

Snohomish Fire District No. 4

Fire Department Assessment & Options Analysis



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On March 27, 2023, Snohomish County Fire District No. 4 (“SCFD4” or the “District”) engaged Clearview Consulting and Investigations to conduct an assessment of its current conditions and explore options for enhancing service delivery through regional consolidation with Snohomish Regional Fire and Rescue (SRFR). In March 2024, SCFD4 authorized an addendum to the original report to include an evaluation of South Snohomish County Fire and Rescue Regional Fire Authority (South County Fire or SCF) as a potential partner. This initiative highlights the District's continued dedication to enhancing service quality and striving for organizational excellence.

This report begins with an analysis of SCFD4's current conditions, including its services, finances, programs, and infrastructure, based on information provided and stakeholder interviews. The next section explores potential partnership opportunities that could enhance efficiency, reduce duplication, and save costs. It also assesses the suitability of Snohomish Regional Fire and Rescue and South County Fire as potential partners.

The final section outlines the five strategies deemed feasible for SCFD4, which include maintaining the status quo, contracting for services, pursuing a formal merger, establishing a Regional Fire Authority, or annexing into a Regional Fire Authority. The report concludes with findings and recommendations for moving forward.

The following is a summary of the key elements evaluated and associated findings.

Organizational Overview

Snohomish County Fire District 4, is a special-purpose district authorized under Chapter 52 of the Revised Code of Washington (RCW). Its service area covers approximately 62 square miles and serves a population of around 30,000 residents. This service area is characterized by a mix of urban and rural areas, with a higher population density concentrated within the City of Snohomish.

Over the past few years, SCFD4 has undergone significant changes and improvements. The organization has taken a proactive and progressive approach towards self-examination, resulting in notable advancements in various aspects of its operations. These improvements have spanned multiple areas, including administration and finance, service levels, and support services.

Within the area of administration and finance, SCFD4 has implemented measures to enhance funding for future liabilities and capital improvements. They have worked to optimize financial management practices to ensure the responsible allocation of resources.

In terms of service levels, SCFD4 has focused on enhancing its emergency response capabilities and providing a higher quality of service to its community. This includes investments in additional staff, officer development, training, and equipment, to better respond to various emergency situations. These enhancements have allowed the District to discontinue the practice of browning out, or temporarily closing, fire stations due to staffing shortages.

In addition to its other improvements, SCFD4 has placed a strong emphasis on support services to enhance the overall experience for both residents and other stakeholders. These efforts include a focus on strengthening communication, community engagement, and collaboration, particularly with the City of Snohomish. Notably, the District has made the strategic decision to assume responsibility for fire code and fire marshal services within the City of Snohomish, demonstrating its commitment to expanding its capabilities and providing comprehensive fire prevention services. Steps are already being taken to acquire these additional capabilities.

Despite the geographic expanse and the limitations imposed by the available tax base supporting emergency services, the district has managed to provide adequate service coverage. This reflects the District's dedication to optimizing resource allocation and ensuring that residents receive the best service possible, even with the challenges posed by the size and demographics of the service area.

Overall, SCFD4's commitment to self-improvement, responsiveness to identified needs, and willingness to adapt are all indications of a progressive and dedicated organization focused on serving the community effectively. As SCFD4 explores potential regional consolidation, it builds upon a solid foundation of continuous improvement and a history of successfully adapting to evolving circumstances. This commitment should position the district well for addressing new challenges and opportunities in the future while maintaining its dedication to the well-being of the community it serves.

Stakeholder Interviews and Feedback

Stakeholder feedback gathered through numerous interviews highlights key insights from various perspectives. From a governance standpoint, there is considerable interest and support for exploring opportunities for regional collaboration, primarily driven by the desire to enhance service levels and eliminate redundancy in emergency response. Multiple opportunities for collaboration exist between SCFD4 and both SCF and SRFR. However, there is a range of opinions among governing board members regarding the type and pace of any consolidation effort.

Leadership at SCFD4, comprised of relatively new members, recognizes the potential benefits of collaboration with SRFR or SCF. Initially, leadership at SCFD4 and SRFR held a series of meetings to discuss opportunities for cooperative services. These meetings identified distinct differences in philosophy and approach between the two agencies. SRFR prioritized an initial approach of relationship-building, while SCFD4 tends to focus on specific aspects of consolidation deemed beneficial. These differences have led to communication challenges. Alternatively, the relationship between SCFD4 and SCF appears to be more favorable, which could potentially facilitate smoother cooperation and integration between the two entities.

From a labor perspective, the SCFD4 labor group expressed concern about limited input on a potential consolidation with SRFR and felt decisions were being made without their active involvement. Labor is content with current working conditions and have reservations of what they deemed as a takeover by SRFR. In contrast, SRFR's labor group supports consolidation, highlighting potential contractual benefits available to SCFD4's labor group, but admits it has been difficult to get the SCFD4 group to engage.

The external perspective from the City of Snohomish emphasizes questions about the benefits of consolidation, particularly in terms of service enhancements and cost savings. The City applauds recent improvements in its relationship with the current fire chief but expresses concerns about potential changes under different management and the survivability of pending agreements.

Overall, there is consensus on the potential benefits for service improvement through collaboration. However, historical, and cultural differences, along with communication breakdowns, pose significant obstacles that must be addressed. SCFD4 desires regional collaboration to be a partnership rather than a takeover. Achieving alignment among labor groups is crucial for a smooth consolidation process, as their support is vital to mitigating challenges and the overall success of any collaborative effort.

Partnership Options

Status Quo

The options for consolidation available to SCFD4 were examined. Although not a form of consolidation the first option to consider would be to maintain the status quo, continuing its current operations and organizational structure. While this approach offers stability and minimal disruption, it might not offer some of the efficiencies and service enhancements a consolidation may provide in addressing identified gaps in current service delivery capabilities.

Inter-Local Cooperation Agreement (Contract for Services)

A contract for service or an inter-local cooperation agreement represents a flexible approach to consolidation for SCFD4. These types of agreement can encompass a wide range of possibilities, from sharing specific functions or services to a more comprehensive collaboration covering all services.

In the case of a contract for service, SCFD4 could engage in agreements with SRFR or SCF to provide or receive specific services. For example, they might collaborate on sharing specialized services, personnel, or training resources. This selective approach allows the District to target specific areas where consolidation could yield immediate benefits without necessarily committing to a full consolidation. One of the key advantages of this type of collaboration is its relatively low risk. Since it involves specific agreements rather than a full consolidation, SCFD4 would maintain a degree of autonomy and flexibility while reaping the benefits of collaboration.

Conversely, an inter-local cooperation agreement could be a more comprehensive arrangement, encompassing a broader range of services and functions. SCFD4 could execute a formal agreement with either SCF or SRFR that would effectively combine two departments into one. This could lead to more efficient resource allocation, improved service levels, and enhanced emergency response capabilities.

Contract-based consolidations are often quicker to implement compared to a more permanent formal merger, establishment of regional fire authority, or annexation into an established regional fire authority. Lastly, the development of a contract for services requires far less legal and administrative process and does not require a vote of the citizens.

Merger

For the purpose of this discussion, the term "Merger" is used to describe the merging of one fire district into another. In Washington State, fire protection districts can merge under specific legal provisions. The merging districts must be reasonably close to each other and subject to review by the Boundary Review Board. The district seeking to merge is called the "merging district," while the district where the merger occurs is the "merger district." After a successful merger, the merging district dissolves, transferring assets and employees to the merger district. This process is detailed in RCW 52.06.080 and RCW 52.06.110. The merger encompasses all legal functions and combines commissioners into a new board. The tax rate must be equalized across the merged jurisdiction as mandated by state law.

Merging resources can enhance efficiency, but the impact depends on participating agencies. Benefits include eliminating redundant governance structures and a unified tax rate. This integration is seen as a lasting solution, reducing future uncertainties.

For this option, SRFDR would be the primary candidate, as the only other fire district meeting the proximity requirement for a merger is Snohomish County Fire District No. 16 (SCFD16), which operates primarily as a volunteer fire department serving a very rural area. A merger between SCFD4 and SCFD16 would likely offer limited administrative or operational benefits due to their distinct operational differences.

Careful financial analysis of available resources, assets, liabilities, and debt is crucial to determining each agency is bringing equitable contributions to the merger. A merger could eliminate SCFD4s current ability to increase levy assessments beyond the one percent annual limitation, affecting capital improvement funding plans.

Regional Fire Authority (RFA)

Rather than utilizing the merger process, fire districts, cities, towns and tribal governments could establish a Regional Fire Authority. The formation of a RFA is authorized by statute and closely resembles a merger, involving shared governance, voter endorsement, and the creation of an independent municipal entity with taxing authority. RFAs provide a regional perspective on fire protection and EMS systems, requiring a high level of collaboration. The process involves creating an RFA planning committee, developing an RFA service plan, educating constituents, conducting a vote, and transitioning to the new structure, typically spanning 18 months to 2 years.

Establishing an RFA offers collaborative benefits, allowing each participating agency to leverage strengths and minimize weaknesses. New best practices can be identified and implemented collectively. The planning process enables a contemporary assessment of services, resources, and costs, ensuring alignment with community needs. Retaining policymakers from participating agencies ensures dedication and citizen involvement in service preferences.

One major drawback is the loss of autonomy for participating agencies, as decision-making authority is shared. Crafting an RFA plan demands a significant time and effort investment, which can be wasted if the plan doesn't proceed or gain voter approval. Funding options for RFAs are similar to fire districts, leaving any financial challenges present prior to the formation of an RFA unaddressed.

Annexation

Annexing into a Regional Fire Authority involves a process where an existing fire district, city or town becomes part of an established RFA. Annexation into the South County Fire is a viable option for SCFD4. This process would begin with SCFD4 adopting a resolution requesting annexation and submitting it to the RFA's governing board. The RFA board can respond by adopting a resolution, adjusting its RFA service plan to address annexation terms, and returning it to SCFD4. If both governing boards agree on the terms, the proposal can be presented to SCFD4 voters for final approval.

Annexing into an established RFA presents several advantages, including bypassing the time-consuming process of creating a new RFA, achieving tax equalization, and allowing input on service levels and governance representation before annexation.

However, a significant drawback is the potential loss of autonomy and local control. Joining an RFA with a benefit charge requires periodic voter reauthorization, and the impact of this charge on property owners remains uncertain, necessitating further analysis.

