services to facilities that directly contract with them. To date, Cascade is not part of the 911 system, does not get dispatched for calls, and is rarely used even in times of an overabundance of calls that stress the system. Consideration should be given to incorporate available Cascade units in time of need due to surge capacity.

In the section below, MCP identifies and reviews response times using established standard metrics and compares them to national benchmarks. MCP also examines national recommendations for improving service delivery to enhance the overall effectiveness and efficiency of emergency response across the County.

Whatcom County has experienced significant population growth and demographic shifts, resulting in a steady increase in emergency call volumes. This increase has had a ripple effect on the fire and EMS system, driving the need to hire additional career staff and, in some cases, prompting consideration of new station locations or other resource enhancements.

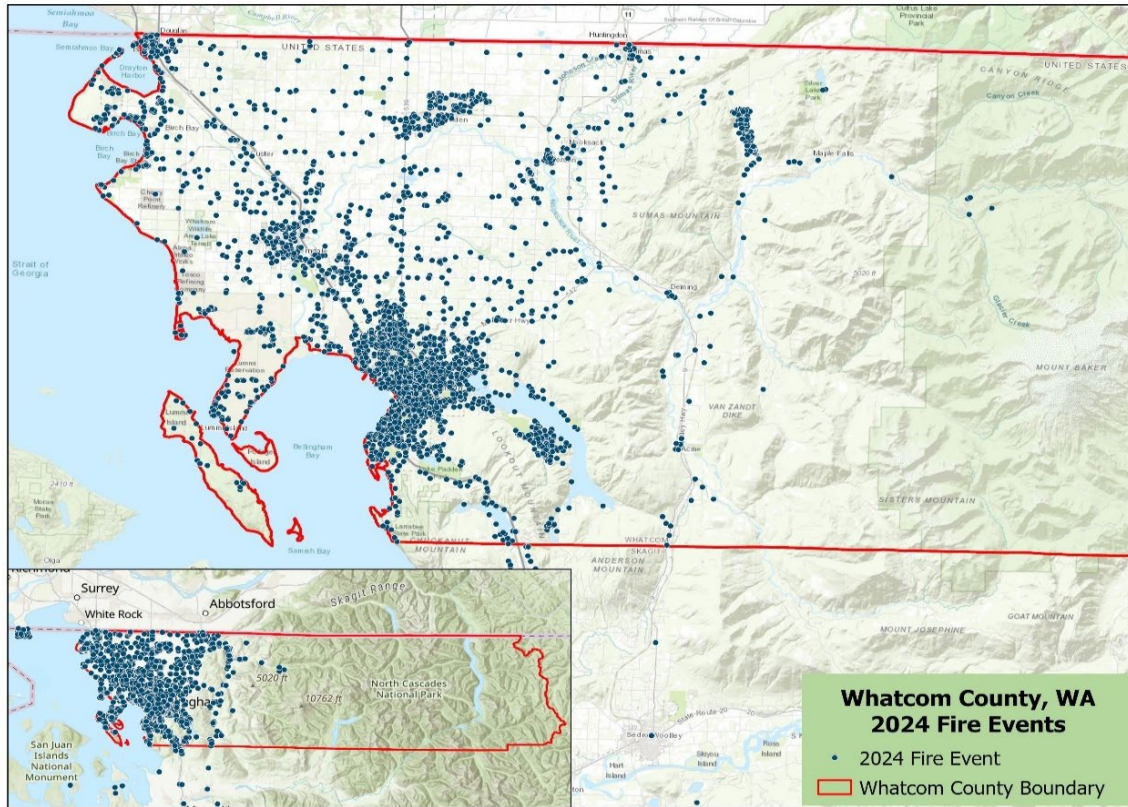


Figure 19: Geo-located Fire Incidents

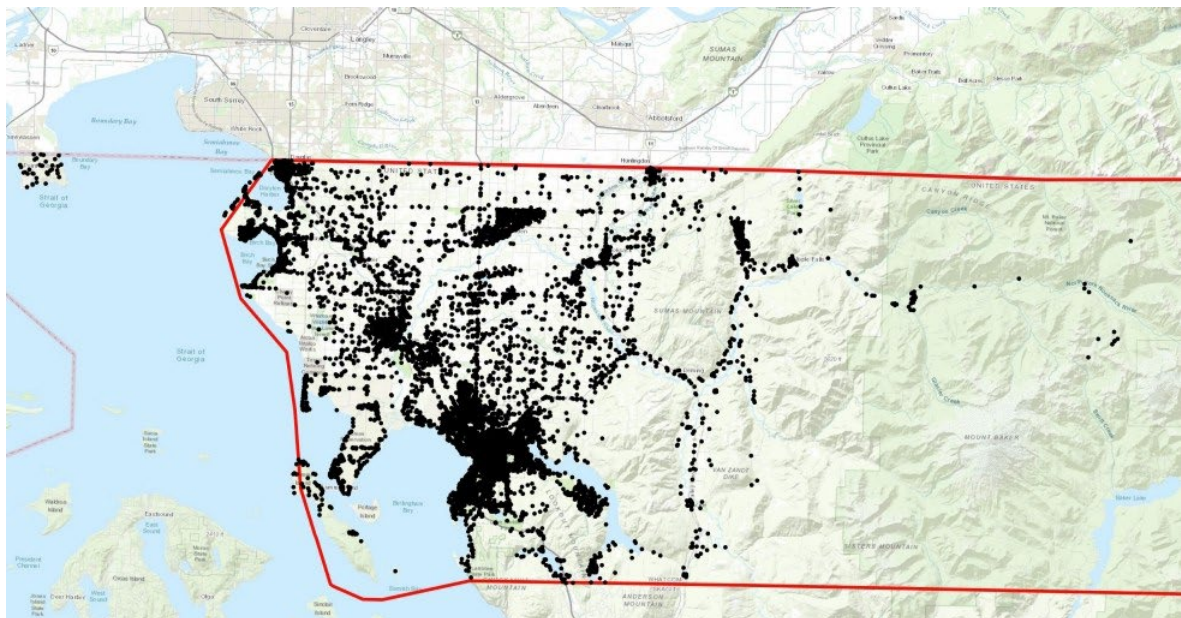


Figure 20: 2024 Geo-located EMS Incidents

When planning EMS resource deployment, station activity is closely monitored to evaluate the number of emergency calls handled and whether response standards are being met. When areas of concern are identified, leadership engages in discussions to explore potential solutions.

There is no single, nationally mandated standard for ambulance response times in the United States; however, there are widely accepted benchmarks and guidelines informed by best practices and industry standards. The following provides a breakdown:

- Urban and Suburban Areas
 - 8 minutes or less, 90% of the time
 - This standard is often referenced by:
 - NFPA 1710, Standard for the Organization and Deployment of Fire Suppression Operations, Emergency Medical Operations, and Special Operations to the Public by Career Fire Departments, and NFPA 1720, Standard for the Organization and Deployment of Fire Suppression Operations, Emergency Medical Operations, and Special Operations to the Public by Volunteer Fire Departments, for fire departments with EMS roles
 - Commission on Accreditation of Ambulance Services (CAAS)
 - EMS industry best practices
 - The “8-minute” benchmark is derived from studies suggesting that survival for cardiac arrest and other critical emergencies improves significantly when EMS arrives within this timeframe.
- Rural and Frontier Areas
 - 15–20 minutes or longer is more typical
 - NFPA and other bodies recognize that rural response times will naturally be longer due to geography and resource limitations
 - There are no enforced federal standards for rural response times; instead, local jurisdictions set realistic targets

Washington State standards, while similar to national benchmarks, include some differences in time targets and compliance percentages. The most recent standards, approved in 2024, are shown below:

These standards establish minimum agency response times—measured for both reliability and timeliness—across defined geographic zones (urban, suburban, rural, and wilderness). Agencies are required to meet or exceed these targets at least 80% of the time.

- Aid Services (non-transport responders, e.g., first responders or similar):
 - Urban: 8 minutes or less, 80% of the time
 - Suburban: 15 minutes or less, 80% of the time
 - Rural: 45 minutes or less, 80% of the time
 - Wilderness: As soon as possible
- Ground Ambulance Services:
 - Urban: 10 minutes or less, 80% of the time
 - Suburban: 20 minutes or less, 80% of the time

- Rural: 45 minutes or less, 80% of the time
- Wilderness: As soon as possible

The following table indicates that the more populated areas are generally close to meeting the benchmarks for urban and suburban response times. However, because most districts serve areas classified as rural or frontier, the response times shown are largely within the parameters established for those geographic designations.

Table 5: Times and Incident Count for EMS (all incidents)

Agency	Dispatch to On Scene	Incident Count
District 16	14:42	147
BFD	08:42	19,602
District 1	12:09	819
District 19	25:11	25
LFD	06:26	2,018
NWFR	09:38	4,073
District 18	12:00	72
SWFA	10:50	828
District 11	14:20	76
District 14	10:04	1,057
District 17	09:08	220
District 7	11:40	4,956
Average/Total	09:19	33,893

For fire departments that have career staff, NFPA 1710 is the standard for response metrics.

- Alarm Handling (911 call processing time):
 - 90 seconds for 90% of calls
- Turnout Time (time from dispatch to apparatus rolling):
 - 80 seconds for fire and special operations
 - 60 seconds for EMS incidents
(Goal: meet this standard in 90% of responses)

- Travel Time:
 - 240 seconds (4 minutes) or less travel time for the first arriving engine company to a fire suppression incident (for 90% of incidents)
 - 480 seconds (8 minutes) or less travel time for the full first alarm assignment (for 90% of incidents). A full first alarm assignment is any combination of units that arrive on the scene of a call that brings 15 to 17 firefighters to that scene. As an example, a typical first alarm could be 3 Engines, 1 Ladder, 1 Battalion Chief, and 1 EMS unit.

Locally, fire districts such as NWFR—which serves areas including District 4—have established specific response time objectives for technical rescue incidents (see below). While these time parameters are specific to NWFR, they closely align with NFPA standards.

- Tier I (Urban): 8 minutes, 90% of the time.
- Tier II (Suburban): 10 minutes, 90% of the time.
- Tier III (Rural): 12 minutes, 90% of the time.
- Tier IV (Remote): 14 minutes, 90% of the time

MCP recognizes that meeting NFPA standards presents challenges. Even large cities and counties with multiple strategically located, fully staffed stations sometimes struggle to achieve these response time targets. For districts that serve a mix of urban and rural areas, consistently meeting these standards in rural zones is particularly difficult. MCP commends NWFR and other districts for establishing realistic response criteria and setting measurable goals to meet them.

The figure below illustrates fire response times from the moment of dispatch until a unit arrives on scene. The color-coded dots represent time intervals: **green** indicates the fastest response times, **yellow** indicates moderate times, and **red** represents responses exceeding 11 minutes. While MCP was unable to geo-locate every call, the sample shown is representative: urban and suburban centers are primarily marked with green and yellow dots, reflecting faster on-scene times (often under five minutes), whereas red dots—primarily in rural areas—indicate longer response times of more than 11 minutes.

