



MEMORANDUM

TO: Whatcom County Council

THROUGH: Satpal S. Sidhu, County Executive

FROM: Kayla Schott-Bresler, Deputy Executive

CC: Sheriff Donnell "Tank" Tanksley
Mike Hilley, EMS Manager

RE: South Whatcom Fire Authority Out of Jurisdiction Response in Galbraith Recreational Easement

DATE: June 12, 2025

Issue Overview

In December 2024, South Whatcom Fire Authority (SWFA) notified Whatcom County and the City of Bellingham that it would be building new response plans that exclude popular recreational areas that fall outside of its jurisdictional boundaries. These areas include the City of Bellingham's recreational easement over Galbraith Mountain, which falls in unincorporated Whatcom County. This and other nearby areas are popular mountain biking destinations and put an uncompensated demand on SWFA resources. This area also has economic development and tourism value to both Whatcom County and City of Bellingham. SWFA first raised this issue in July of 2023.

After well over a year of negotiations, the City of Bellingham has proposed a two-year agreement of \$147,287 per year to fund these services and is requesting Whatcom County pay 1/3 of the costs (\$49,000 per year for two years) to maintain continuity of EMS services. During this period, we would work toward a more sustainable solution for EMS coverage on Galbraith.

Jurisdiction

Galbraith Mountain is a high use recreation area that is under a conservation and recreation easement, built from a partnership between the City of Bellingham, a private landowner, Whatcom Mountain Bike Coalition, and the Whatcom Land Trust. Whatcom County was not a part to the agreement that established the recreation and conservation easements. At the time of this agreement, no plan was developed to account for EMS response in this area.

Galbraith Mountain is not within the boundaries of any fire district or fire authority, and technically would fall within the jurisdiction of the County's Search and Rescue function. However, Galbraith is a



high-use recreation park in a semi-urban area (unincorporated Whatcom County right outside Bellingham city limits), and user and community expectation is that a rider with a serious injury can call 911 for an EMS response. SWFA has no obligation to respond in these situations.

The presence of high-use recreation areas, Galbraith in particular, has resulted in higher demand for technical rescue and EMS response outside of state trauma zone boundaries, and outside SWFA's jurisdiction.

Whatcom County provides payments to SWFA for basic life support services through the EMS levy for calls within the Fire Authority's boundaries. In addition, the EMS levy funds ALS response activities countywide.

Other Examples

After some initial research, the County administration has not been able to find an analogous situation in other areas of Washington, as most high-use mountain bike parks are within City, Fire District, or Fire Authority boundaries. There are, clearly, other areas of high recreation use in wilderness areas but they tend to be further from an urban area, and there is not the same community expectation regarding EMS response.

In some other areas of the Country, there are private EMS patrols in high use recreation parks, similar to a Ski Patrol. In the case of Galbraith, the Whatcom Mountain Bike Coalition and its members bring in EMS patrol for their higher-risk, high use events (like the Northwest Tune Up festival).

Councilmember Scanlon has engaged council staff on researching other models and the Administration has also consulted with Search and Rescue, the Sheriff's Office, the Mountain Bike Coalition, Parks, and the EMS office in its research.

City of Bellingham Proposal

The City has evaluated the request from SWFA and has proposed to compensate SWFA for services in the easement area to avoid a halt in response. The City has proposed \$147,287 per year for a two-year period, which SWFA has accepted.¹

The City of Bellingham has requested that, because the area in question is in unincorporated Whatcom County and technically falls under Search and Rescue's jurisdiction, the County contribute 1/3 of the cost or \$49,095 towards the City's contract for service with SWFA.

¹ In 2024, 32 of 1183 calls were related to Galbraith Mountain, or 2.7% of SWFA's total calls. As a percent of SWFA's 2024 budget, this equates to \$147,287.



The City has proposed this as a two-year contract to solve the immediate issue, while the parties search for a more sustainable solution.

Next Steps

The Administration seeks direction from the Council regarding Whatcom County's response to SWFA and the City of Bellingham's request. Should the Council agree to proceed, the Executive would bring forward an interlocal with the City of Bellingham and a budget supplemental for council consideration (general fund or EMS fund).