Regional Fire Authorities are emerging as the most likely avenue for continued regionalization in South Snohomish County. With Mill Creek having annexed into South County Fire and Edmonds considering annexation, this model of consolidation could set a trend for others in the region. Both small and large entities, such as the Cities of Mukilteo and Everett, Snohomish County Fire District 4, and Snohomish Regional Fire & Rescue, might explore similar annexation opportunities or the formation of a new RFA. This trend towards regionalization aims to enhance service delivery, streamline operations, and provide more sustainable and coordinated fire and emergency services across the southern portion of the county.

Determining the right choice among these five options will depend on a thorough assessment of SCFD4's specific circumstances, stakeholder preferences, financial implications, and long-term goals for service delivery and community well-being. Engaging in a comprehensive analysis and consultation process will be crucial to determine the option that best aligns with the District's mission and vision for the future. This process will ensure that the chosen path supports SCFD4's commitment to enhancing service quality and achieving organizational excellence.

Snohomish Regional Fire and Rescue Suitability as a Potential Partner

Snohomish Regional Fire and Rescue (SRFR) emerges as a potential partner for SCFD4, offering several notable attributes. SRFR is a significantly larger organization, strategically positioned with adjacent service areas that complement SCFD4's. It holds accreditation from the Commission on Fire Accreditation International, demonstrating its commitment to quality, and maintains a relatively stable financial standing, instilling confidence as a reliable fire service agency.

A potential collaboration with SRFR presents several areas of interest. SRFR boasts a well-established administration, equipped with personnel specializing in critical functions like finance, human resources, and logistics. Collaboration with SRFR could enhance SCFD4's capabilities to deliver Fire Prevention and Fire Marshal services and expedite its ability to assume those responsibilities in the City of Snohomish.

Collaboration also opens the door to enhanced deployment options, which could lead to more efficient emergency responses while reducing redundancy, benefiting both agencies. In the rural areas of both agencies there may be an opportunity for station relocation and consolidation, something worth further study.

In summary, SRFR indeed emerges as a potential suitable partner, given its considerable operational, administrative, and support service capabilities, coupled with a stable financial position. It's important to note, however, that this assessment focused solely on these operational aspects and did not dive deep into cultural or philosophical differences, or the current state of existing relationships when evaluating suitability. These additional factors would need to be considered and addressed in any comprehensive partnership decision.

South Snohomish County Fire and Rescue Regional Fire Authority as a Potential Partner

SCF's administrative structure is well-organized, with dedicated personnel managing finance, human resources, and logistics. This comprehensive administration can provide valuable support to SCFD4, particularly in areas where additional expertise and resources are needed.

A collaboration with SCF may not offer the same opportunities for improved unit deployment strategies as a partnership with SRFR due to the lack of proximity between their service areas. However, by leveraging SCF's established systems and protocols, SCFD4 could optimize its administrative and operational capabilities, enhancing overall efficiency and effectiveness.

SCF has stated it is open to assisting SCFD4 with support services and has previously provided administrative support, recently entering into contractual agreements for GIS and Incident Data analysis services. Regarding a full consolidation, SCF appears to favor annexation as the preferred method. While SCF is willing to consider a contractual arrangement, it emphasized that any agreement must include full cost recovery. In an annexation scenario, some of SCFD4's deployment goals may surpass the service levels currently maintained by SCF, potentially making them unfeasible within the annexation framework.

In summary, SCF presents itself as a capable and strategic partner for SCFD4, with strengths in administrative support, training, operational efficiency, and support services. The current positive relations between SCF and SCFD4 provide a solid foundation for collaboration, though the level of exposure to each other's operations has been minimal. As with any potential partnership, it is essential to consider cultural alignment, philosophical differences, and the state of existing relationships to ensure a successful and harmonious collaboration.

Strategies for Shared Services

SCFD4 has explored regional consolidation options with the City of Everett by exploring the feasibility of forming a Regional Fire Authority. Several other feasible strategies exist, each with varying degrees of cost efficiency and service enhancement. Further analysis and careful consideration will be necessary once initial decisions are made regarding the type of consolidation effort.

Strategy A: Status Quo – Maintaining the status quo is a viable option for SCFD4, given its recent progress in addressing deficiencies and strong financial position. This approach allows for nuanced optimization while avoiding major disruptions. However, it may miss opportunities for improvement through consolidation.

Strategy B: Contract for Services – A contract-for-services approach offers flexibility and can be terminated if not beneficial. It can be applied to specific functions or all operational functions. This strategy may allow SCFD4 to retain its ability to levy funds for its capital projects, benefitting both parties.

Strategy C: Merger – This strategy would involve creating a single fire district by dissolving SCFD4 and transferring its assets and employees to SRFR. Tax rates would be equalized, potentially impacting taxpayers. Stronger relationships and better collaboration between both organizations are essential for a successful merger.

Strategy D: Regional Fire Authority (RFA) – Creating an RFA requires a planning committee, public engagement, legal considerations, and a financial plan. It offers efficiency and improved service but involves a time-consuming process and broader voter support. Additionally, SRFR may view the RFA process as unnecessary, while SCFD4 sees an opportunity for active involvement.

Strategy E: Annexing into South Snohomish County Fire and Rescue Regional Fire Authority – Annexing into an established Regional Fire Authority offers the advantage of streamlined governance and resource allocation, leveraging the RFA's existing infrastructure and administrative efficiencies. This integration can lead to enhanced service delivery and standardized protocols benefiting the community through more coordinated and effective fire and emergency services.

In evaluating consolidation options, SCFD4 should carefully weigh the benefits against the challenges, considering time, effort, and uncertainties associated with each strategy.

Recommendations

Based on the study findings and stakeholder input it is recommended that SCFD4 adopt a phased approach regarding regional consolidations. Initially, SCFD4 should maintain the current status while preparing for a transition towards Strategy B. This transitional approach involves exploring opportunities for greater efficiencies and enhanced services through functional consolidation, facilitated by inter-local cooperative agreements. The primary focus should be on partnerships that would enhance SCFD4's capability to provide fire code/fire marshal services to the City of Snohomish, followed by the consolidation of training divisions and optimizing related resources, whilst fostering a unified agency culture. This approach aligns with SCFD4's commitment to continuous improvement and strategic evolution while ensuring seamless service delivery to the community.

The recommendation for a phased approach stems from the lack of unity within SCFD4's membership regarding an immediate full consolidation. Additionally, the current state of communication and relationships between SCFD4 and SRFR, both administratively and among labor is a critical factor. The phased approach considers the current absence of labor support of a full consolidation or merger, avoiding potential disruptions and maintaining a positive workplace environment. Prioritizing this approach serves as a strategic steppingstone towards regionalization, allowing SCFD4 to evolve progressively and build a foundation for long-term success through collaboration and efficient service delivery.

It is also important to note that SCFD4's recent adoption of a strategic plan containing goals related to operational improvements closely aligns with this recommendation. The strategic plan emphasizes the importance of continually seeking efficient means of serving the community, including the objective evaluation of consolidation opportunities. Prioritizing elements of this plan as a path forward could accomplish the desired goals and enhance stakeholder engagement while advancing the organization's journey towards regionalization.

Considerations for a Full Consolidation

The recommendation is to pursue a phased approach toward consolidations. However, there are benefits to a full consolidation or formal merger between SCFD4 and SRFR or SCF. The decision lies with the governing board, which should weigh the benefits against the current state of readiness. Both SRFR and SCF are viewed as suitable partners due to their compatibility and capabilities. Initially, a contractual relationship is recommended for reasons discussed in the recommendations section of this report. Positive relationships, labor union support, and public trust are all crucial to the success of a full consolidation. If a full consolidation is pursued, a strategic planning process is advised.

INTRODUCTION

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank the following individuals and groups for their contributions to the Snohomish County Fire District No. 4 Fire Department Assessment and Options Analysis Report:

- The commissioners for commissioning and providing guidance for this project.
- Fire Chief Don Waller for his leadership and valuable insights.
- IAFF Local 2694, particularly Union President Chris Jorve, for assistance in developing a clear understanding the organizational culture.
- Fire Chief Kevin O'Brien and the administrative team at Snohomish Regional Fire and Rescue for their assistance in exploring collaboration options.
- Fire Chief Robert Eastman and Commissioner Edward Widdis from South County Fire.
- All other contributors, both internal and external to the fire department, for their essential assistance and cooperation in data gathering and research.

Your support and dedication were essential to the successful completion of this report

Project Initiation

The project began with the collection of information related to SCFD4's financial, operational, infrastructure, and programs. To supplement the current conditions analysis, consultant reports from previous assessments of SCFD4's community risk and operational performance were utilized. Subsequently, information provided by SRFR and SCF was evaluated to determine their suitability as a potential partners for collaboration or shared services.

Information and findings were cross-referenced with Washington State laws and regulations, National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standards, Commission on Fire Accreditation International (CFAI) self-assessment criteria, and widely recognized best practices within the fire and EMS services.

Stakeholder Input

In-person interviews and meetings with approximately three dozen individuals were conducted to gather information from key stakeholders to provide context for the findings and recommendations identified within this study. The purpose of these interviews was to gain an understanding of the current conditions at SCFD4, as well as opinions regarding the potential partnership opportunities with SRFR and/or SCF. General topics discussed during each interview included:

- Perceived strengths and weaknesses of the current system
- Opportunities for enhancement to the current system

- Opportunities for enhancements through consolidation
- Future challenges that may warrant attention

Interviews with SCFD4 stakeholders included, but were but not limited, to the following individuals:

- SCFD4 Elected Officials
- SCFD4 Labor Representatives IAFF, Local 2694
- SCFD4 Executive Leadership Team
- SCFD4 Training Personnel
- SCFD4 Administrative Support Personnel
- City of Snohomish Mayor
- City of Snohomish City Administrator
- SRRF Board Chair
- SRRF Fire Chief
- SRRF Executive Leadership Team
- SRRF Union President IAFF, Local 2781
- SCF Fire Chief
- SCF Commissioner/Intergovernmental Committee Chair

Organization Overview

History and Formation

The first organized fire company was established in August of 1888 with donations from local citizens. Snohomish County Fire Protection District No. 4 was established by a vote of the people in 1942. The City of Snohomish annexed into the District in 2003.

General Description

SCFD4 is classified as a career fire department per NFPA 1710 definition, comprised primarily of career full-time and a small contingent of full-time-equivalent (Part-Paid firefighters) station-based personnel immediately available to comprise at least 50 percent of an initial full alarm assignment.

Geography and Demographics

SCFD4 is situated in the southwestern part of Snohomish County, Washington, approximately 30 miles northeast of Seattle. It shares borders with Snohomish Regional Fire and Rescue to the north and south, Snohomish County Fire District No. 16 to the east, South County Fire to the southwest, and the City of Everett to the northwest.