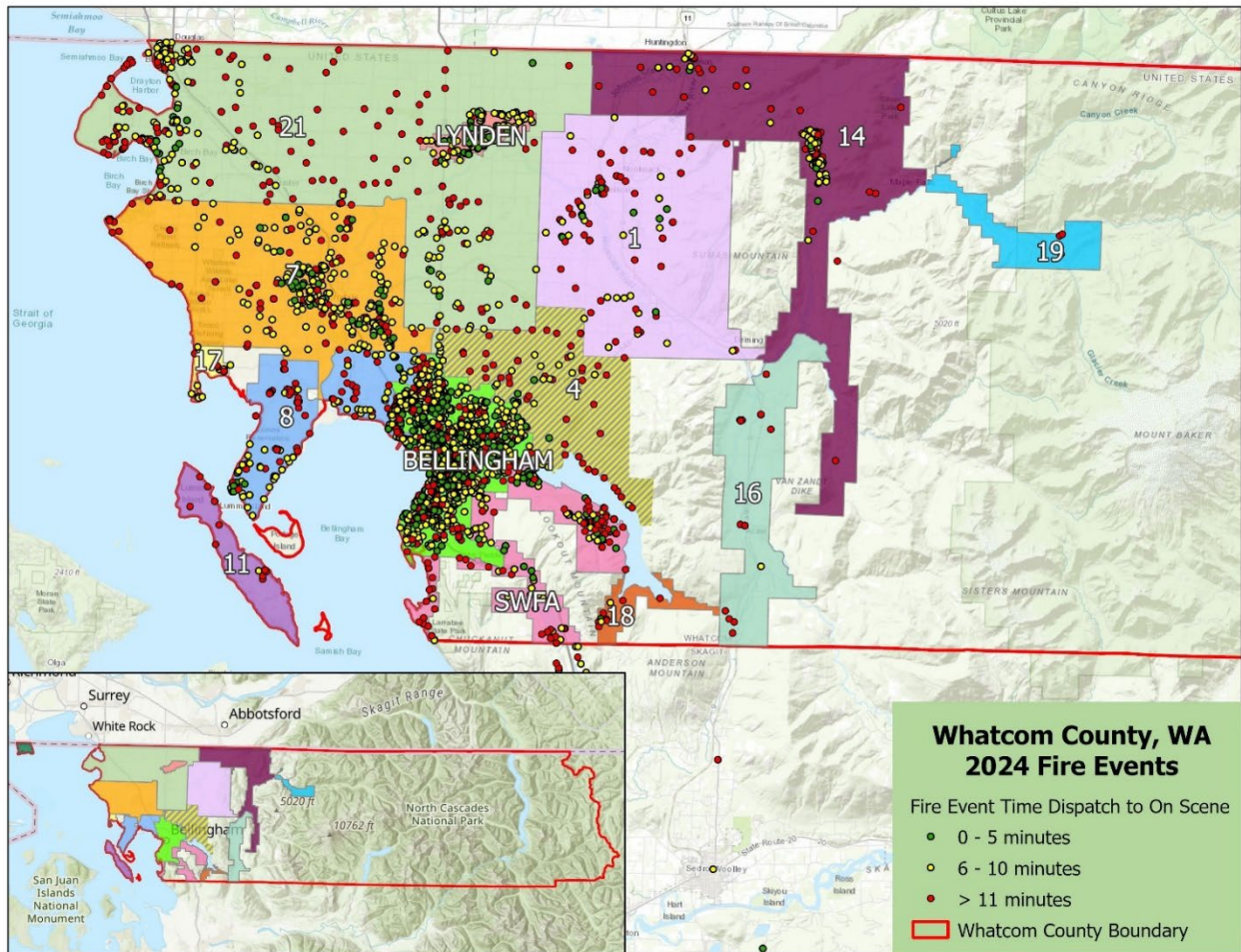


Figure 21: Geo-located Fire Incidents with On-Scene Times

Due to the rural geography present in portions of the County, achieving the NFPA 1710 key performance objective of having an ALS ambulance on scene within eight minutes of an emergency call is often not feasible.⁸ However, the presence of local fire district ambulances staffed with BLS personnel—EMTs—significantly improves response times and increases the frequency of early patient contact. MCP will explore alternative deployment models to address this challenge in the Future State section.

As with EMS, there are many areas of the County where meeting this standard would be challenging. However, in the cities and urban/suburban areas, achieving at least a first-responding engine arrival within the standard time frame should remain a key goal.

⁸ The “8-minute” benchmark traces back to research in 1979, particularly a study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. The study found that if CPR was initiated within 4 minutes and definitive care (defibrillation, typically paramedic-level ALS) was provided within 8 minutes, survival rates from cardiac arrest were significantly higher (~43%). This influenced the adoption of the 8-minute target in NFPA 1710. <https://www.jems.com/patient-care/response-time-realities-the-scientific-evidence/>

5.1.2 Washington State Alignment with Standards

In the fire service, it is essential that fire apparatus respond to emergencies within a specific amount of time and with the appropriate level of staffing. The Washington Surveying and Rating Bureau (WSRB) is an independent, not-for-profit public service organization serving Washington State. Its purpose is to assist insurers and their customers by providing objective data on multiple risk factors used in determining fire insurance ratings.

The WSRB is not affiliated with any insurance company, except to the extent that insurers operating in Washington State may subscribe to its services. Ownership of WSRB is vested in a subscriber trust agreement approved by the Washington State Office of the Insurance Commissioner.

WSRB operates in a manner very similar to the Insurance Services Office (ISO)—a large, national property and casualty insurance ratings bureau that was recently acquired by Verisk Analytics, Inc. Like ISO, WSRB functions as an arm of the insurance industry, tasked with evaluating a jurisdiction's ability to provide fire protection and fire suppression services. Using established analytical criteria, WSRB determines a jurisdiction's response capability and assigns a Public Protection Classification (PPC), which directly impacts property insurance rates for homes and businesses.

The WSRB evaluation is based on three primary categories—emergency communications, fire department resources (including apparatus and staffing), and water supply—with fire safety control available as an optional extra-credit category. These evaluations are conducted using the Fire Suppression Rating Schedule (FSRS) to develop the community's classification.

WSRB evaluates communities based on four key areas:

- Fire Department (50%): Assessment of fire stations, apparatus, equipment, personnel, and training.
- Water Supply (40%): Evaluation of the capacity, distribution, and maintenance of water systems and fire hydrants.
- Emergency Communications (10%): Review of dispatch systems, staffing, and training.
- Fire Safety Control/Community Risk Reduction (optional credit): Examination of fire code enforcement, public education, fire investigations, and building code enforcement.

Table 6: WSRB Rating Schedule

Classification/Rating	Definition-
Class 1-3	Excellent Fire Protection
Class 4-6	Good to Average
Class 7-8	Limited Protection
Class 9	Minimal
Class 10	None

Ratings range from Class 1 to Class 10. A Class 1 rating represents the highest level of protection, assigned to properties served by a fire department that meets the most rigorous standards. Conversely, a Class 10 rating indicates the lowest level of protection, typically properties farthest from a fire station with little or no available

water supply. As noted, many factors contribute to a community's rating, and this report does not address total or partial loss considerations.

Some fire districts may receive a split rating, meaning different parts of the district are rated differently based on water supply. For example, areas with fire hydrants may receive a higher rating (e.g., Class 5), while non-hydrated areas receive a lower rating (e.g., Class 8), resulting in a combined 5/8 rating. Several areas of the County have either a split rating or a sliding scale applied to determine the most accurate classification.

Table 7: Current WSRB Classifications by Agency

District	Rating
City of Bellingham	PC3
District 5	PC4
District 8	PC4
City of Lynden	PC5
District 7	PC5
District 14	PC5/6 Split
District 17	PC5
SWFA	PC5
District 4	PC5/9 Split
District 21	PC5/9 Split
District 19	PC6
District 16	PC6
District 1	PC7
District 11	PC7
District 18	PC7/9 Split

Insurance companies use WSRB's classification data to assess fire risk and determine property insurance premiums across Washington State. Generally, properties with lower PPC rating indicate stronger fire protection—qualify for reduced fire insurance premiums. However, it is important to note that classification is only one of several factors' insurers consider when calculating overall property insurance costs.

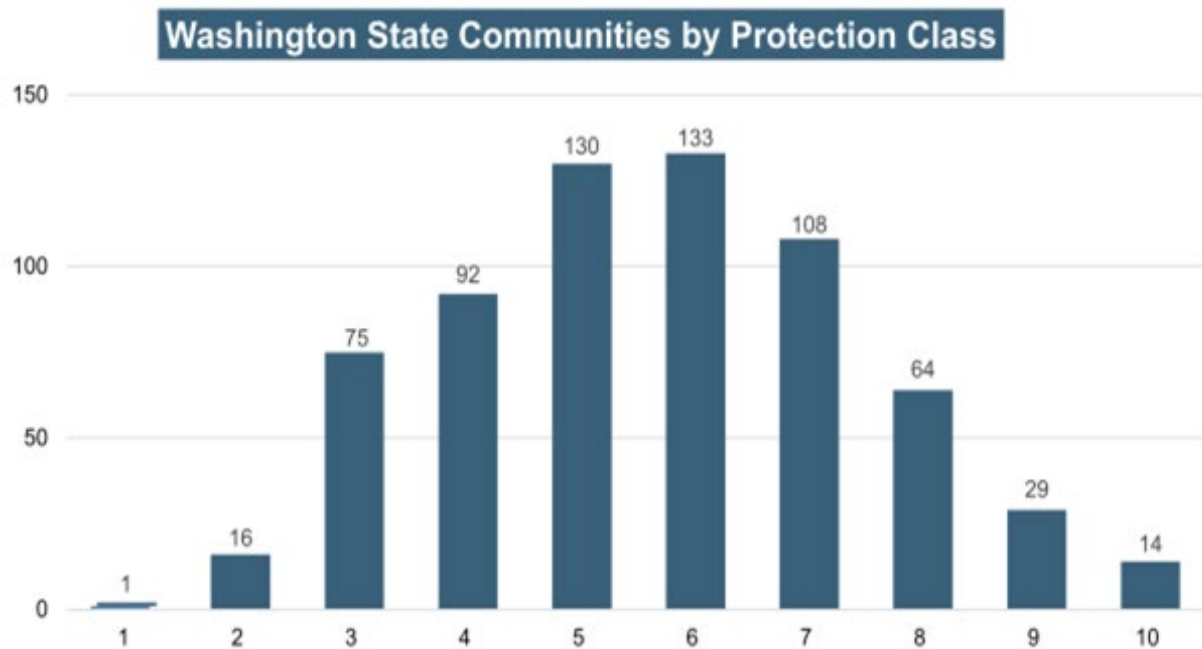


Figure 22: Washington State Communities by Protection Class

In addition to WSRB standards, NFPA 1710 and NFPA 1720 provide valuable benchmarks for this study.