SCFD4 is centered around the City of Snohomish and the unincorporated areas surrounding the city. Encompassing an area of 62 square miles, the District is home to 29,777 residents, which includes the 10,151 residents of the City of Snohomish.¹ Snohomish is a historic city that preserves its historical heritage through well-preserved buildings, downtown streets, and a unique charm that attracts visitors and residents alike.

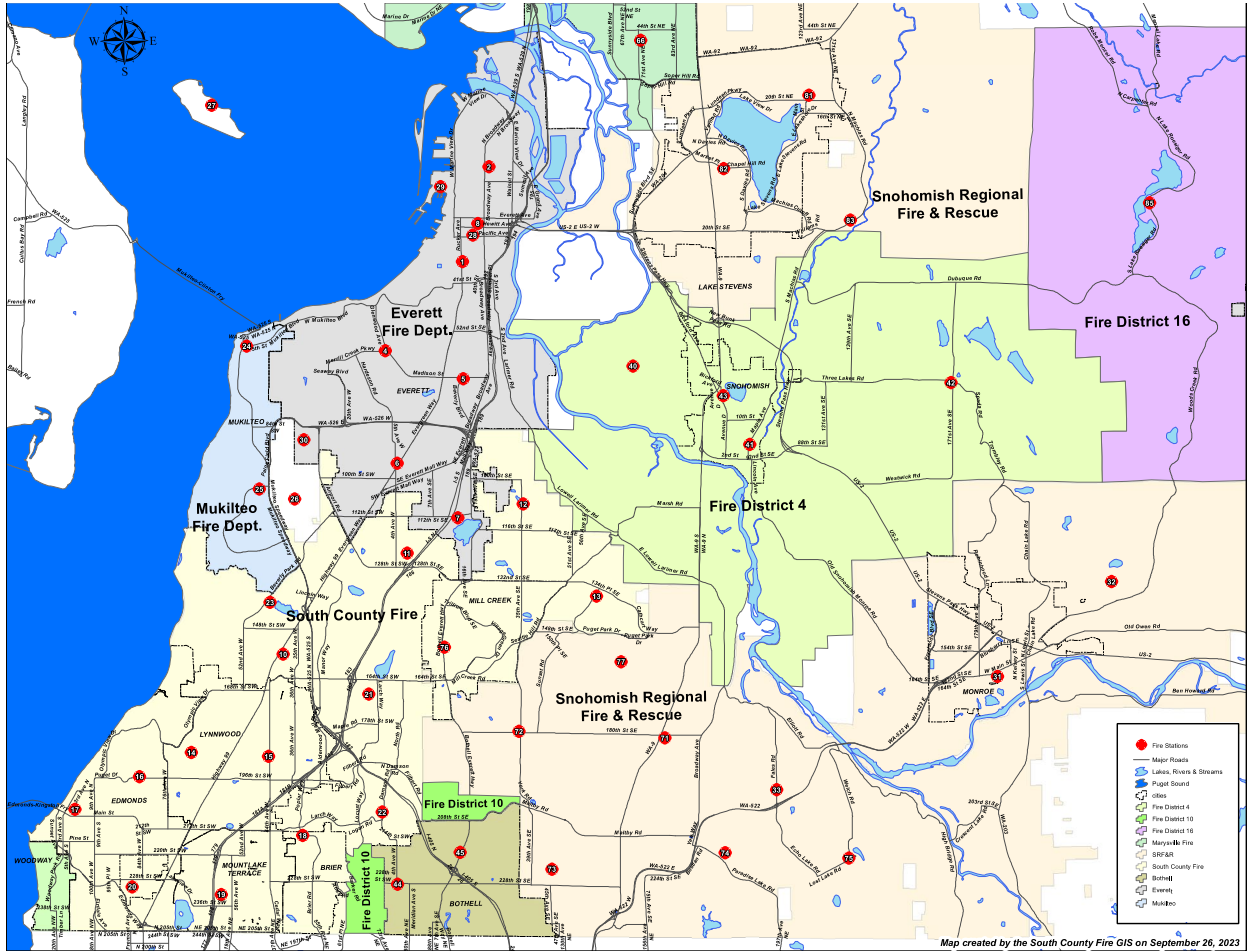
As part of the larger Snohomish River Valley, the District is surrounded by rolling hills and valleys. The natural setting of the District is characterized by a picturesque landscape, abundant waterways, and a mix of rural and suburban elements. The Snohomish River flows through the City of Snohomish, offering scenic views and recreational opportunities.

The weather is influenced by the Pacific Northwest's temperate climate, characterized by relatively mild, wet winters and warm, dry summers. The area receives a substantial amount of rainfall throughout the year.

SCFD4 also encompasses significant areas of agricultural lands, especially along the banks of the Snohomish River. These areas support farming activities, and the area is known for producing crops such as berries, dairy products, and various other agricultural products.

¹ Population data sourced from Washington State Office of Financial Management.

Figure 1: Map of SCFD4 Service Area



The racial and ethnic makeup of the District is diverse, with a mix of different backgrounds. Although the majority of the population is White there are significant communities of Asian, Hispanic/Latino, and African American residents, among others. The age distribution in the District includes residents of all age groups. It has a mix of families with children, working-age adults, and senior citizens.

The local economy thrives on a balanced mix of small businesses, essential services, and some light industries. Additionally, agriculture and tourism play key roles, capitalizing on the District's picturesque surroundings and historical attractions.

Governance and Lines of Authority

SCFD4 functions as a municipal corporation operating under the authorization of Title 52 of the Revised Code of Washington (RCW). Operating as a distinct legal entity, it possesses specific powers and responsibilities, separate from county or city government. As per RCW 52.02.020, the District is empowered to deliver fire prevention services, engage in fire suppression, provide emergency medical services (EMS), and execute other activities aimed at safeguarding life and property.

The District's governance is overseen by a Board of Commissioners consisting of three individuals. The typical responsibilities of this Board include:

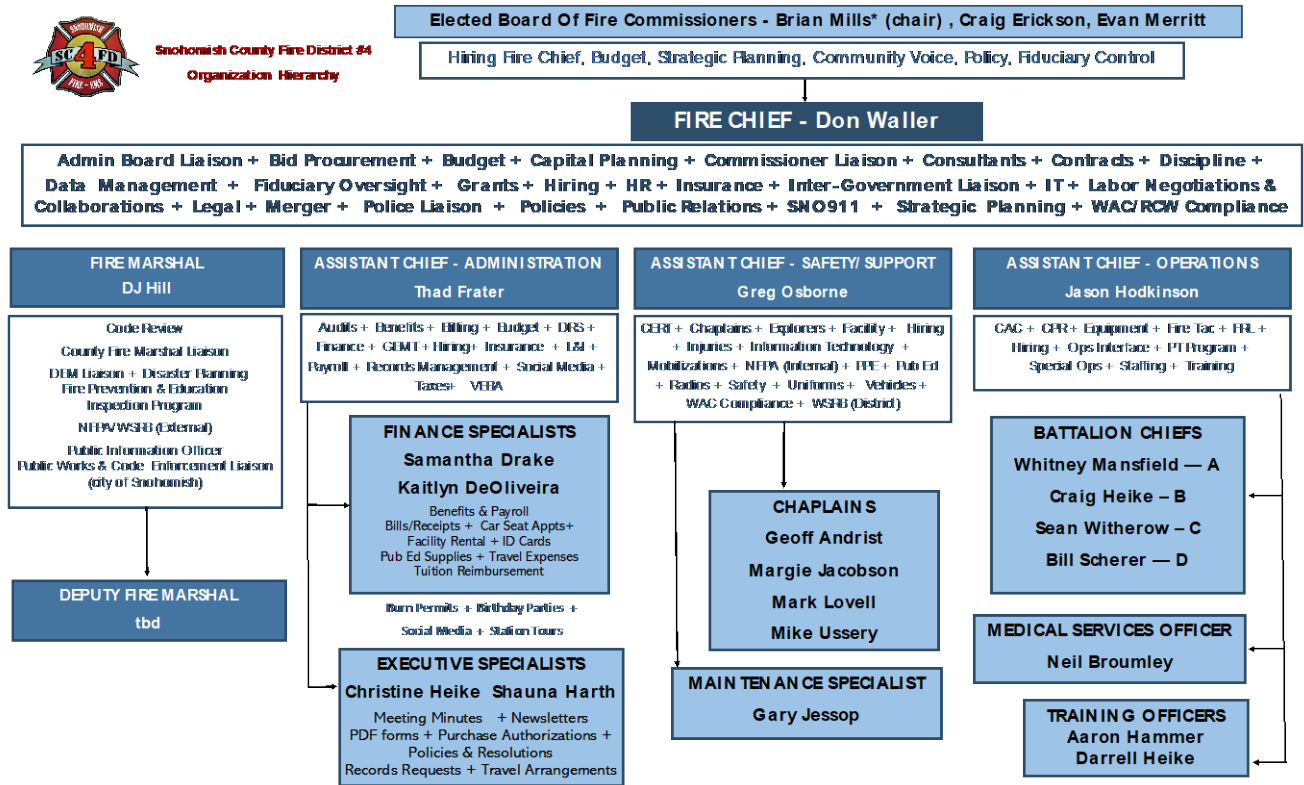
- Defining service levels and establishing organizational objectives.
- Granting approval for budgets, tax levies, and determining funding levels.
- Formulating policies and endorsing procedures.
- Steering strategic planning efforts.
- Acting as the agency's representative to the public.

Board meetings are convened on the second Monday of each month. The Fire Chief is an at-will employee and holds the position of reporting directly to the Board of Commissioners. Full-time firefighters are members of the International Association of Firefighters (IAFF) Local #2694 with separate collective bargaining agreements for the Battalion Chief and Firefighters and Officers.

Organizational Design

The organizational structure of SCFD4 is consistent with traditional fire service organizations. A full-time Fire Chief leads the department. Additional full-time administrative staff includes three Assistant Chiefs, one Medical Services Officer, two Training Officers, one Maintenance Specialist, and two office support staff. Operational line staff is comprised of 39 full-time firefighters and between 5-12 part-paid firefighters.

Figure 2: SCFD4 Organizational Chart



Foundational Policy Documents

Administrative and operational decision-making within the SCFD4 is guided by foundational policy documents. These documents serve as crucial references, outlining defined job descriptions, policies, and administrative roles. To ensure effectiveness and adaptability, policies are subject to regular review and updating. This process occurs periodically or as needed to facilitate continual improvement and to accurately reflect any changes in the operating environment.

Mission, Vision, Values - Goals and Objectives

SCFD4 has not published a formal mission or vision statement; however, the organization has embraced four core values to direct its efforts within the community and within the agency. These values are Proficiency, Balance, Collaboration, and Resilience. Detailed information on how these values were incorporated into service delivery goals and future planning can be found in SCFD4’s 2021 Strategic Plan.

In addition to the strategic plan, SCFD4 has recently developed a Community Risk Assessment and Standards of Coverage. The organization is also actively planning for Capital Equipment Replacement and Capital Facility Replacement and/or Improvement initiatives. The following provides additional detail on these planning efforts

Standards of Coverage

In 2021, SCFD4 contracted with CityGate Associates LLC, to perform a Community Risk Assessment, Facility Assessment, and a Standards of Coverage Analysis².

A Standards of Coverage (SOC) is a comprehensive document that outlines the critical aspects of the fire department's service delivery. It is a strategic planning tool that assesses and analyzes various elements of fire department operations to ensure they are aligned with community needs and expectations.

For SCFD4 this process was a vital foundation for its formal strategic planning process, capital facility replacement/improvement plan development, and other efforts to enhance emergency response capabilities, optimize resource allocation, and ensure transparency and accountability.

Strategic Planning

In 2021, SCFD4 adopted a comprehensive Strategic Plan³. The plan focused on four topic areas and 15 specific goals designed to improve Operations, Community Relationships, Personnel and Culture, and Systems and Resources.

Washington Surveying & Rating Bureau

The District recently underwent a public protection classification assessment conducted by the Washington Surveying & Rating Bureau (WSRB); a non-profit, independent organization dedicated to public service in Washington State.

WSRB evaluates fire departments based on a risk scale ranging from 1 to 10, where lower scores signify excellent protection (1 meaning outstanding fire protection, while 10 indicates a lack of recognized fire protection). This rating system is widely used by insurance companies to set premium rates for both residential and commercial properties. The Public Protection Class designation is determined by WSRB's evaluation of the fire department's proficiency in fire suppression and risk management.

Categories include:

- Fire Department (40% of score): distribution of fire stations, engine and ladder companies, pumping capacity, apparatus maintenance, department personnel staffing, and training.

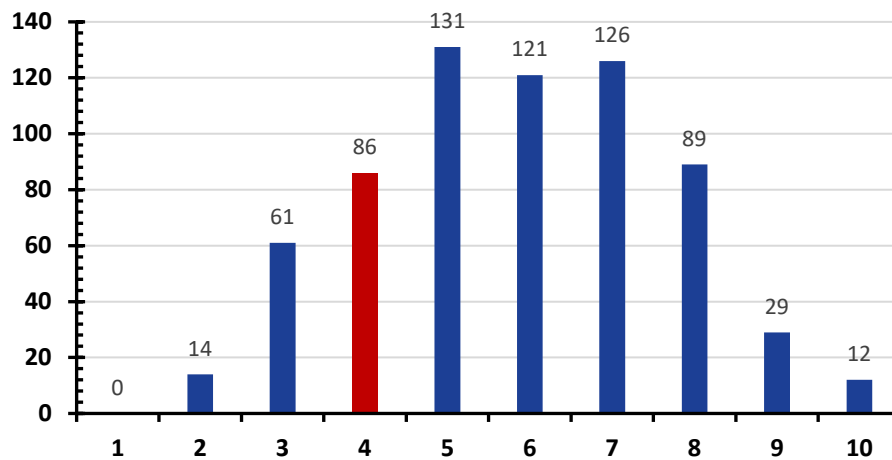
² SCFD4 Community Risk Assessment and Standards of Cover Analysis <https://www.snohomishfire.org/>

³ SCFD4 2021-2025 Strategic Plan <https://www.snohomishfire.org/>

- Water Supply (35% of score): adequacy of firefighting water supply, including water flow, hydrant locations, and system maintenance.
- Emergency Communications (9% of score): evaluation of the community’s 911 system ability to receive and handle calls for emergency services.
- Fire Safety Control (16% of score): fire prevention, public education, and building code enforcement.

WSRB conducts separate analyses and assigns distinct ratings for SCFD4’s unincorporated area and the municipal jurisdiction of the City of Snohomish. In the latest evaluation (effective October 1, 2021), both areas, whether inside or outside the City of Snohomish, received a WSRB Public Protection Class 4 (indicated by the red bar). The figure below illustrates these two ratings as a ratio compared to the overall fire service ratings in Washington State.

Figure 3: WSRB Public Protection Classifications of Fire Departments, WA



Improving the WSRB rating from the existing level 4 to a level 3 within the City of Snohomish is possible by making strategic investments in various areas. Such efforts would include bolstering company and officer training, acquiring, and deploying a ladder truck, and implementing comprehensive improvements in fire prevention and education programs. All of which are components of the strategic planning set for the near future.

Capital Infrastructure

The District operates from three strategically positioned fire stations to efficiently cover its service area. The District also has one unstaffed fire station used for storage and a training facility used by SCFD4 and other regional partners. The following is a brief description of each of these capital assets.

Figure 4: SCFD4 Capital Facilities

Facility	Image	Address	Date of Construction	Condition
Training Station		6319 Foster Slough Road	1990	Good
Station 41		427 Maple Avenue	1995	Good
Station 42		6724 171 st Avenue S.E.	1990	Fair
Station 43 (Headquarters)		1525 Avenue D	1984	Fair
Ray Lee Brown Training Center		6425 S. Machias Road	2011	Good-Excellent

Training Station

This facility which is situated approximately three miles northwest of the City of Snohomish, is a two-story former fire station covering an area of 6,096 square feet and sits on a 1.68-acre parcel owned by the District. Constructed 1990, this 33-year-old facility is no longer used for emergency response purposes and currently serves as an ancillary training facility and general storage.

The construction and location for this facility was based on an expectation of a zoning change that would have permitted denser development, which unfortunately did not materialize.

Consequently, this facility was repurposed as the location was poorly positioned to effectively serve as a response station for the more densely populated areas of the District.

In its current state, the facility can be considered in good condition, but it falls short of ever meeting the District's anticipated needs as a response facility. However, there have been discussions regarding the feasibility of using this site as a regional training office. The building could be reconfigured to create office spaces, meeting rooms and classrooms.

Station 41

Station 41, situated in the southeastern section of the City of Snohomish, is a single-story fire station spanning 4,540 square feet. The station is located on a 0.41-acre parcel and until recently was jointly owned by the City and the District.

Inside the facility, there are three sleeping quarters and two apparatus bays. There are three personnel stationed at this location, who cross staff an engine and a medic/aid unit. While the station is in good condition overall, it falls short of meeting current seismic safety requirements and does not adequately accommodate the District's present or anticipated future space needs as a response facility. It lacks the capacity to increase staffing levels or house specialized response apparatus or equipment, such as a ladder truck and secondary response units (brush-truck, water tender, rescue, etc.).

Despite being the newest of the District's four facilities, the District is currently in the process of relocating Station 41. The decision to move the facility is prompted by the limitations imposed by the small parcel size and the inability to house the desired ladder truck, centralized Battalion Chief response, other secondary response units, and space for stocking of supplies and equipment. By relocating the station, the District aims to ensure it can better meet the evolving demands of the service area and provide enhanced response capabilities to the City of Snohomish and surrounding community.

Station 42

Station 42 is positioned approximately six miles east of the City of Snohomish, and it is a two-story building spanning 7,500 square feet. The station is situated on an approximately 4.5-acre parcel owned by the District.

Within the facility, there are five sleeping quarters and three apparatus bays. Presently, three personnel are stationed at this location, who cross-staff an Engine, Medic/Aid unit, and a Brush Truck.

Though the station is in good condition overall, it does not fully meet current seismic safety requirements and lacks the standard features commonly found in modern fire stations. Improvements or potentially the replacement of this facility may be necessary to ensure optimal safety and functionality for the personnel and equipment housed within the facility.

Station 43

Station 43, serving as the District's headquarters, is located within the City of Snohomish. The facility is a substantial two-story, 12,832 square foot building, situated on a 0.7-acre parcel. Additionally, the station includes a separate education annex, a single-story 5,441 square foot building, featuring a physical fitness workout area and public meeting rooms.

This station is home to the administrative staff and has five sleeping quarters for emergency responders and six apparatus bays. Currently, four emergency personnel are stationed here, including an on-duty Battalion Chief and three fire fighters/officer who cross-staff various essential units, such as an Engine, Medic/Aid unit, Brush Truck, and Water Tender.

While the facility remains operational, it faces challenges. Overall, it can be categorized as being in fair to poor condition, unable to meet the District's anticipated needs adequately. Notably, it lacks the capacity to accommodate a ladder truck or other specialized response apparatus or equipment. Furthermore, the station fails to comply with seismic safety requirements and lacks an automatic fire sprinkler system. Additionally, it lacks many features found in modern fire stations.

Considering the deficiencies and limitations of the current facility, the replacement of Station 43 is desired to ensure optimal safety and functionality for the personnel and equipment housed within it. An updated and improved facility would better cater to the District's evolving needs and enhance the effectiveness of emergency response operations in the area.

Until recently, the facility was jointly owned by the City of Snohomish and the District. However, a recent agreement has been reached with the city, resulting in a division of the parcel. As a result, the station will now be owned by the District, while the annex will belong to the city. This arrangement grants the District the authority to enhance or even replace the facility as needed, facilitating future improvements.

Ray Lee Brown Training Center

The Ray Lee Brown Training Center is located northeast from the center of the City of Snohomish. This facility sits on a 5.26-acre parcel and contains numerous fire service training props and is capable of live fire training scenarios. The site is heavily used by SCFD4 and other regional partners. SCFD4 and SRFr are working on an agreement that will make the two agencies the primary users of the facility with annual contributions going towards upkeep and capital improvements of the facility.

Community Risk Assessment

The 2021 Standards of Cover analysis, performed by Citygate Associates, LLC, included a community risk assessment for SCFD4. The following is a summary of Citygate’s findings regarding the values at risk and hazards likely to impact the District’s service area yields the following:

- The District serves a diverse urban/suburban/rural population with densities ranging from fewer than 500 to more than 6,000 people per square mile, over a widely varied land use pattern.
- The District’s population is projected to increase approximately 10 percent to about 32,000 by 2035.
- The District’s service area includes a large inventory of residential and non-residential buildings to protect.
- The District has economic and other resource values to be protected, as identified in this assessment.
- No single mass warning system exists in Snohomish County to alert the public of disaster or emergency information in a timely manner.
- The District’s overall risk for five hazards related to emergency services provided range from Low to High, as summarized in the following table.