NFPA 1710—applicable to career fire department sets specific requirements for dispatch, turnout, and response times, as well as staffing levels, to ensure fire apparatus arrive at their jurisdictional areas within clearly defined time frames. By contrast, NFPA 1720—intended for volunteer and combination departments—provides more flexibility and less stringent requirements.

For example, NFPA 1710 requires a first-due engine company to arrive on scene within 240 seconds (4 minutes) of dispatch, and a full first-alarm assignment to arrive within 480 seconds (8 minutes). These criteria are particularly relevant to Bellingham and Ferndale, given the urban and suburban nature of their response areas. Future decisions regarding station locations and staffing levels in these cities should consider compliance with NFPA 1710.

For the remainder of Whatcom County—where fire and rescue departments cover predominantly rural and backcountry areas, and EMS incidents represent the majority of calls—NFPA 1720 provides a more practical framework for planning. Unlike NFPA 1710, which uses travel time as the standard measure, NFPA 1720 focuses on ensuring that a minimum number of firefighters are on scene to initiate a primary fire attack. This typically requires six firefighters on scene within 14 minutes, with the requirement reduced to four firefighters in more remote areas farther from a station.⁹

When considering both WSRB and NFPA standards, agencies must weigh multiple factors, including financial constraints, staffing levels, and anticipated growth. It is important to recognize that the results of any future analysis—and the recommendations that follow—will vary depending on which standard is applied and whether it is appropriate for the region. NFPA and WSRB provide recognized benchmarks, but a “one-size-fits-all” approach may not be practical for Whatcom County’s diverse service areas.

⁹ In this scenario, the fire fighters must be assembled (i.e., ready to initiate a fire attack) 90% of the time.

5.2 Future State

When making deployment recommendations, several factors must be considered. Most importantly, the system should aim to deliver a uniform level of service to all addresses, with adjustments made for risk levels and service demand.

Response times are a critical element. For example, in cases of cardiac arrest, initiating cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) within four to six minutes is essential to prevent irreversible brain damage. Likewise, faster response times directly correlate with reduced property loss during fire incidents.



Considering cardiac arrest scenarios, response must occur as quickly as possible, with first responders arriving on scene and initiating CPR promptly to maximize a patient's chance of survival. Using an average travel speed of 40 miles per hour¹⁰, the apparatus will cover approximately 2.67 miles in four minutes, 4.00 miles in six minutes, and 6.67 miles in ten minutes. The map below illustrates these distance intervals—2.67-mile, 4.00-mile, and 10-mile radii—from each fire station. Areas not highlighted fall outside these parameters.

These calculations are based on road miles. While some locations may appear geographically close to a fire station, the road network may limit direct access, resulting in longer actual travel times. Consequently, areas located more than 10 miles from a station typically experience response times of 15 minutes or longer before fire or EMS services arrive. Many of these extended-response areas are mountainous and sparsely populated, but when viewed through the lens of survivability for witnessed out-of-hospital cardiac arrest—or effective fire suppression—these time and distance parameters underscore the critical role of proximity to a station.

Another important consideration is staffing; although the map suggests stations are strategically positioned, many are not staffed full-time. Reliance on a single manned station could significantly increase the number of areas experiencing extended response times.

¹⁰ At 40-mph, a vehicle travels approximately 2/3 of a mile (0.667 miles) each minute.

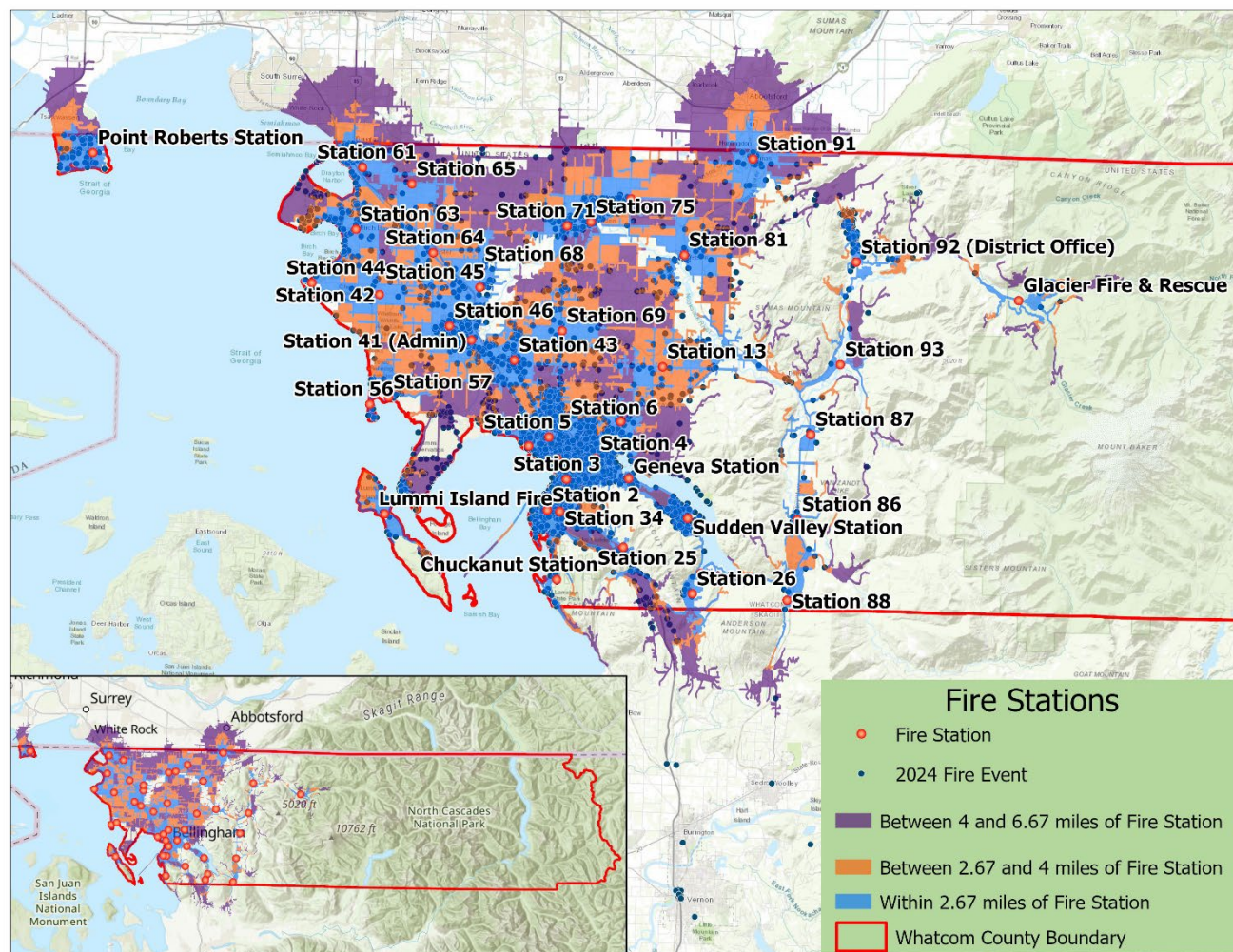


Figure 23: 2024 Incidents Within 2.67, 4.00, and 6.67 Miles of Existing Stations

MCP recommends that the County collaborate with EMS Administration and the County GIS department to leverage Esri and other geospatial tools to evaluate deployment models based on NFPA standards. This analysis would support data-driven decisions regarding the optimal positioning of fire and EMS resources and station locations.

The following ALS response map highlights areas of the county that fall well outside a ten-mile radius of existing coverage. Future consideration should be given to placing an ALS unit in the Deming area. This location would provide highway access to multiple points currently underserved, improving overall coverage. MCP further recommends that EMS Administration review call data for this area and evaluate the feasibility of permanent or semi-permanent unit placement to enhance response capability.

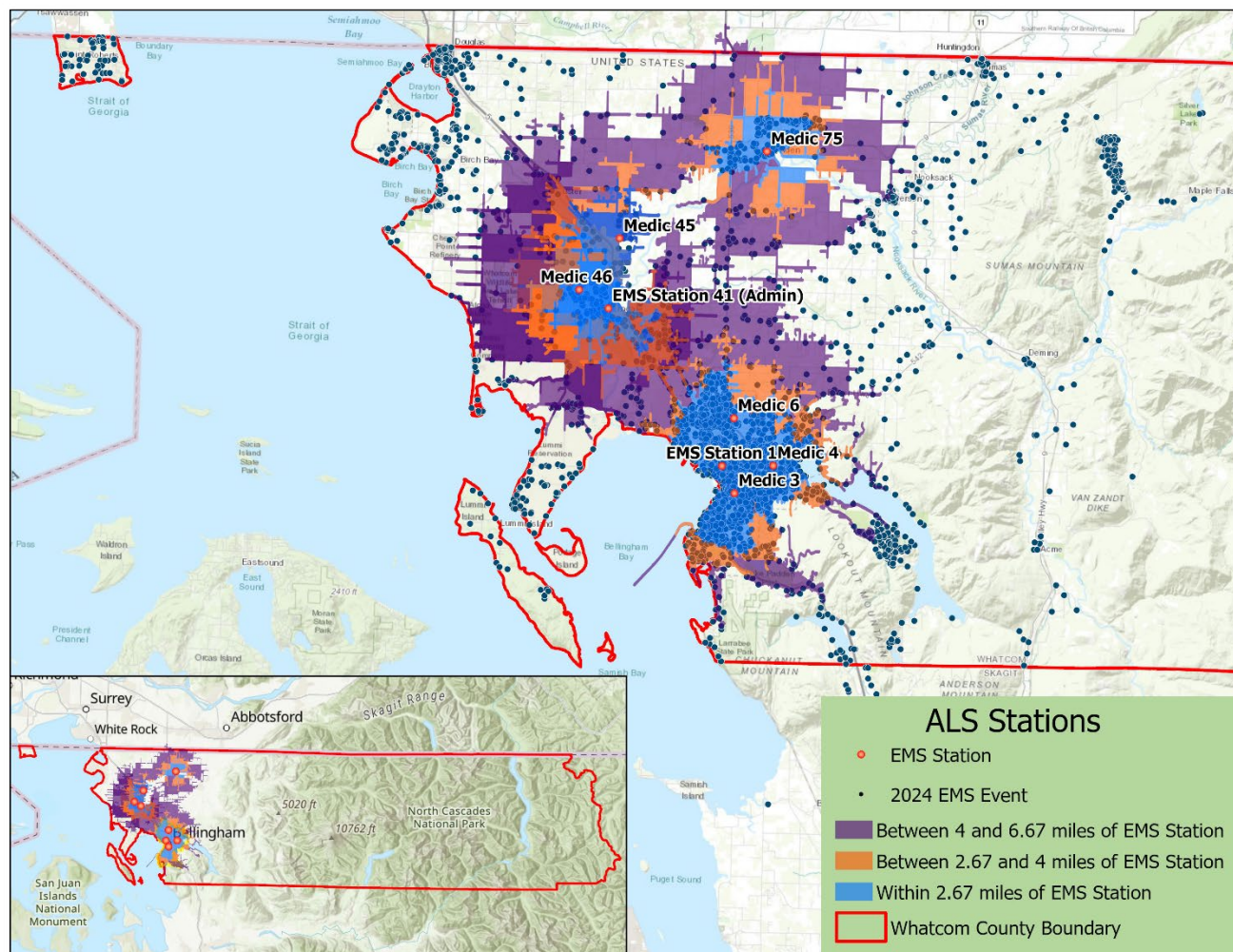


Figure 24: 2024 ALS incidents within 2.67, 4.00, and 6.67 miles

5.2.1 Response Times

Whatcom County should define clear performance metrics in alignment with national performance standards. These definitions should specify when the response-time clock starts and stops. Metrics should measure not only dispatch-to-on-scene times but also the interval between unit arrival and first patient contact.