Figure 5: Overall Risk by Hazard Type

Hazard	Planning Zone		
	Sta. 41	Sta. 42	Sta. 43
Building Fire	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Vegetation/Wildland Fire	Low	Moderate	Low
Medical Emergency	High	High	High
Hazardous Materials	Low	Low	Low
Technical Rescue	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate

Service Delivery & Performance

This section of the report focuses on how well service is delivered within SCFD4 from a response performance standpoint. Information and analysis provided by the District and gleaned from its 2021 Standards of Coverage document were used to describe service delivery and performance. A more detailed analysis of the service delivery can be found in the Standards of Coverage analysis which is available on the District's website.

Emergency Services Provided

The District provides a wide range of traditional fire department services, including fire suppression (Structural and Wildland), Basic Life Support (BLS) and Advanced Life Support (ALS) Emergency Medical Services, ambulance transport, and various rescue response services.

The District encompasses significant areas classified as urban/wildland interface, posing a potential hazard for wildland fires. In response, the District has strategically deployed and cross-staffed multiple Type 5 and 6 wildland fire apparatus and actively trains personnel to attain red card⁴ certification levels. The District participates in regional mobilizations for wildland fire events. This allows for crews to gain valuable experience not currently available due to the low incidence of these types of fires within the District.

The District also provides initial response for hazardous materials incidents and receives technical and operational support from the Snohomish County Hazardous Materials Response Team which operates under a tiered response system with hazmat units strategically placed throughout the county. The District provides financial support to the team to qualify as an affiliate member of the program.

The District is developing an internal multi-discipline technical rescue capability to provide initial response to swift water, trench, high and low angle rope, confined space, trench rescue operations. The District is enhancing its technical rescue capabilities through training and certification of crew members in the various technical disciplines. To augment current capabilities, the District receives support from the multi-agency Snohomish County Technical Rescue Team.

⁴ Red Card certification qualifies a person to fight wildland fire with a federal agency or on federal land. The red card system is also a family of wildland fire training courses and corresponding certification that can be applied to wildland firefighting in a local fire district.

Service Deployment

Resources and Staffing

The current deployment model of the District includes three engines, cross-staffed medic/aid units, and other specialized units. These resources are spread across three fire stations, each with a minimum of three responders. Additionally, there is one 24-hour Battalion Chief (BC) in operation, resulting in a daily minimum staffing of 10 personnel across the three staffed fire stations.

Response Plan

The District utilizes a tiered response plan that calls for different types and numbers of resources depending on the incident or risk type. The closest and most appropriate resource units are dispatched according to the District's response plan, which includes automatic aid resources. It is important to note that automatic aid is required to achieve the desired Effective Response Force (ERF) staffing for structure fire, technical rescue, and aircraft crash incident types.

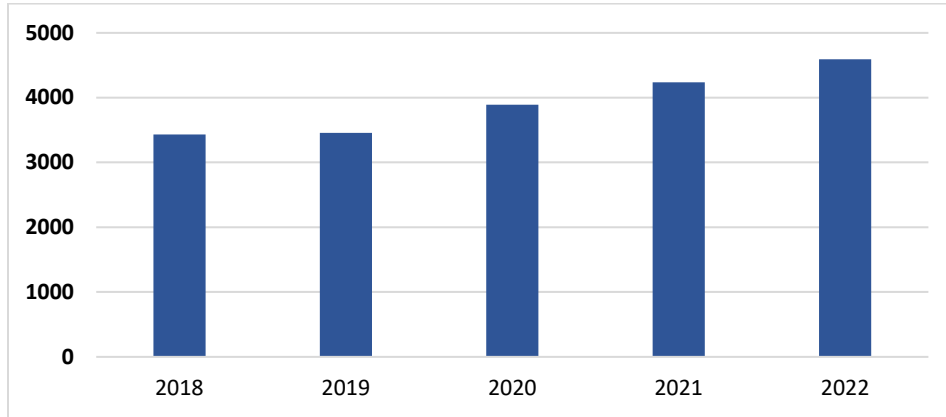
Figure 6: Response Plan by Type of Emergency

Incident Type	Response	Total Staffing
Structure Fire-Residential	3 Engines, 1 Truck or 4 th Engine, 1 Medic/Aid Unit, 1 BC	16
Structure Fire-Commercial	4 Engines, 1 Truck*, 1 Medic Unit, 1 Aid Unit, 2 BCs	23
Medical Emergency	BLS: 1 Aid Unit (BLS) or 1 Medic Unit (ALS)	3
	ALS: 1 Medic Unit (ALS) plus 1 Engine or Aid Unit	3-6
	Cardiac Arrest: 2 Medic Units (ALS), 1 BC, and 1 Engine	7-10
Vegetation Fire	1 Engine, 2 Brush Trucks, 1 Water Tender, 1 BC	11
Vehicle Fire	1 Engine	3
Vehicle Collision	2 Engines, 2 Medic Units, 1 BC	13
Hazardous Materials	1 Engine, 1 Aid Unit, 1 BC	7
Technical Rescue	3 Engines, 1 Tech Rescue, 1 HazMat*, 1 Medic Unit, 1 Aid Unit, 1 BC	22
Aircraft Crash	3 Engines, 1 Medic Unit, 1 Aid Unit, 1 BC	16

Service Demand

The District provided five years of incident and response data for the period from January 1, 2018, through December 31, 2022. In that time the demand for service has increased by approximately 34 percent as depicted in the following figure.

Figure 7: SCFD4 Service Demand (2018-2022)



In 2022, the District responded to 4,594 incidents, for an average daily service demand of 12.58 incidents. Of these, 2.19 percent were fire incidents, 61.53 percent were EMS incidents, and 36.28 percent were other incident types. The following figure uses the National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS) incident categories to detail the nature of service demand for the District.

Figure 8: Service Demand by NFIRS Category (2022)

NFIRS Category	Count	% of Total
1—Fire	101	2.20%
2—Rupture/Explosion	9	0.20%
3—Rescue/EMS	2827	61.54%
4—Hazardous Condition	82	1.78%
5—Service Call	517	11.25%
6—Good Intent Call	875	19.05%
7—False Alarms	172	3.74%
8—Severe Weather/Natural Disaster	5	0.11%
9—Other Incidents	6	0.13%
Total (2022)	4,594	100.00%

Station Workload

As discussed, SCFD4 operates out of three stations where multiple units are cross staffed by three personnel. Station 41 is the busiest station followed by Station 43 and then Station 42. The SOC analyzed the station demand to calculate the relative workload for each station. The results of that analysis showed an overall hourly workload of 12.92%, 11.31%, and 5.28% for Stations 41, 43, and 42 respectively. The International Association of Firefighters (IAFF) and International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) recommend fire departments consider adding additional staffed units when utilization of a unit or station exceeds 25-30%. Workloads greater than the recommended levels begin to diminish the ability to complete other responsibilities such as training, inspections, and apparatus and station maintenance. In the case of SCFD4 none of the three stations have workload that would be high enough to require additional units.

Concurrent Calls for Service

Another way to look at resource workload is to examine the number of times multiple incidents happen within the same timeframe in each station area. In the 2021 SOC, incident response data during the study period (2018-2020) was examined to determine the frequency of concurrent incidents. In 2020, 31.08 percent of District incidents occurred while one or more other incidents were underway, as shown in the following table.

Figure 9: Concurrent Incident Activity (2020)

Number of Concurrent Incidents	Percentage
2 or more	31.08%
3 or more	5.78%
4 or more	0.92%

In larger jurisdictions, concurrent incidents in different station areas have minimal operational impact. In smaller agencies concurrent incidents can strain available resources and affect the ability to assemble an Effective Response Force (ERF) in a timely manner. More importantly, when concurrent incidents occur within a single station area, there can be significant delays in response times, as responding unit(s) must come from a more distant station. Stations 41 and 43 have experienced the highest number of concurrent incidents within a single station area, averaging 200-300 incidents each over the past few years. While the overall workload may not indicate a need for additional staffing, the impact of the number of concurrent calls for service justifies the need for an additional unit.

To address this issue, SCFD4 has submitted a SAFER Grant⁵ application to secure funding for additional personnel. If approved, this funding will enable the staffing of a dedicated engine at Station 41, significantly reducing the impact resulting from concurrent calls for service.

Response Performance

The District's operational performance has been a focal point for management. The performance for the three-year period of 2018-2020 was measured, and the results of the analysis were detailed in the 2021 Standards of Cover document. This analysis looked at six components: call processing time, crew turnout time, first unit travel time, dispatch to arrival time, and call to arrival time. The District has continued to monitor performance and implement strategies to improve performance where possible. Below is a brief discussion of each element.

Call Processing Time

Call processing time is the measurement of the time from receipt of a call for service to the completion of the dispatch notification process. Best practice for call processing for most priority calls for service is 64 seconds or less 90 percent of the time.

The 2021 analysis of the Standards of Cover revealed that call processing times averaged 3 minutes and 40 seconds (3:40) for District-originating calls during the 2018-2020 evaluation period. Calls for service are handled by SNO911, the District's public safety answering point (PSAP).

Collaborating with SNO911 and other emergency service agencies, strategies to improve call processing times were evaluated. In 2022, SNO911 implemented rapid dispatch protocols (RDP) in the District's service area. Under RDP, call takers promptly confirm essential details, including the address, phone number, and nature of the call, and immediately dispatch the closest and most appropriate available unit(s) without delay. Dispatchers stay connected with callers to gather additional information. As additional information is obtained dispatchers will provide pre-arrival updates to responders. If needed, additional resources are added to the response. This process of rapid dispatching ensures there is no delay in dispatching emergency units.

These efforts to improve call processing times have resulted in a dramatic improvement. In 2022, SNO911 reported a call processing time of one minute and nine seconds (1:09) 90 percent of the time. Through August 2023, call processing time improved further to 37 seconds 90 percent of the time.

⁵ The Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response Grants (SAFER) was created by FEMA to provide funding directly to fire departments to help them increase or maintain the number of trained, "front line" firefighters available in their communities.

Turnout Time

Turnout time is the measurement of the time from initial dispatch to the point at which the apparatus initiates its travel to the scene of the incident.

NFPA 1710 recommends a turnout time of 60 seconds 90 percent of the time for EMS incidents and 80 seconds 90 percent of the time for fire incidents. While attaining this standard has proven to be challenging for many fire departments, it establishes a reference point to which they can aspire.

In the 2021 Standards of Cover document, a turnout time goal of two minutes and forty-five seconds (2:45) for fire and EMS incidents was used as a baseline. The District's turnout time performance for the three-year study period of 2018-2020 was two minutes and forty-seven seconds (2:47), falling well short of the NFPA recommendation.

Turnout time is the one aspect of total response time that can be influenced by emergency responders. Numerous factors can impact turnout time, including but not limited to cross-staffing of apparatus, station design, donning appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), time of the call, and responder awareness of performance.

The District has taken a proactive approach to address its turnout time performance. This includes raising awareness of turnout time performance, establishing a turnout time standard of two minutes (2:00), providing an additional set of PPE to be placed on both fire suppression and cross-staffed units. Turnout time will also be considered in the station design criteria of the facility improvement planning.

The efforts undertaken by the District have started to have a positive effect. Turnout time has been trending downward over the last few years, with a 14-second reduction in the 90 percent turnout time performance. Management has indicated plans to continue working to eliminate obstacles that impact turnout time.

First Unit Travel Time

First unit travel time is the measurement of time from initial apparatus movement until arrival at the scene of the incident. Best practice for travel time is 4:00 minutes or less 90 percent of the time in urban areas and 8:00 minutes or less 90 percent of the time in rural areas.

In 2022, the travel time for incidents occurring within the City was six minutes and twenty-two seconds (6:22) 90 percent of the time. The travel time in rural areas was ten minutes and twenty-one seconds (10:21) 90 percent of the time. Travel time is dictated by the distance between the location of an incident and the location of the fire station where the response is dispatched. The SCFD4 service area is approximately 62 square miles, other than adding additional fire stations this element of performance cannot be significantly improved.

Dispatch to Arrival Time

Dispatch to arrival time is the measurement of time from dispatch to the arrival of the first apparatus on the scene. The District's 2021 Standards of Cover recommended an appropriate dispatch to arrival time for urban areas to be six minutes (6:00) 90 percent of the time, and for rural areas, it is ten minutes (10:00) 90 percent of the time.

The Standard of Cover analysis determined that the urban dispatch to arrival time was seven minutes and fifty-six seconds (7:56) 90 percent of the time, and for rural areas, it was thirteen minutes and thirty-eight seconds (13:38) 90 percent of the time. This performance does not meet national standards or the District's established policy goals.

Dispatch to arrival data for 2022 indicated a 59-second improvement in rural areas and a 34-second increase in the city. It is important to note that measuring improvement with such a small sample set may not accurately reflect the impact of all efforts to improve response times. Continued efforts and performance tracking should continue the trend of improvement.

Call to Arrival Time

Call to arrival time is the measurement of time from the call for service to the arrival of the first apparatus on the scene. This time period takes into account all elements of the response time and is the true measurement of performance from a customer service standpoint.

The Standards of Cover analysis determined the call to arrival time for urban areas to be 10 minutes and 36 seconds (10:36) 90 percent of the time and 16 minutes and 29 seconds (16:29) 90 percent of the time for rural areas. These times are slower than the best practice threshold recommended in the Standards of Cover analysis.

2022 call to arrival time data was not provided for this study, and thus there was no opportunity to track improvement in this element. However, with the improvements made to call processing and turnout times, this performance metric would be worth tracking in the future.

Effective Response Force (ERF) Dispatch to Arrival

The ERF dispatch-to-arrival time, which includes crew turnout and travel duration, measures the time from when dispatch is completed to the arrival of the final ERF resource. Over a three-year study period (2018-2020), a full ERF, comprising either four engines or three engines and one ladder truck, one medic unit, and one chief officer, was assembled at an emergency incident five times. These five instances occurred exclusively within the City of Snohomish.

Figure 10: 90th Percentile Dispatch to ERF Arrival Performance (2018–2020)

Response Area	90 th Percentile Performance
City of Snohomish	13:09
District-Wide ⁶	13:09
Rural Area	N/A

In 2022, there were six incidents in which an ERF was assembled. The 90th percentile response performance for these incidents was fourteen minutes and eight seconds (14:08). The data provided did not specify the location of these incidents, whether they occurred in urban or rural areas. Additionally, it's essential to highlight that the number of incidents involving ERF assembly remains a notably small sample set.

Automatic and Mutual Aid

Snohomish County Fire Chiefs have adopted a policy of dispatching the closest unit, meaning the closest appropriate resource is sent to any incident, regardless of jurisdiction. These agreements lead to a coordinated and efficient response designed to minimize response times and deliver top-notch services. This approach optimizes the utilization of tax revenues while maintaining a seamless and high-quality emergency response system.

SCFD4 actively participates in this collective effort by aiding neighboring communities through this county-wide automatic aid agreement. In return, neighboring jurisdictions reciprocate with the same level of support. SCFD4's principal automatic aid partners include Snohomish Regional Fire and Rescue, City of Everett Fire Department, South County Fire, and Snohomish County Fire District 16.

Analyzing the total time dedicated to responding to automatic aid incidents throughout 2022, it reveals that the District contributed a cumulative aid duration of 454 hours while benefiting from 669 hours of assistance received. These figures underscore the benefit SCFD4 receives from its automatic aid partnerships. One of the key benefits is the timely response to areas distant from SCFD4 stations, ensuring that emergency incidents are addressed promptly and effectively. Additionally, these partnerships provide SCFD4 with additional units to complete an ERF (Emergency Response Force), enhancing its capacity to respond to complex and large-scale emergencies.

⁶ There were no incidents outside of the City of Snohomish during the study period where a complete ERF was assembled.

Among the automatic aid partners, SRFR stood out as the most active, with the two agencies exchanging a combined total of 830 hours of assistance. Notably, SRFR provided 151 more hours of assistance than it received. The following figure presents a detailed breakdown of the hours of aid provided and received between SCFD4 and its primary aid partners.

Figure 11: Aid Given/Received (Hours/Minutes/Seconds)

Jurisdiction	Aid Received	Aid Given	Net Aid
Everett Fire Department	67:39:22	10:26:12	-57:13:10
SCFD16	0:38:57	62:45:19	62:06:22
SRFR	490:42:59	339:12:38	-151:30:21
South County Fire	58:52:11	2:32:35	-56:19:36
Other	51:12:34	39:05:06	-12:07:28
Total	669:06:03	454:01:50	-215:04:13

Recommendations:

- Continue efforts to improve turnout time to continue identified improvement trend. Correcting identified obstacles, implementing performance benchmarks, and communicating performance can effectively reduce turnout time.
- Continue efforts to obtain additional personnel to staff a dedicated engine. The additional unit will greatly improve the impact of simultaneous calls on overall response performance.

Support Services

Training

A strong and comprehensive training program is a cornerstone of a successful fire department, essential for preparing personnel to carry out their responsibilities effectively and safely. Proper training not only ensures a high level of preparedness but also projects professionalism and fosters organizational pride. The following is an overview of the training program at SCFD4:

- **Financial Support:** SCFD4 allocates significant resources to training, with a budget of \$328,694 dedicated to training programs and an additional \$87,778 for a well-equipped training facility. This financial commitment underscores the importance placed on training within the department.
- **Dedicated Personnel:** The department has three dedicated personnel responsible for developing and conducting in-service training. Two Training Officers, both holding the rank of Captain, manage fire suppression-related training programs, while EMS training is overseen by a Medical Services Officer, also a Captain.
- **New Hire Training:** New firefighters undergo initial training through the regional Snohomish County Fire Training Academy (SCFTA). This academy operates under an interlocal cooperation agreement involving ten Snohomish County fire departments. The SCFTA is highly regarded, serving as a successful model of regional collaboration in training.

The commitment to training, financial resources, and dedicated personnel demonstrates SCFD4's dedication to maintaining a highly trained and prepared workforce. This investment ensures that personnel are well-prepared to handle the challenges they may encounter during emergency response operations.

Fire & Life-Safety Code Enforcement

Preventing fires and minimizing their impact through the installation of specific fire protection features in buildings is a proactive approach that significantly enhances community fire safety. The effective implementation and enforcement of fire codes and building safety regulations plays a critical role in maintaining a safe environment for those who live, work, and visit the community. The following is an overview of the current status and recent developments in fire code enforcement within SCFD4:

Current Situation

- Fire code adoption, inspection and enforcement activities within the District's unincorporated area fall under the jurisdiction of the Snohomish County Fire Marshal's Office.

- In the City of Snohomish, fire code adoption, inspections, and enforcement responsibilities are retained by the City. The City has adopted the 2018 Edition of the International Fire Code, supplemented by state and local amendments.
- While the City conducts plan reviews and inspections for new construction, it lacks a comprehensive program for inspecting and enforcing fire codes in existing buildings.

Recent Agreement

- In a recent development, SCFD4 and the City of Snohomish have entered into an agreement to delegate the responsibility for Fire Marshal and Fire Code services within the City to the District.
- Under this agreement, the District will collaborate closely with the City's Building Code Official to oversee the administration of fire codes.
- The responsibilities encompass various tasks, including conducting plan and site reviews for new construction, performing construction inspections, conducting building inspections, inspecting target hazard facilities, issuing special event permits, and conducting related inspections.
- It's important to note that the City will continue to serve as the Fire Code Official until such time as the District establishes the capability to assume these responsibilities fully.
- Additionally, the City will maintain its authority to adopt fire codes and amendments, as well as enforce violations related to fire codes.

This collaborative agreement signifies a proactive step toward enhancing fire code enforcement and building safety within the City of Snohomish. By working together, the District and the City aim to ensure that new and existing structures comply with fire protection regulations, contributing to increased fire safety and hazard mitigation in the community.

The District analyzed the various options for providing Fire Marshal services to the City. These options included outsourcing services to agencies with established programs such as South County Fire or SFRF, developing in-house capabilities, or adopting a hybrid approach that combines in-house personnel with contracted support from an agency with a more established program. Each of these approaches has its unique advantages and disadvantages. Contracting allows for a quicker deployment of services, while an in-house model fosters a closer relationship with the City.

After careful consideration, the District recently decided to create and fill a new full-time Fire Marshal position, opting for the in-house model or hybrid approach. The Fire Marshal will be responsible for developing and implementing fire prevention programs and services within the District. Additionally, the District is considering contracting with an outside agency for related support services such as plan review and fire code interpretation assistance when needed.