Information regarding dispatch and response times was obtained from the county's dispatch entities. It is understood that occasional discrepancies may occur—such as when mobile data terminals (MDTs) fail to update due to a lack of cellular coverage or when a telecommunicator misses a unit's transmission because of poor radio coverage in certain areas. In these cases, arrival times and other time-stamped events may be inaccurate; however, departments typically correct these incidents individually. MCP believes that, while such errors occur in a small percentage of incidents, they do not significantly affect the overall data due to the law of averages.

Regardless of data imperfections, MCP recommends conducting a response time evaluation following any consolidation of agencies. Consolidation can change which district is the closest response agency to a given

Finally, MCP acknowledges that any redistricting resulting from these evaluations may require a public vote in the affected areas, particularly if levy rates would be impacted by the proposed changes.

Response activity is closely tied to population density. Overlaying census data with planning, zoning, and GIS mapping data can reveal where population growth has occurred and where it is likely to increase in the future. Understanding which areas of the county are zoned for agricultural, residential, and commercial use—along with the expected timelines for development—will enable the County to take a proactive approach in determining where resources should be deployed.

Much of the County is designated for agriculture or commercial forestry, shown in varying shades of green. Long-term growth areas are identified as Urban Growth Areas (shaded in purple) or rural communities and rural business areas (shaded in orange).



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5.2.3 Ancillary Recommendations to Improve Efficiencies

Shared Fleet Management

MCP recommends that the districts consider partnering in a shared fleet management program. Whatcom County Public Works currently operates a fleet management program that provides repair and service, fuel and maintenance, vehicle technology support, and fleet replacement for County department vehicles. County departments rent their vehicles from the Whatcom County Public Works Equipment Rental and Revolving Fund (ER&R). As vehicles age, they are replaced through the ER&R fund.

Such an arrangement would require an agreement between the fire districts and the County, but it could potentially reduce preventive maintenance, repair, and replacement costs over time—offering a fiscally advantageous solution. However, this model may not be appropriate for all fire districts, as some may prefer to continue operating district-owned apparatus rather than County-owned vehicles.

Another option could be that districts partner with each other and form a fleet division and maintain their own mechanics. A third alternative would be an outsourced, third-party service contract, offering a predictable cost model for fleet maintenance and management.

Additionally, MCP recommends that all agencies review their fleet size and determine their specific needs. Maintaining excess apparatus unnecessarily increases costs for maintenance, insurance, and operations. For example, if District A operates three fire engines and District B operates one, and the two merge into a single fire district, the new district must now manage and maintain five fire engines. A fleet review could reveal several options, such as:

- Relocating one of District A's engines to District B
- Selling one of District A's engines
- Purchasing a new or used engine for District B
- Relocating one of District A's engines to a new substation location midway between District A and District B

A review of fleet size does not necessarily mean apparatus will be eliminated; rather, it ensures that services are distributed more efficiently and economically across the community served.

Shared Facilities Management

As with fleet management, facilities management could benefit from the same “economy of scale” approach, providing advantages to all districts. Under RCW 52.12.031, appointing a facilities manager or coordinator—or contracting with a third-party service—is a viable option. Agencies across the country, including Bainbridge Island and North Kitsap locally, have successfully implemented this model.

A centralized facilities management program offers a single point of contact for addressing urgent issues and coordinating larger projects. This approach ensures consistency and efficiency, particularly for construction or renovation projects where the facilities manager can serve as the primary liaison.

MCP recommends that any contracted provider or in-house facilities management team be staffed with individuals who have expertise across all major building systems to provide comprehensive support.

Shared Purchasing

Shared purchasing is increasingly common among emergency services agencies. Several fire districts in the county already take advantage of regional and national cooperative procurement programs such as National

Purchasing Partners (NPP), Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC) contracts, Washington State Department of Enterprise Services contracts, and other statewide purchasing agreements.

MCP recommends that all fire districts consider forming a shared procurement committee to coordinate purchasing efforts in cases where a cooperative procurement vehicle does not currently exist. Districts could realize significant cost savings by purchasing equipment and supplies collectively at discounted rates.

Shared purchasing also promotes standardization across agencies, which enhances interoperability and familiarity with equipment when agencies respond jointly. In addition, combining orders allows agencies to leverage larger purchasing volumes, improving negotiating power with vendors to secure better pricing and, in some cases, faster delivery timelines.

Currently, EMS supplies (both BLS and ALS) are procured individually by each district under a county pricing agreement with multiple vendors. MCP recommends that EMS Administration explore the option of centralized procurement—ordering supplies annually, semi-annually, or quarterly—and consider implementing a quartermaster system to manage, track, and distribute supplies across all districts.

Regardless of whether districts use existing contracts or a newly developed joint procurement process, bulk purchasing leverages economies of scale, improves inventory control, and has the potential to deliver measurable cost savings year over year.

Shared Chiefs

Skagit County currently utilizes shared chiefs and duty officers across the county for certain shift periods, primarily overnight and on weekends. This model could be expanded and applied more broadly in Whatcom County. Maintaining duplicate command staff for districts that regularly support one another is not an efficient use of resources. By sharing command officers, Whatcom County districts could reduce costs while improving consistency.

This approach is similar to the current arrangement with District 8, where BFD provides operational services for the district, while District 8 retains its commissioner board and executive responsibilities. Although governance challenges need to be addressed, they are not insurmountable.

A potential model could involve dividing the county into battalions—similar to larger jurisdictions. Major incidents within each battalion would be managed by a command duty officer (often called a battalion chief). For example, if the county were divided into four battalions—three county battalions plus the city of Bellingham—four command duty officers could be scheduled daily. Scheduling could be coordinated by a central county authority (e.g., the Fire Chief's Association) or through a cooperative process among the fire districts.

Under this model, command duty officers would focus exclusively on incident management, while each district would retain day-to-day operational control of its organization. MCP recommends that this concept be considered as a strategy to reduce operational costs, enhance consistency in response, and complement the existing *Whatcom County Fire/EMS Operations Manual*.

Training with a Consolidated Mindset

Training with a consolidated mindset means approaching personnel development as a unified, strategic effort rather than as a collection of isolated tasks or department-specific goals. It emphasizes cross-agency collaboration, resource sharing, and standardized practices to enhance efficiency and effectiveness. This approach ensures that all personnel—regardless of district or role—receive consistent, high-quality instruction aligned with shared operational objectives. By fostering a culture of integration, a consolidated approach to

training reduces redundancy, improves interoperability during emergencies, and builds a stronger, more cohesive response system across jurisdictions.

Whatcom County fire districts currently conduct training individually and occasionally with other districts. However, continued emphasis should be placed on cross-district training whenever possible. Effective training with mutual aid partners increases efficiency on the fireground and builds a better understanding of each agency's resource capabilities.

At present, the County maintains several fire training grounds throughout the region. However, one critical training resource remains absent: a Class A live-fire training facility. Class A burn buildings allow for realistic fire evolutions using materials such as wood, hay, or paper—fuels that closely replicate the conditions firefighters encounter in actual incidents. Although the county has access to a gas-fed Class B burn building, fire service leadership nationwide generally prefers Class A facilities because they better simulate realistic fire behavior, heat conditions, and smoke movement.

MCP recommends that Whatcom County collaborate with local fire agencies to evaluate the feasibility of developing a Class A burn building. Such a facility would significantly enhance the realism and effectiveness of firefighter training, ultimately improving operational readiness and safety.

Regional Grant Opportunities

The success of prior grant opportunities—whether submitted regionally or individually—has varied over the past several years. Within public safety, it is widely recognized that grant funding has declined significantly since the surge of funding that followed the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. It is also well-documented nationally that public safety grant applications have a significantly higher chance of approval when submitted as a regional or statewide effort rather than by a single entity (e.g., an individual department, district, or county).

Given the dwindling availability of grant funds, districts should pursue every applicable state or federal opportunity. Federal programs such as Assistance to Firefighters Grants (AFG), Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER), and Fire Prevention and Safety (FP&S) grants should be applied for regularly.¹¹

Grant reviewers at both state and federal levels strongly favor proposals that demonstrate regional collaboration, as they provide a broader benefit and represent more efficient use of funds. MCP recommends that districts continue to work cooperatively to submit regional grant applications whenever possible, thereby improving the likelihood of success and maximizing the benefit to the entire County.

6 Emergency Communications

6.1 911/Public Safety Communications Roles and Responsibilities

In Whatcom County, fire and EMS communications are handled by BFD's PSAP, locally known as Prospect. While Prospect is responsible for processing 911 calls related to fire and EMS and dispatching the appropriate resources, it is not the primary PSAP that receives the initial 911 call.

The primary PSAP—managed by BPD—is known as What-Comm. What-Comm is the primary PSAP and dispatch center for law enforcement agencies across the county, including the Whatcom County Sheriff's Office.

¹¹ The next AFG application cycle has been reported as opening in the fall of 2025.

Although the two centers use the same computer-aided dispatch (CAD) system, fire and EMS calls are typically transferred from What-Comm to Prospect by phone before being processed and dispatched.

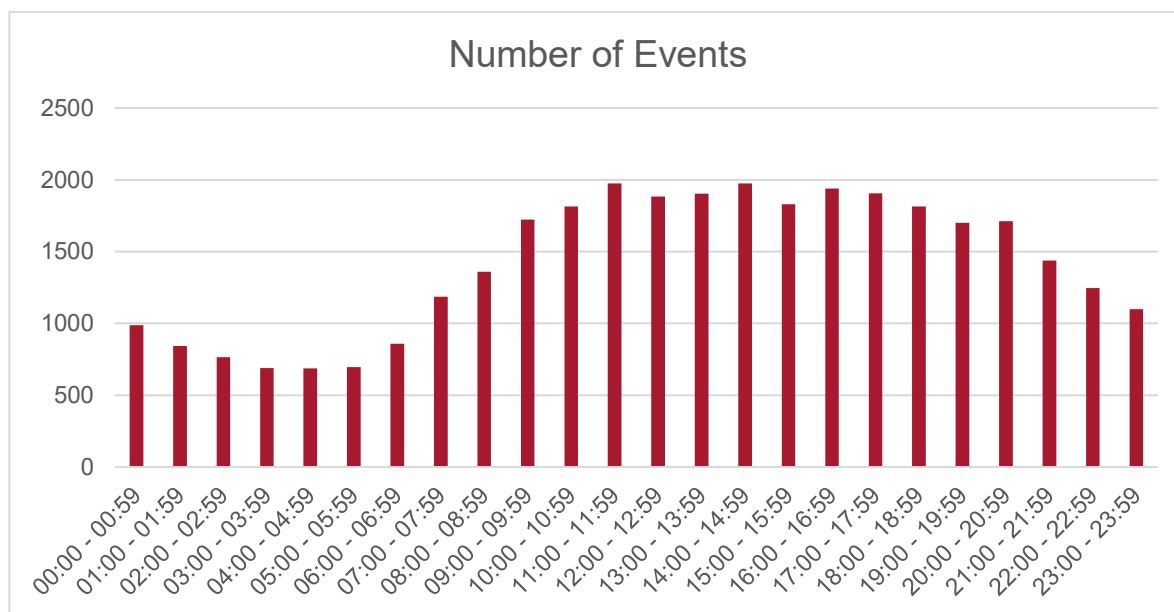


Figure 26: Events (Incidents) by Time of Day

6.2 PSAPs

Well-planned, well-executed, and timely communication ensures that critical information reaches the right audience when it matters most. Effective communication enhances organizational transparency and trust, sets clear expectations—which in turn can improve accountability—and strengthens relationships across all levels of an organization’s hierarchy.

Several challenges that prompted the above observation were the lack of transparency MCP experienced when attempting to obtain otherwise publicly available information. Today, Prospect maintains a public-facing dashboard that shows call locations, and a program called PulsePoint is also utilized to display call type, mapping, and dispatched units. Both tools are readily accessible to the public. Nevertheless, MCP’s request for the same dispatch data was initially denied and only granted after a formal public records (right-to-know) request was submitted.

Currently, the co-existence of the two PSAPs—What-Comm and Prospect—has the potential to positively or negatively impact daily operations, influence member satisfaction, and shape expectations. When communication is insufficient, information often travels horizontally rather than vertically, contributing to misunderstandings and frustration.

While What-Comm answers emergency calls expeditiously, there remains an inherent delay in transferring calls to Prospect. This delay can occur for several reasons: callers may struggle to articulate their need, What-Comm staff may be busy and unable to transfer calls immediately, or the call may involve law enforcement priorities that must be addressed before transferring (e.g., a robbery with an injured victim requiring EMS response).

From the caller’s perspective, being transferred can be frustrating. Callers often begin explaining their emergency, are placed on hold for the transfer, and must then repeat the explanation to a second call-taker.

Although this practice was common two decades ago, it is no longer acceptable in a society that expects near-instant communication. The time lost during these transfers can be critical—and in some cases, may mean the difference between life and death.

The table below reflects the average time to unit notification, which—based on national standards—should occur within 90 seconds, 90% of the time. Current times exceed this benchmark, and these figures do not include the additional delays caused by inter-center call transfers.

Table 8: Notification Time to Dispatch

Response Mode	Incident Count	Average Unit Notification
Code Red (higher priorities)	14,689	2:35
Code Yellow (lower priorities)	12,700	2:29

As noted in the WSRB section of this report, emergency communications are included as part of the final rating. While this category represents only about 10% of the overall score, every point can influence the outcome.

The table below summarizes a recent evaluation of the Prospect PSAP and highlights the areas where deficiencies were identified.

Table 9: WSRB Rating for Prospect Communications

System	Rating
Recording	100%
Telephone Service	50%
Supervision of circuits	0%
Dispatch circuits	25%
Emergency Power	100%
Dispatcher Training	72%
Number of Dispatchers on duty	70%

- **Telephone Service:** The number of telephone lines required for emergency and business calls is determined by the population served by the PSAP. Additional lines may be required if the center receives calls for other emergencies beyond fire, or if central station alarms are received. One outgoing-only line must also be provided. The WSRB review found deficiencies at Prospect in the number of lines available for call handling.
- **Supervision of Circuits:** All components of the primary dispatch circuit—including transmitters, repeaters, and primary and secondary power—must be monitored for integrity. Fault conditions

should trigger audible or visual alarms to alert telecommunicators of a problem. Prospect did not receive any credit in this area, meaning it currently lacks the capability to monitor communications links for telephony or radio dispatch alerting.

Even though Prospect does not own the radio system, NFPA 1225, *Standard for Emergency Services Communications*, requires PSAPs to monitor circuits regardless of ownership. This monitoring is critical because, without it, telecommunicators may be unaware of a partial or complete system failure and could attempt to dispatch incidents or communicate with field personnel without realizing the system is down—potentially delaying response until someone notifies them of the failure.

- **Dispatch Circuits:** PSAPs must have separate primary and secondary circuits for dispatching. Maximum credit is awarded when dual circuits are provided, the primary circuits are supervised, automatic switchover to the secondary circuit is in place, and all system components are owned by the agency. Prospect is currently losing approximately 75% of its credit in this category due to deficiencies.
- **Training:** NFPA standards require a minimum of 480 hours of initial training for telecommunicators, with at least 240 hours each devoted to general dispatch and fire dispatch training. Non-certified telecommunicators should receive 40 hours of continuing education annually, while certified Telecommunicator I and II personnel must receive 30 hours and 24 hours, respectively. Prospect currently meets about 72% of this requirement, indicating deficiencies in either recruit training or ongoing education.
- **On-Duty Staff:** The required number of telecommunicators on duty is based on annual call volume. Full credit is given when call-answering and dispatch times meet NFPA 1225 standards. Prospect has some staffing deficiencies relative to its call volume, which affects performance in this area.

MCP recommends that Prospect be co-located with What-Comm. MCP understands that a new What-Comm facility is under construction, making this an ideal opportunity for Prospect to relocate. A co-located center would address many of Prospect's operational and technology deficiencies. Additionally, co-location would eliminate delays caused by transferring calls between centers by enabling the use of universal call-takers. Having all calls answered and monitored in a single facility would improve supervision, minimize delays, and reduce the risk of miscommunications.

7 Levy Rates

7.1 Current State

Whatcom County residents and visitors are served by a fire service and EMS system staffed by a combination of career and volunteer professionals. For example, the volunteer departments of Glacier Fire and Rescue and Lummi Island Fire continue to operate because dedicated community members recognize the critical need for these services in their area.

Other departments, which are organized as individual fire districts, are administered and operated by a mix of career and volunteer personnel. In most cases, fire levies provide the funding necessary to support and sustain these districts, ensuring that personnel, whether fully career or partially paid are adequately funded. This levy-based funding structure relieves the County from the financial burden of having to support a fully County-funded fire service system.

The table below shows the 2025 fire district levy rates for Whatcom County.

Table 10: 2025 Fire Levy Rate Per District

District	Levy Rate per 1,000	Cost Paid on a \$500,000 Home
1	\$1.12	\$560.00
4	\$1.04	\$520.00
5	\$1.09	\$545.00
7	\$0.76	\$380.00
8	\$0.81	\$405.00
11	\$0.99	\$495.00
14	\$1.17	\$585.00
16	\$1.02	\$510.00
17	\$1.25	\$625.00
18	\$0.66	\$330.00
19	\$0.64	\$320.00
21	\$0.76	\$380.00
SWFA	\$1.08	\$540.00

One might reasonably ask whether Whatcom County's levy rates are comparable to those of nearby counties. The answer is both yes and no. In Skagit County, levy rates average \$0.60 per \$1,000 of assessed property value, whereas Snohomish County averages \$1.20, with some districts at the maximum allowable level of \$1.50. Whatcom County falls in between, averaging \$0.97 per \$1,000.

According to NFPA, approximately 65% of firefighters nationwide are volunteers. However, volunteerism is on the decline. In a 2023 interview with *The Olympian*, T.J. Nedrow, secretary of the Washington State Fire Fighters' Association, reported that the number of volunteer firefighters in Washington had fallen from about 19,000 to 10,000. This declining trend has made it increasingly difficult for departments to maintain volunteer staffing levels, both regionally and locally.

Given this reality, sustaining even a partially volunteer system will likely become more challenging over time. The decision to staff some stations with career personnel and provide stipends or shift pay for volunteer firefighters is therefore understandable and necessary to maintain service levels.

If the County were required to staff a fully career department to respond to fire incidents, it would need to employ at least three firefighters per station per shift to meet national standard response times. The average salary for a newly hired firefighter in the region—excluding the city of Bellingham—is approximately \$60,000. With a four-shift rotation and two staffed stations within a single district, the salary cost alone for career firefighters would be as follows:

Table 11: Personnel Cost for Two Stations

Average Salary	# of Firefighters per Station	# of Staffed Stations	Total Shifts	Total
\$60,000	3	2	4	\$1,440,000

The table above does not account for benefits, training, equipment, or other ancillary costs, which would likely increase the total cost by at least 30%.

If the salary costs were extrapolated into a countywide model—where every station is staffed with career personnel, the total cost would fall in the range of \$20 to \$25 million annually. This estimate does not include benefits, step increases, or salary variations based on experience or education, nor does it account for higher salaries for command and support staff required to manage a career fire department. These costs would also be expected to rise over time as population growth increases demand. Furthermore, if Whatcom County transitions to a fully career-staffed model, changes to NFPA or Washington State standards could affect staffing requirements and response-time expectations, thereby impacting future cost projections.

Currently, the EMS levy rate in Whatcom County is set at \$0.255 per \$1,000 of assessed value, a reduction from the maximum voter-approved rate of \$0.295 per \$1,000 that the Council implemented in 2023. The table below provides a comparison of levy rates in other Washington jurisdictions. Whatcom County has historically maintained one of the lowest levy rates in the state and should be commended for this fiscal responsibility.

However, MCP believes that the reduced rate is not sustainable if the County intends to maintain a surplus. Another concern is the potential impact of federal budget changes, particularly the possible loss of Medicaid reimbursement dollars from EMS billing and GEMT gap funds, which have provided significant revenue to the levy. Losing GEMT funding alone would result in an annual shortfall of approximately \$2.2 million.

Table 12: EMS Levy Rates for Surrounding County/Agencies

County	Levy Rate
Whatcom County	0.29.5 (voted rate)
King County Medic One	0.24
Skagit County	0.47
Snohomish County (N County Regional Fire Authority)	0.50
Jefferson County (Quilcene Fire/Rescue)	0.46
Kitsap County (Central Kitsap Fire/Rescue)	0.50
Thurston County	0.34

MCP recommends that the County consider utilizing its banked capacity and the 1% levy lift in the future to maintain financial stability. Additional explanation of this recommendation is provided in Section 8.