Public Education and Community Engagement

Promoting fire safety and life-saving behaviors within the community through public education programs is an essential component of a fire department's mission. The following is an overview of how SCFD4 currently approaches public education and community engagement:

Current Initiatives

- SCFD4 actively participates in community events, with an average of two engagements per week. This demonstrates a strong commitment to engaging with the community and raising awareness about fire safety.
- Despite temporary disruptions caused by the COVID-19 outbreak, the District has successfully reinstated important programs, such as CPR training and school education initiatives. Notably, the school program has expanded to include interactions with Junior High School students, ensuring that fire safety education reaches a broad range of age groups.
- The District maintains a modern and up-to-date website, providing valuable information and resources related to fire safety and emergency preparedness for the community.
- Regularly published newsletters contribute to keeping the community informed about relevant fire safety topics, events, and initiatives.
- Active engagement on social media platforms further extends the District's reach, allowing for timely dissemination of fire safety tips and important announcements.
- Offering infant car seat installations, and providing blood pressure checks at all three fire stations are additional services that underscore the District's dedication to community well-being.

Collective Efforts

While the District does not currently have dedicated personnel exclusively responsible for public education and community outreach, the collaborative efforts of its team members have proven highly successful in engaging with the community. By leveraging the skills and dedication of its existing staff, SCFD4 has effectively maintained and expanded its public education programs and community engagement activities.

The District's commitment to public education and community safety is evident in its diverse range of initiatives and activities. Through these efforts, SCFD4 continues to empower community members with the knowledge and resources they need to make informed decisions about fire safety, ultimately contributing to a safer and more resilient community.

The recent approval of the levy lift is evidence of a supportive community, likely due in part to the District's engagement efforts.

Fire Cause and Origin Investigations

Accurately determining the cause and origin of a fire is a crucial aspect of a fire prevention program. When fires are intentionally set, identifying and prosecuting those responsible is paramount to prevent additional fires and potential loss of life. Moreover, identifying causes and potential trends allows the fire department to provide targeted public information and fire prevention education to prevent recurrence.

Throughout the jurisdiction, fire cause and origin investigations are conducted by the Snohomish County Fire Marshal's Office (SCFMO) for fire investigation services. The SCFMO has authority and jurisdiction for these services in the unincorporated areas of the District. Fire investigations within the City of Snohomish are performed by the SCFMO through a contract for investigation services.

Given the relatively small number of fire incidents, the District would likely never have the workload to justify establishing its own investigation program.

Other Services

The District has a Maintenance Specialist who takes care of most facility maintenance responsibilities and needs. For apparatus and vehicle maintenance, the District contracts with SRFR. IT services are also contracted out from external service providers.

Finance

Maintaining a sound financial condition is crucial for sustaining the provision of critical life safety and emergency services at a satisfactory level. A data-driven model was employed to comprehensively evaluate the District's financial policies, available resources, and expenditure practices.

In this section, the background information furnished by the District was utilized to portray the historical and current financial state. This involved a thorough review of revenues, expenses, and various financial indicators over the last five years (2019-23).

The analysis relied upon the financial documentation provided by the District as the primary source of information. However, supplementary information was sourced from the Washington State Auditor's Office, Snohomish County Assessor's Office, and other relevant sources. The survey table titled 'Budget & Finance,' found in Appendix B at the conclusion of this report, presents the specific information provided by the District.

Revenue Analysis

For a fire district that heavily depends on property taxes for its funding, having a dependable funding stream is of utmost significance. Property taxes offer a reliable and steady source of income, essential for meeting operational requirements, sustaining infrastructure, and delivering crucial services to the community.

Under Washington State law, fire districts are granted authority through RCW 52.16.130 and 52.16.140 to impose property taxes to fulfill its intended purposes. However, there are limitations on the extent to which fire districts can levy property taxes. Typically, the maximum allowed tax rate of the regular fire levy is one dollar and fifty cents per one thousand dollars of assessed value within the taxing district.

In addition to the regular fire levy, fire protection districts may also impose an EMS levy as outlined in RCW 84.52.069. However, this is contingent upon no other taxing jurisdiction within the district's boundaries having already imposed an EMS levy. The EMS levy is restricted to a maximum rate of fifty cents per thousand dollars of assessed value within the taxing district.

SCFD4 utilizes both a regular fire levy and an EMS levy as sources of funding for its services. The figure below shows the relative tax rates assessed by the District for the regular fire and EMS levies for the last five years.

Figure 12: SCFD4 Property Tax Rates, 2019–2023

Levy Type	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Fire Property Tax Levy Rate	1.2833	1.3968	1.4591	1.4191	1.1489
EMS Property Tax Levy Rate	0.3446	0.5000	0.4753	0.4400	0.3411
Total Property Tax Levy Rate	1.6279	1.8968	1.9344	1.8591	1.4900

Both the regular fire and EMS levies are subject to further restrictions on annual growth. Without voter approval, taxing districts may not increase the total amount collected by more than one percent annually or the rate of inflation, whichever is lower. The 101% limit restricts revenue growth, which creates a significant burden for jurisdictions that are heavily dependent on property taxes and whose costs are increasing more than one percent per year due to inflation, salary and benefit costs, and other factors.

When property values experience an annual increase of more than one percent within a jurisdiction, the imposition of a one percent levy limit exerts downward pressure on the maximum allowable levy rates. As a result, the jurisdiction is compelled to collect a lower rate than it previously did. This occurrence is illustrated in Figure 12 presented above.

If a taxing jurisdiction is collecting less than the maximum statutory levy rate allowed, it has the option to seek approval from a simple majority of voters to "lift" the total levy amount collected from the current assessed valuation by more than one percent. This process, known as a "lid lift," can result in an increase in the limit factor for a duration of one year or up to six consecutive years. However, the new levy rate cannot exceed the maximum statutory rate.

In 2017, the District's voters approved a multiyear lift of its regular fire levy, permitting an annual growth cap of six percent. This mandate was scheduled to conclude after the 2023 tax year, but in August 2023, voters approved a fresh lid lift proposal. The newly authorized provision allows the District to increase levy collections each year up to six percent over the next six years, provided the overall levy rate remains under the statutory threshold of one dollar and fifty cents per one thousand dollars of assessed value

Revenues generated from property taxes are affected by three components, the assessed value of the real and personal property subject to taxation, the tax rate being charged against that value, and the value of new construction added to the tax roll.

The limitation on property tax growth does not apply to new construction in the first year that the improvement comes onto the tax roll. This allows total revenue to grow at rates greater than the statutory limit factor. While new construction can be complicated to forecast, especially beyond the coming year, using historical values can provide a baseline for assumptions. The following figure shows the historical growth of the District's assessed value and inclusion of new construction onto the tax roll for the last five years.

Figure 13: SCFD4 Assessed Values, 2019-2023

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Fire Levy Assessed Value	\$4,981,387,680	\$5,269,181,201	\$5,685,641,329	\$6,241,051,943	\$8,210,959,890
AV Increase as % of Prior Year	N/A	5.78%	7.90%	9.77%	31.56%
EMS Levy Assessed Value	\$5,006,262,980	\$5,338,686,101	\$5,756,472,629	\$6,318,883,043	\$8,306,351,990
EMS AV Increase as % of Prior Year	N/A	6.64%	7.83%	9.77%	31.45%
New Construction Value	\$43,197,409	\$62,374,016	\$63,325,868	\$34,742,747	\$58,214,500
New Construction as % of Prior Year	N/A	44.39%	1.53%	-45.14%	67.56%

Historically, property taxes have been the primary source of revenue for the District, accounting for an average of 83% of its total revenue. This heavy reliance on property taxes highlights their significant role in funding the District's operations and maintaining its financial stability. However, it is important to recognize the additional revenue sources that contribute to the District's funding, namely ambulance transport fees and Ground Emergency Medical Transportation (GEMT) supplemental payments.

Ambulance transport fees and GEMT supplemental payments play a crucial role by contributing approximately 15% of the District's total revenue. These revenue streams are specifically tied to the provision of emergency medical services and ambulance transportation.

Ambulance transport fees are imposed on individuals or their insurance providers for the utilization of ambulance services. These fees directly generate revenue for the District, helping cover the costs associated with staffing, equipment, and operational expenses related to ambulance services. By collecting these fees, the District can offset some of the financial burden associated with providing high-quality emergency medical transportation.

GEMT supplemental payments are another important funding source for the District. GEMT is a government program that provides supplemental payments to publicly owned or operated providers of transportation of Medicaid beneficiaries to the nearest medical facility capable of meeting the emergency medical needs of the patient. Payments also supplement agencies for the costs associated with advanced and basic life support services provided before or during the act of transportation. The intent of this program is to cover the gap between the actual cost of providing services and the standard rate paid by Medicare.

Both ambulance transport fees and GEMT supplemental payments help the fire District maintain a sustainable financial position, enabling them to provide an adequate level of service. These revenue streams contribute to covering the expenses of staffing, training, equipment maintenance, and other operational costs associated with emergency medical services. Without these funding sources, the District would face significant challenges in delivering the necessary level of care and maintaining the required resources to respond effectively to medical emergencies.

The following figure provides an overview of the historical revenue collection for the last five years. Intergovernmental Revenues include the GEMT supplemental payments and wildland mobilization reimbursements. Charges for Goods and Services include ambulance and emergency aid services, CPR/First Aid training fees, and other services provided for a fee. The remaining miscellaneous portion of the District's revenues come from various sources such as interest income, medical insurance premium cost-share, facility rental, and other sources.

Figure 14: SCFD4 Operating Revenue Trend, 2019–2023

Revenue Type	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Real and Personal Property Tax - Fire	\$6,388,210	\$7,360,804	\$8,287,646	\$8,855,212	\$9,433,716
Real and Personal Property Tax - EMS	\$1,719,102	\$2,669,566	\$2,733,478	\$2,780,280	\$2,833,703
Intergovernmental Revenues	\$848,782	\$930,686	\$929,490	\$1,058,247	\$750,000
Charges for Goods and Services	\$1,087,854	\$741,198	\$923,279	\$935,055	\$850,000
Miscellaneous Revenues	\$292,140	\$130,229	\$111,089	\$196,817	\$144,750
Total Operating Revenue	\$10,336,088	\$11,832,483	\$12,984,982	\$13,825,611	\$14,012,169

Expense Analysis

From 2019 through the budget year 2023, the District experienced annualized average growth of 8.2% in total expenditures. The District's expenses are categorized into five main areas: Salary and Wages, Personnel Benefits, Operational Equipment and Supplies, Professional Services, and Intergovernmental Services. Among these categories, personnel-related costs represent the most substantial portion of the District's expenses, accounting for 84 percent of all operational expenses.

The following figures show District’s total operational expenses from 2019 through 2023.