7.2 ALS Levy for BLS Operations

Currently, approximately \$1.5 million is distributed annually among Whatcom County's fire districts to support BLS operations. However, the existing distribution model—based primarily on incident volume—has resulted in significant inequities, particularly for smaller and more remote agencies. For instance, districts such as Lummi Island Fire and Glacier Fire and Rescue receive less than \$10,000 annually, while larger agencies receive several hundred thousand dollars. This disparity makes it difficult for smaller districts to maintain baseline EMS readiness, despite their fixed operational costs and geographic challenges.

MCP recommends that the County implement a minimum funding threshold, for example, \$25,000 per agency—to ensure that all districts receive a base level of support. The overall distribution formula should be revised to integrate this minimum while still accounting for call volume and system demand across the county.

This approach would create a more equitable funding foundation for sustaining BLS services countywide, particularly for agencies facing geographic isolation and staffing limitations.

7.3 Systemwide Impacts on Costs

While not all the following factors may currently impact Whatcom County, each has had a significant effect on fire and EMS systems across the country and should be considered:

- Inflation
 - Rising costs are tied to the Consumer Price Index, impacting on equipment, supplies, and operational expenses.
- Siloed Purchasing
 - Departments purchasing independently lose the ability to leverage economies of scale, resulting in higher overall costs.
- Comprehensive Plan
 - Impacts the demand placed on fire and rescue services.
 - Planning and zoning decisions directly affect service demand for fire and EMS.
- Performance Metrics
 - Comprehensive plans often outline goals for public safety.
 - Because no universally accepted standards exist for measuring EMS system performance, decision-makers are frequently left with anecdotal evidence or best-practice comparisons. This lack of standardized benchmarking allows critics to use selective data or emotional arguments to influence policy decisions.
 - Establishing and meeting performance metrics can increase costs for public safety departments.
- Opioid Crisis
 - Overdose patients—often not breathing or in cardiac arrest—require additional resources and are considered top-priority calls.

- Hospital Turnaround Times
 - No established performance metrics exist for hospital turnaround times.
 - Ambulances can be unavailable for extended periods while waiting to offload patients.
 - These delays increase costs by keeping highly trained EMS caregivers tied up at hospitals instead of being available for the next call.
- Personnel Costs
 - Increased staffing demand due to rising call volume.
 - Challenges with retention rates.
 - Rising salaries and the addition of fringe benefits add to overall budget pressures.
- Training Hours
 - Increased training requirements mandated by the State of Washington.

8 EMS

The EMS program was established in 1974 with the formation of Whatcom Medic One Transport. In the early 2000s, the program—operated through BFD—transitioned to a two-tiered EMS system. Under this model, fire departments provide BLS functions, while the City of Bellingham and Ferndale provide ALS functions.

Currently, the following stations provide ALS coverage for advanced care response:

- Medic 3 – 1111 Billy Frank Jr. St. – 24/7 staff
- Medic 4 – 2306 Yew St – 24/7 staff
- Medic 6 – 40460 Deemer Rd – 24/7 staff
- Medic 45 – 1886 Grandview Rd, Ferndale – 24/7 staff
- Medic 75 – 215 4th St., Lynden – 24/7 staff
- EMS 1 – 1800 Broadway – 24/7 staff
- EMS 41 – 2020 Washington St – staffed 12 hours per day

One factor that has historically hindered unilateral changes in EMS operations within Whatcom County is the influence of career unions, which can sometimes interfere with or block new initiatives. For example, in 2008, the City of Ferndale sought to establish its own ALS service. This proposal was met with resistance from Bellingham IAFF, as BFD was the sole ALS provider at the time. The union expressed concern that Ferndale's expansion—if not incorporated into the Bellingham labor framework—would create an imbalance in service delivery. Although this occurred more than a decade ago, its effects continue to resonate today, as this topic is still frequently mentioned by those interviewed. Such legacy perspectives contribute to divisions between agencies and complicated regional collaboration. While MCP recognizes and respects the role of unions in protecting their members, organized labor should not become a barrier to common-sense public safety initiatives that would improve service to the community.

Currently, ALS ambulances in Whatcom County are staffed with two paramedics per unit. While this model ensures a high level of clinical expertise on every call, other nationally used deployment strategies may offer greater flexibility and resource efficiency. One common model is the single-tier system, in which each medic unit

is staffed by one paramedic and one EMT, with these units responding to all EMS calls regardless of acuity. Another approach is the ALS intercept model, where BLS transport is provided by fire districts and a single-paramedic ALS response vehicle (often an SUV) meets the BLS unit en route to the hospital when ALS-level care is required.

MCP recommends that the County explore transitioning to a single-tier deployment system. However, current practice is constrained by the County medical director's requirement that each medic unit be staffed with two paramedics. MCP encourages the medical director to consider approving alternative response configurations that align with evolving system needs and national best practices, especially given the widely reported nationwide paramedic shortage.

Today, BFD operates a paramedic-staffed supervisory response vehicle, which occasionally provides primary response coverage when other units are committed. MCP recommends that this model be expanded into underserved areas such as Deming. EMS Administration should continue studying this area for growth, call volume, and response times, as a single-paramedic response vehicle based in Deming could improve coverage.

While there is no consensus on the ideal number of ALS providers required for optimal EMS system performance, various reports in EMS trade publications over the past decade have found no significant difference in patient outcomes between one-paramedic/one-EMT crews and two-paramedic crews. One article in the *Journal of Emergency Medical Services*¹² cited peer-reviewed studies comparing these staffing models.^{13 14 15 16} While one could argue that two highly trained providers may be advantageous in the most severe cases, MCP's nationwide exposure to public safety communications/911, fire, and EMS systems indicates that many agencies—including several large West Coast municipalities—commonly use EMT-paramedic-staffed units as their standard deployment model.¹⁷

8.1 EMS Billing

EMS billing presents a complex set of challenges. EMS billing systems are governed by intricate federal rules and are typically outsourced to third-party companies that handle reimbursement after a patient is transported. A.J. Heightman, MS, EMT-P, editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Emergency Medical Services*, offers this description of EMS fees:

"EMS is normally reimbursed on a set schedule of fees, negotiated rates, or charges based on a convoluted and complex set of rules and regulations that often reimburse an EMS provider below its actual costs."

¹² Journal of Emergency Medical Services. (2018). Ambulance Crew Configuration: Are Two Paramedics Better Than One? <https://www.jems.com/ems-operations/ground-ambulance-operations/ambulance-crew-configuration-are-two-paramedics-better-than-one/>

¹³ Bayley R, Weinger M, Meador S, et al. Impact of ambulance crew configuration on simulated cardiac arrest resuscitation. *Prehosp Emerg Care*. 2008;12(1):62—68.

¹⁴ Hawkins E. (May 2005.) One vs. two paramedics: Does ambulance crew configuration affect scene time or performance of certain clinical skills? Carolina Digital Repository: Collections: Master's Papers: Gillings School of Public Health. Retrieved March 1, 2018, from <https://cdr.lib.unc.edu/record/uuid:97a724fe-cad7-4e1e-8b9e-15811d778145>.

¹⁵ Kelly AM, Currell A. Do ambulance crews with one advanced paramedic skills officer have longer scene times than crews with two? *Emerg Med J*. 2002;19(2):152—154.

¹⁶ Cortez EJ, Panchal AR, Davis JE, et al. The effect of ambulance staffing models in a metropolitan, fire-based EMS system. *Prehosp Disaster Med*. 2017;32(2):175—179.

¹⁷ California: Los Angeles, Sacramento area (Falk and AMR), San Diego County and Santa Clara, Oregon: Eugene-Springfield, and Portland/Multnomah County, Washington: Clark County, King County (Seattle metro area-AMR and Tri-Med) and Spokane County.

Reimbursement is generally based on factors such as:

- The type of response (emergency vs. non-emergency)
- The level of service provided (BLS, ALS, specialty care transport)
- The distance the patient was transported
- The geographic location (rural vs. urban)

Some additional regional reimbursement mechanisms exist for rural providers and tiered response systems.

Heightman further emphasizes that: “It is important to comprehend that EMS reimbursement rates are not tied to local EMS market conditions.”

Unlike demand for tangible goods, the demand for EMS services is largely driven by uncontrollable factors such as socioeconomic and demographic issues.

Agencies have long used EMS billing as a revenue source to help offset operational costs. However, EMS billing alone does not fully recover the expenses associated with running an EMS system. While billing data provides insight into expected revenue, it also introduces complications that must be addressed. These include determining who submits the bill, managing the varying rates charged by insurance providers, and creating policies for non-transport scenarios, for example, when a patient receives Narcan/Naloxone for an overdose but refuses transport to the hospital.

The impacts on billing return rates include the following:

- ALS and BLS are billed separately, resulting in duplication
- Confusing Medicare rules
- Patients opting for cheaper alternatives such as Uber and Lyft
- Catastrophic event billing challenges (e.g., opioid crises)
- Patient payment difficulties (lack of cash, high deductibles, costly copayments)
- High dispatch volume but low transport rates
- High dispatch but low patient contact, creating ongoing service costs without corresponding claims for reimbursement

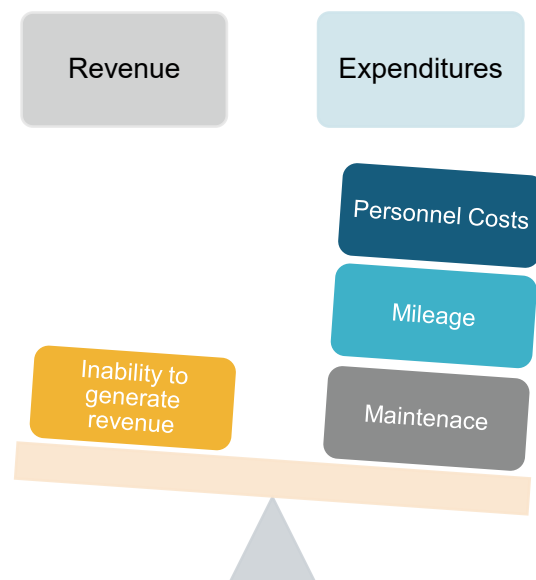
Currently, BLS billing is performed by each district, and some districts choose not to bill at all. Any revenue generated from BLS billing is retained by the district. For ALS billing, ALS providers submit the bills, and the resulting revenue is returned to the EMS levy budget. Because EMS Administration does not manage billing directly, there is little transparency into billing-related factors.

MCP recommends that all billing income be shared with EMS Administration so that a full accounting of funds can be maintained. Today, a third-party biller, System Designs, is utilized for billing. It would be relatively simple for System Designs to provide EMS Administration with a monthly statement. This would increase transparency, including insight into uncollected funds, which can be significant.

MCP was unable to determine whether Whatcom County uses soft billing or hard billing practices. Soft billing does not aggressively follow up on nonpayment—such as through multiple invoices or collections—and generally results in a lower collection rate. Hard billing, by contrast, is a more assertive approach: insurance is billed first, but any remaining balance becomes the patient’s responsibility, and continual action is taken to recover the cost.

Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages, but soft billing can result in significant lost revenue. These figures—and their impact on the levy—should be transparent and understood by all stakeholders involved in levy management.

MCP agrees with Heightmen’s assessment: “No matter your EMS market situation, it’s clear that a focus on getting every dollar available owed to your EMS system is a key variable that must be diligently cultivated and monitored to help keep your system viable.”



8.1.1 Revenue versus Costs

The costs associated with providing ALS services—as well as supporting BLS services, training programs, and community paramedicine initiatives—are significant. The table below provides a snapshot of revenue collected and expenditure for 2024.

Table 13: Projected Revenue

Category	Amount
Levy Income	\$13,500,000
Billing Income	\$2,000,000
Sales Tax	\$4,500,000
GEMT	\$2,300,000
Total	\$22,300,000

MCP is concerned about the recently passed federal bill H.R. 1, the “*One Big Beautiful Bill Act*,” and the potential that GEMT payments could be reviewed for elimination. While MCP has no direct knowledge that such action will occur, the funding is perceived to be at risk. The loss of this revenue stream would have a significant impact on the overall EMS budget.

Table 14: Capital Expenditures

Category	Amount
Main ALS Unit costs	\$13,800,000
What-Comm	\$2,600,000
Paramedic Training	\$1,600,000
BLS Distribution	\$1,500,000
Equipment Lease	\$500,000
Total	\$20,000,000

There are various other line-item expenditures totaling an additional \$2.5 million. The income-to-expenditure balance is losing ground, particularly when projecting out to 2028.

The fund currently maintains a surplus target equal to 70% of annual expenditure. However, this reserve is projected to decline in the coming years. At the end of 2023, the balance was \$1.1 million short of meeting this target.

Given ongoing concerns about GEMT funding and continued cost increases, MCP recommends engaging the available “bank capacity” and lifting the 1% levy limit. Additionally, a recalibration of the reserve target should be considered—if 70% is no longer realistic moving forward, the percentage should be adjusted to align with fiscal realities.

9 EMS Administration

The EMS Administration administrator position was created in 2016 to manage levy financing, contracts, and system administration, including oversight of the levy budget and other ancillary financial responsibilities.

- System Administrator (EMS Administrator) – Provides leadership and oversight of EMS Administration, leads strategic planning, and collaborates with various boards such as the EMS Oversight Board and County Council.
- Data Analyst – Supports and analyzes data from the regional electronic patient care reporting system in use across the county. This position identifies trends in response and patient care, utilizes GIS to visually display response metrics and coverage (as seen in some of the mapping in this report), and prepares reports and maps to assist stakeholders in decision-making.
- Training Program Specialist – Conducts EMT classes and scenarios, provides CPR and automated external defibrillator (AED) instruction for public education, supports BLS stakeholders when needed, and updates and provides valuable input for “Rescue Hub,” a learning management system used to educate and track training certifications. This position was originally recommended in the first levy agreement, where two fire chiefs sat on the committee.
- Office Administrator – Handles standard administrative duties such as preparing documents and reports, scheduling meetings, and coordinating staff schedules and visitors.

During interviews with agencies, MCP repeatedly heard concerns that the EMS Administration is “building a fiefdom” and has grown too large. While the office budget is approximately \$500,000, MCP does not believe the office is rife with waste. Each employee is assigned specific responsibilities, and during MCP’s visits and staff interviews, it was evident that all employees were committed to their mission. Furthermore, as part of the 2023–2028 EMS Plan, which was developed with input from multiple fire service and government officials, the current positions were formally approved for EMS Administration.

9.1 EMS Training and Certification Level

All EMS providers are required to comply with continually evolving training and recertification standards. The table below outlines the recertification hours and cycles for the various levels of EMS training. This ongoing process of recertification and continuing education can be demanding, but it is essential to ensure that EMS providers remain current with the latest treatment techniques and maintain proficiency in their skills.

Table 15: Recertification Requirements

Provider Level	Washington State Requirements	National Registry-EMT Requirement
Paramedic	NR-EMT required	60 Hours in a 2-year cycle
EMT-Advanced	60 hours in a 2-year cycle	72 Hours in a 2-year cycle
EMT	24 hours in a 3-year cycle	40 Hours in a 2-year cycle

The table above reflects recertification requirements only and does not capture the overall commitment involved in becoming a paramedic or EMT. The table below outlines the training and education requirements for initial certification.

Table 16: Provider-level Training Hours

Provider Level	Hours Requirements
Paramedic	1,200 – 1,800
EMT-Advanced	250 – 350
EMT	150 – 190

Currently, BFD leads the paramedic training efforts in the county, with instructional staff drawn directly from within the department’s ranks. These firefighter-paramedic instructors bring significant operational experience and are deeply committed to the training process. However, this model presents cost challenges, as utilizing department personnel—particularly at current wages and benefit levels—results in higher instructional costs compared to those at traditional academic institutions. Much of this program is taught using overtime pay, which further increases costs.

Beyond financial considerations, the current structure creates a barrier to entry for individuals seeking a career path into paramedicine. Enrollment in the BFD-affiliated program is limited to those already employed by the department, effectively excluding members of the public or those who are not firefighters. This limitation reduces the accessibility of the training pipeline and may hinder broader workforce development efforts to address regional paramedic staffing needs.

As noted, the current system does not accept unaffiliated candidates—even those willing to pay out of pocket. MCP therefore recommends partnering with an accredited academic institution, such as Bellingham Technical College, to deliver this curriculum. Doing so would open the training system to a larger pool of applicants, increasing access and helping to meet regional workforce needs. For example, Central Washington University in Ellensburg and Tacoma Community College offer paramedic programs that are open-enrollment and do not require agency affiliation.

10 Conclusion

The findings and recommendations in this report reflect a system with deep-rooted strengths, including a legacy of service, a dedicated workforce, and a clear commitment to community safety. At the same time, the assessment highlights areas where improved coordination, shared services, transparency, and strategic planning will be essential to meet the growing and changing demands of the County's population while maintaining sustainable finances.

Implementing these recommendations will require sustained collaboration among stakeholders and a willingness to move beyond historical operational silos. By addressing structural inefficiencies, exploring regional partnerships, and strengthening governance and training systems, Whatcom County can create a more resilient, equitable, and efficient fire and EMS system—one that honors its past while effectively preparing for the future.

Now is the time to establish a unified vision that aligns services with community needs and fiscal realities. With intentional planning and action, Whatcom County can enhance public safety outcomes, maximize resources, and ensure consistent, high-quality fire and EMS services for all residents.

Table 17: Recommendations and Level of Effort

Recommendations	Level of Effort
The districts should continue operating under common standard operating procedures (SOPs) as outlined in the <i>Whatcom County Fire/EMS Operations Manual</i> . This promotes consistency and seamless operation during mutual aid responses.	Easy
Unincorporated areas of the county that have historically required fire department response but remain unassigned to a fire district should be formally assigned. A financial reimbursement mechanism should be developed for these assignments.	Hard
The County should consider the consolidation of operations between District 17 and District 7.	Hard

Recommendations	Level of Effort
The County should consider the consolidation of operations between District 18 and the South Whatcom Fire Authority.	Hard
County government should host dedicated meetings with fire service leadership, separate from existing meetings. These meetings should occur at least quarterly to address critical fire and EMS service issues and to educate the County Council on system needs.	Easy
All districts, cities, and fire authorities should increase transparency in budgeting and governance. Public expenditures and meeting information should be easily accessible to residents.	Easy
While MCP has not identified a pressing need to expand the current ALS or BLS deployment models, an annual review should be conducted to assess emerging needs and address factors contributing to extended response times. The Deming area, in particular, should be continually monitored for delays and evaluated for the potential placement of a dedicated unit.	Easy
Shared fleet management should be explored to maximize cost-efficiency.	Moderate
Each entity should evaluate its fleet size and align resources with operational needs. Underutilized apparatus still incur maintenance and insurance costs.	Easy
Shared facility management should also be investigated to reduce costs and improve utilization of infrastructure.	Moderate
Shared purchasing strategies for both fire and EMS should be implemented to take advantage of economies of scale. This is especially important for EMS, where supplies are consumed frequently and restocking is a daily necessity. The first levy plan identified this as a potential need.	Easy
Fire districts should discuss the potential for sharing command staff to reduce costs, promote standardization, and enhance regional cooperation.	Easy
A Class A burn building is needed to provide realistic fire training scenarios for both recruits and veteran personnel.	Hard
Grant application efforts should be regionalized to improve competitiveness for federal grant funding.	Easy
Prospect should be consolidated with, or co-located into, What-Comm to enhance operational efficiency.	Hard
The “banked capacity” and levy lift should be enacted for the remaining years of the current levy term to offset rising costs and potential funding reductions, including those related to Medicare and the GEMT program.	Moderate

Recommendations	Level of Effort
ALS levy funds should be reallocated in part to support BLS operations, ensuring that smaller agencies receive a minimal level of financial support.	Easy
Fire districts should share ALS billing information with the County EMS Administration and/or grant the EMS Administration access to billing vendor portals. Current practices lack transparency. Greater visibility would enable a more comprehensive audit and improve the accuracy of EMS levy budgeting.	Easy
Paramedic training should be provided through local academic institutions to increase the availability of qualified personnel within the region.	Easy

Note: The level-of-effort categories are used to assess the complexity of each recommendation. Items denoted as “easy” are typically low-cost but still require cooperation and discussion among stakeholders. Conversely, items marked “hard” may involve significant financial investment, governance changes, and potentially even public voting.

In summary, these recommendations provide a roadmap for strengthening Whatcom County's fire and EMS system, ensuring it remains responsive, efficient, and financially sustainable. By prioritizing collaboration, strategic investment, and transparent decision-making, the County can better meet current and future demands while continuing to deliver high-quality service to the community.

Appendix A: Fire Department Profiles

All statistics provided are based on 2022 statistics (last available year) as provided by the Whatcom County Council. Annual call volume does not include mutual aid responses.

Information shown as ♦ indicates information that was not provided or able to be obtained through open-source means.

Whatcom Fire District 1 – Everson

Service Area and Population

- Geographic Coverage: approximately 75 sq mi (covers a large east-central portion of the county, extending from Everson to the county boundary south of Sumas Mountain)
- Population Served: 12,700
- Primary Service Responsibilities:
 - Fire Suppression
 - BLS Transport

Operational Metrics (If Available)

- Annual Call Volume (2022): 1,082

Staffing

- Total Personnel:
 - Career:
 - Fire Chief
 - Assistant Fire Chief
 - 3 Lieutenants
 - 5 Full-time Fire Fighter/EMT
 - 7 Part-time Fire Fighter/EMT
 - 2 Administrative Assistants
 - Volunteer:
 - 30

Stations

- Station 81: 101 E. Main Street, Everson, WA 98247
- Station 82: 5664 Lawrence Road, Everson, WA 98247

Whatcom Fire District 4 – North Whatcom Fire and Rescue (contracted)

Service Area and Population

- Geographic Coverage: approximately 40 sq mi (hatched area east of Bellingham, reaches the county line past Lake Whatcom)
- Population Served: 10,000
- Primary Service Responsibilities:
 - Fire Suppression
 - BLS Transport

Operational Metrics (If Available)

- Annual Call Volume (Fire EMS/Rescue): 6,013 (North Whatcom total)

Staffing

- Total Personnel:
 - Career:
 - 8
 - Volunteer:
 - 48

Stations

- Station 12: 4142 Britton Loop Road, Bellingham, WA 98226
- Station 13: 2308 E. Smith Road, Bellingham, WA 98226

Whatcom Fire District 5 – Point Roberts

Service Area and Population

- Geographic Coverage: 5 sq mi (Point Roberts peninsula)
- Population Served: 1,275
- Primary Service Responsibilities:
 - Fire Suppression
 - BLS Transport
 - ALS Transport

Operational Metrics (If Available)

- Annual Call Volume (Fire/EMS/Rescue): 510
- Average Response Times (if tracked): on scene within 5 minutes
- Turnout Time Goals/Benchmarks: one minute

Staffing

- Total Personnel:
 - Career:
 - District Chief
 - Part-time Assistant Chief
 - 4 Duty captains
 - Volunteer:
 - 40

Station

- Station 1: 2030 Benson Road, Point Roberts, WA 98281

Whatcom Fire District 7 – Ferndale

Service Area and Population

- Geographic Coverage: approximately 72 sq mi (extends west from Bellingham toward Birch Bay, covering unincorporated coastal suburbs and the Cherry Point Industrial Area)
- Population Served: 5,825
- Primary Service Responsibilities:
 - Fire Suppression
 - BLS Transport (if applicable)

Operational Metrics (If Available)

- Annual Call Volume (Fire/EMS/Rescue): 5,825

Staffing

- Total Personnel:
 - Career: 54
 - Fire Chief
 - Assistant Chief of Operations
 - Assistant Chief of Training and Support
 - Chief of Medical Services
 - Operations Captain
 - Training Captain
 - 2 EMS Captain
 - 2 Community Paramedic
 - Operations Division Assistant
 - Finance Administrator
 - Administrative Assistant
 - Volunteer: 75

Stations

- Station 41: (Headquarters): 2020 Washington Street, Ferndale, WA 98248
- Station 42: 4047 Brown Road, Ferndale, WA 98248
- Station 43: 5368 Northwest Drive, Bellingham, WA 98226
- Station 44: 5491 Grandview Road, Birch Bay, WA 98230
- Station 45: 1886 Grandview Road, Ferndale, WA 98248
- Station 46: 6081 Church Road, Ferndale, WA 98248

Whatcom Fire District 8 – Marietta

Service Area and Population

- Geographic Coverage: approximately 42 sq mi (Lummi Peninsula, area west/northwest of Bellingham, the Port of Bellingham, and the International Airport)
- Population Served: ♦
- Primary Service Responsibilities:
 - Fire Suppression
 - BLS Transport

Operational Metrics (If Available)¹⁸

- Annual Call Volume (Fire/EMS/Rescue):
 - Station 31: 989
 - Station 34: 839
- Average Response Times (if tracked):
 - 5 minutes 57 seconds
- Turnout Time Goals/Benchmarks:
 - Arrival of first due apparatus is under 7 minutes 40 seconds 90% of the time

Staffing

- Total Personnel:
 - Career: 30
 - Volunteer: N/A

Stations

- Station 31: 752 Marine Drive, Marietta, WA 98225
- Station 34: 2600 Mackenzie Road, Gooseberry Point, WA 98226

¹⁸ Statistics include all Bellingham Fire Department stations unless otherwise noted.

Whatcom Fire District 11 – Lummi Island

Service Area and Population

- Geographic Coverage: approximately 9.3 sq mi (approximate size of Lummi Island)
- Population Served: ♦
- Primary Service Responsibilities:
 - Fire Suppression
 - BLS Transport (if applicable)

Operational Metrics (If Available)

- Annual Call Volume (Fire/EMS/Rescue): 106

Staffing

- Total Personnel:
 - Career:
 - 1 Full-time administrative staff
 - 2 Part-time administrative staff
 - Volunteer: ♦

Station

- Station 38: 3809 Legoe Bay Road, Lummi Island, WA 98262

Whatcom Fire District 14 – Sumas/Kendall

Service Area and Population

- Geographic Coverage: approximately 192 sq mi (southeastern part of the county and the Sumas Mountain corridor)
- Population Served: ♦
- Primary Service Responsibilities:
 - Fire Suppression
 - BLS Transport (if applicable)

Operational Metrics (If Available)

- Annual Call Volume (Fire/EMS/Rescue): 1,397

Stations

- Station 91 (Sumas): 143 Columbia St, Sumas, WA 98295
- Station 92 (Kendall – Headquarters): 7528 Kendall Rd, Maple Falls, WA 98266
- Station 93 (Welcome): 5640 Mosquito Lake Rd, Deming, WA 98244

Whatcom Fire District 16 – Acme

Service Area and Population

- Geographic Coverage: approximately 161 sq mi (Van Zandt Ridge area)
- Population Served: ♦
- Primary Service Responsibilities:
 - Fire Suppression
 - BLS Transport (if applicable)

Operational Metrics (If Available)

- Annual Call Volume (Fire/EMS/Rescue): 137

Staffing

- Total Personnel
 - Career:
 - Part-time Fire Chief
 - Part-time Secretary
 - Volunteer:
 - 21

Stations

- Station 86 (Acme – Headquarters): 2036 Valley Hwy, Acme, WA 98220
- Station 87 (Van Zandt): 5495 Potter Road, Deming, WA 98244
- Station 88 (Wickersham): 319 Valley Highway, Acme, WA 98220

Whatcom Fire District 17 – Sandy Point

Service Area and Population

- Geographic Coverage: approximately 71 sq mi (Lynden-Birch Bay north area)
- Population Served: ♦
- Primary Service Responsibilities:
 - Fire Suppression
 - BLS Transport

Operational Metrics (If Available)

- Annual Call Volume (Fire/EMS/Rescue): 203

Stations

- Station 56: 4332 Sucia Drive, Sandy Point, WA 98248

- Station 57: 3685 Prevost Way, Ferndale, WA 98248

Whatcom Fire District 18 – Sedro Woolley

Service Area and Population

- Geographic Coverage: approximately 119 sq mi (from Lookout Mountain south)
- Population Served: ♦
- Primary Service Responsibilities:
 - Fire Suppression
 - BLS Transport

Operational Metrics (If Available)

- Annual Call Volume (Fire/EMS/Rescue): 197

Staffing

- Total Personnel:
 - Career: Chief
 - Volunteer: 18

Stations

- Station 25: 3250 S Bay Drive, Sedro-Woolley, WA 98284
- Station 26: 431 Cain Lake Road, Sedro-Woolley, WA 98284

Whatcom Fire District 19 – Glacier Fire and Rescue

Service Area and Population

- Geographic Coverage: approximately 109 sq mi (Glacier, and the Nooksack/Upper Nooksack area)
- Population Served: ♦
- Primary Service Responsibilities:
 - Fire Suppression
 - BLS Transport (if applicable)

Operational Metrics (If Available)

- Annual Call Volume (Fire/EMS/Rescue): 88

Staffing

- Total Personnel:
 - Career: 0
 - Volunteer: 19

Station

- Station 96: 9953 Mount Baker Highway, Deming, WA 98244

Whatcom Fire District 21 – North Whatcom Fire and Rescue

Service Area and Population

- Geographic Coverage: approximately 622 sq mi (the northwest corner of the county, excluding the City of Lynden)
- Population Served: 25,000
- Primary Service Responsibilities:
 - Fire Suppression
 - BLS Transport

Operational Metrics (If Available)

- Annual Call Volume (Fire/EMS/Rescue): 5,807

Staffing

- Total Personnel:
 - Career: 46
 - Volunteer: 24

Stations

- Station 61 (Blaine) – 9408 Odell Road, Blaine, WA 98230
- Station 62 (Semiahmoo) – 9001 Semiahmoo Parkway, Blaine, WA 98230
- Station 63 (Birch Bay) – 4581 Birch Bay Lynden Road, Blaine, WA 98230
- Station 64 (Custer) – 3401 Haynie Road, Blaine, WA 98230
- Station 65 (Haynie) – 3401 Haynie Road, Blaine, WA 98230
(Note: Stations 64 and 65 share the same Haynie Road location)
- Station 69 (Delta/Birch Bay area) – 6028 Guide Meridian Road, Bellingham, WA 98226

South Whatcom Fire Authority

Service Area and Population

- Geographic Coverage: approximately 154 sq mi (southwestern part of the county, along the western banks of Lake Whatcom, Interstate 5 corridor, and Pacific coastline)
- Population Served: 13,500
- Primary Service Responsibilities:
 - Fire Suppression
 - BLS Transport

Operational Metrics (If Available)

- Annual Call Volume (Fire/EMS/Rescue): 1,188

Staffing

- Total Personnel:
 - Career: 26
 - Volunteer: 30

Stations

- Station 18 (Chuckanut): 686 Chuckanut Drive, Bellingham, WA 98229
- Station 21 (Geneva): 4518 Cable Street, Bellingham, WA 98229
- Station 22 (Sudden Valley): 2050 Lake Whatcom Boulevard, Bellingham, WA 98229
- Station 28 (Lake Samish): 5070 Samish Way, Bellingham, WA 98229

City of Bellingham Fire Department

Service Area and Population

- Geographic Coverage: approximately 31 sq miles
- Population Served: approximately 94,750
- Primary Service Responsibilities:
 - Fire Suppression
 - BLS Transport
 - ALS
 - Community Paramedicine

Operational Metrics (If Available)

- Annual Call Volume (Fire/EMS Rescue): 24,566

Staffing

- Total Personnel:
 - Career: 194
 - Volunteer: N/A

Stations

- Station 1 – 1800 Broadway, Bellingham, WA 98225
- Station 2 – 1590 Harris Avenue, Bellingham, WA 98225
- Station 3 – 1111 Billy Frank Jr. Street (also known as West Indiana Street), Bellingham, WA 98225
- Station 4 – 2306 Yew Street, Bellingham, WA 98229
- Station 5 – 3314 Northwest Avenue, Bellingham, WA 98225

- Station 6 – 4060 Deemer Road, Bellingham, WA 98226
- Satellite Medic Station 75 – 215 4th Street, Lynden, WA 98264

City of Lynden Fire Department

Service Area and Population

- Geographic Coverage: approximately 5 sq mi
- Population Served: approximately 16,500
- Primary Service Responsibilities:
 - Fire Suppression
 - BLS Transport

Operational Metrics (If Available)

- Annual Call Volume: 2,494

Staffing

- Total Personnel:
 - Career: 6 (Fire Chief, two full-time fire captains, two full-time firefighters, and a support services manager)
 - Volunteer: approximately 40 (compensated on a per-call basis)

Station

- Station 1: 215 4th Street, Lynden, WA 98264