Figure 15: SCFD4 Operating Expense Trend, 2019–2023

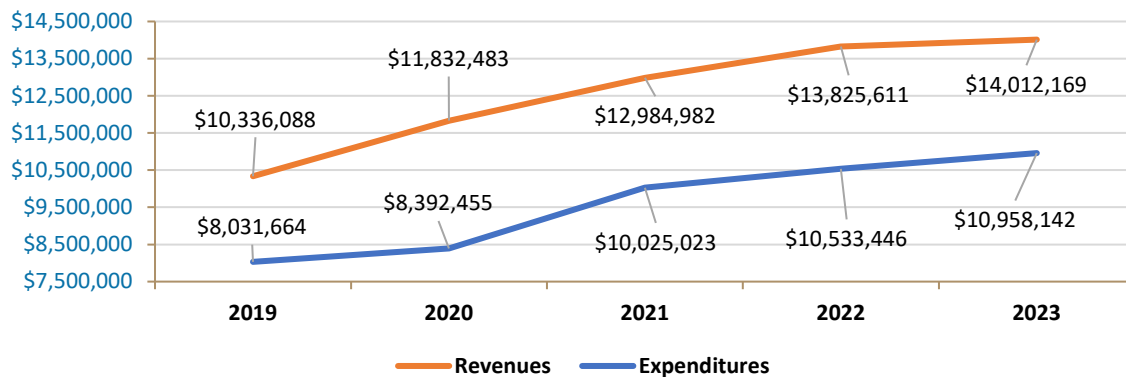
Expense Type	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Salaries & Wages	\$5,098,428	\$5,365,884	\$6,089,727	\$6,838,137	\$6,615,683
Personnel Benefits	\$1,586,112	\$1,779,214	\$2,123,776	\$2,183,710	\$2,367,960
Operational Equipment and Supplies	\$252,062	\$322,263	\$514,650	\$470,450	\$616,085
Professional Services	\$794,489	\$654,853	\$1,026,955	\$780,324	\$1,079,912
Intergovernmental Services ⁷	\$300,573	\$270,241	\$269,915	\$260,825	\$278,502
Total Expenses	\$8,031,664	\$8,392,455	\$10,025,023	\$10,533,446	\$10,958,142

⁷ Intergovernmental Services include SNOCOM Dispatch fees, election fees and costs, auditor fees, GEMT billing prep, and miscellaneous financial services.

In 2021 expenses jumped by 19.45% which significantly impacted the five-year expense average. Factors for the large increase in 2021 include changes made to staffing structure by adding new promoted positions and additional firefighter positions. This changes to staffing were designed to reduce the reliance on part-time firefighters and overtime. These changes added operational costs but allowed the District to end the practice of “Browning out” or temporarily closing fire stations due to vacancies. Other initiatives taken on to enhance operational capabilities and community outreach such as the completion of a Standard of Cover (SOC), a Strategic Plan, and several community outreach initiatives were achieved in 2021.

Over the past five years, the District has consistently maintained expenditures below the overall revenue generated. This prudent financial practice has significantly benefited the District by allowing it to allocate funds to reserves for use against future liabilities, thereby strengthening its financial position. The chart provided below offers a visual representation of the revenue-to-expenditure ratio, emphasizing this positive financial trend.

Figure 14: Revenues vs Operational Expenditures



In the last five years the District has collected \$15,050,603 more than its operational expenses. In the same period \$15,831,847 has either been used for capital purchases (\$2,030,093) or allocated to reserves (\$13,795,754). Through these transfers the District has made great progress in setting aside funds to address known liabilities such accrued leave, capital equipment replacement, and approximately \$12,000,000 for planned capital facility projects.

Fund Management

The District maintains its financial resources across five distinct funds, each serving a specific purpose and addressing various financial liabilities. The following provides a description of each fund, based on the information provided by the District:

General Expense Fund

The General Expense Fund is the primary operating fund of the District. It encompasses most day-to-day operations and covers expenses related to personnel, supplies, services, and administrative overhead. It also includes revenues from various sources, such as property taxes, fees, and grants, which are used to finance the District's ongoing operations and services. The various other reserve funds are funded through transfers from this fund as authorized by the Board of Commissioners.

Through Resolution #201, guidelines were set forth to establish the minimum funding requirements for the General Expense Fund. The primary aim of these guidelines is to ensure that the fund maintains adequate resources to support ongoing operations and address unexpected contingencies that may arise during the period between the regular receipt of tax revenues in April and October.

Capital Expense/Replacement Fund

The Capital Expense/Replacement Fund is established to accumulate resources specifically designated for the replacement, refurbishment, or acquisition of various types of vehicles and equipment. Sufficient funds are allocated to this fund during each budget cycle, ensuring that the fund adequately meets the financial requirements for maintaining equipment and apparatus replacement schedules.

Training Center Fund

The Training Center Fund is established through Resolution #486 for the purpose of funding the operation of the Ray Lee Brown Training Site. In establishing this fund, the Board wished to pay for that operation from a specific fund to track expenses related to the training site.

Capital Projects Fund

The Capital Projects Fund is established to accumulate resources specifically designated for capital projects. This fund allows the District to set aside funds over time to finance major infrastructure improvements, equipment purchases, facility expansions, and other long-term capital needs. By maintaining a separate reserve fund, the District ensures adequate resources are available to address capital requirements without disrupting the General Fund.

Leave Liability Fund

The Leave Liability Fund is specifically designated to set aside reserves for the liability associated with accrued employee leave balances, including vacation, sick leave, and various other types of paid time off. By setting aside funds for this purpose, the District can ensure that employees with outstanding accrued leave are compensated appropriately when they separate from employment without impacting the annual budget.

Originally this fund was established to include funding for post-retirement benefit obligations for one former LEOFF 1 employee. The District no longer has any LEOFF 1 liability thus the fund is solely maintained for the purpose of funding its leave liability.

Figure 16: SCFD4 Funds (Beginning Balances), 2019–2023

Fund Name	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
General Expense (770)	\$5,220,557	\$6,574,497	\$9,137,740	\$4,346,387	\$5,312,142
Capital Expense/Replacement Fund (775)	\$138,014	\$485,127	\$623,260	\$663,724	\$571,963
Training Center Fund (776)	\$117,968	\$141,840	\$156,152	\$150,910	\$163,207
Capital Projects Fund (778)	\$2,080,510	\$2,466,885	\$2,884,042	\$10,136,925	\$11,238,042
Leave Liability Fund (780)	\$519,427	\$630,461	\$618,001	\$722,869	\$981,154
Fund Balance Totals	\$8,076,476	\$10,298,810	\$13,419,195	\$16,020,815	\$18,266,508

The District's management of funds across these distinct categories reflects a structured approach to financial planning and responsibility. Each fund is designated for a specific purpose, helping to ensure that resources are allocated appropriately to meet various financial needs, from daily operational expenses to long-term capital projects and employee benefits. This approach can contribute to effective financial management and stability, allowing the District to provide essential services while maintaining financial prudence.

Capital Equipment and Apparatus Replacement Planning

The District has recently developed a comprehensive capital replacement funding plan. This plan is designed to ensure that the District maintains a proactive approach to equipment acquisition and replacement. It considers the anticipated lifespan of various equipment and apparatus. By accurately assessing the expected life of equipment, the District can plan and budget for timely replacements, minimizing the risk of equipment failure and optimizing operational efficiency.

In addition to accounting for equipment lifespan, the Capital Replacement Plan also considers anticipated cost inflation. This factor recognizes that equipment costs tend to increase over time due to inflationary pressures and market dynamics. By factoring inflation, the plan provides recommendations for annual contributions to the Capital Replacement Fund that align with the projected costs of equipment replacement in future years. This approach ensures that the District's funding remains adequate and keeps pace with the evolving costs of equipment procurement.

Overall, the District's comprehensive capital replacement plan demonstrates a proactive and financially responsible approach to equipment management. The plan enables the District to effectively allocate resources and maintain a reliable fleet of equipment and apparatus. This approach enhances operational readiness, reduces the risk of unexpected failures, and supports the District's ability to deliver efficient and effective emergency services to the community.

Capital Facility Planning

The District's operational infrastructure consists of three fire stations, which includes a headquarters station and two satellite stations. All three of these facilities are over 30 years old and lack the capacity to support current and anticipated future service demands. Recognizing the need for facility upgrades, the District has proactively developed plans to replace these aged fire stations. The initial step is to relocate and replace Station 41, allowing for additional staffing and the housing of an aerial apparatus. This will be followed by the on-site replacements of Station 43 and then Station 42. What distinguishes these plans is the District's commitment to funding these projects with general revenues, rather than relying on debt financing.

To ensure the financial resources necessary for the facility replacements, the District has already accumulated approximately \$12,000,000 specifically designated for capital facility replacement. By utilizing general revenues and accumulating funds beforehand, the District aims to save taxpayers significant sums of money. Traditional financing options like bonds would typically involve borrowing funds and incurring interest expenses, as well as fees associated with issuing such bonds.

The savings achieved through this capital facility plan have the potential to amount to millions of dollars, which would otherwise have been spent on interest payments and bond issuance fees. These cost savings can be redirected to other critical areas, such as personnel, equipment, training, or community programs, ultimately benefiting both the taxpayers and the District's overall financial health.

The successful implementation of this plan relied on the passage of the levy lid lift ballot measure, which allowed the District to collect additional revenue to fund the needed facility improvements. Voters approved the levy lid lift, thus endorsing the capital upgrades proposed by the District.

Debt

The District currently has no outstanding debt. The absence of debt provides significant value to the District. Operating without debt grants the District financial freedom and flexibility. It allows the allocation of financial resources toward critical operational needs, such as equipment upgrades, personnel training, and facility maintenance, without the burden of debt service payments.

Without the obligation to repay debt, the District can maintain a more stable financial position. A financially stable District is better equipped to weather economic downturns, unexpected expenses, or fluctuations in revenue. By avoiding debt, the District saves on interest payments and related expenses. These long-term savings can be reinvested in the district's core operations and long-term capital projects.

Lastly, the absence of debt can increase public confidence and trust. Community members appreciate responsible financial management, and the absence of debt demonstrates the District's commitment to fiscal prudence. This trust can result in increased community support, cooperation, and a willingness to support the District's initiatives or funding requests. This was demonstrated by the recent approval of the levy lid lift proposal.

Regional Comparison of Major Revenue Streams

In addition to reviewing SCFD4's financials, the property tax collection rates of neighboring fire service agencies were also examined. It's crucial to recognize that the agencies in south-central Snohomish County differ significantly in terms of their service area size, demographics, service demand, organizational structure, and methods of service delivery. Consequently, any comparisons made should be approached with caution due to potential limitations.

In this analysis, the focus was solely on the regular fire and EMS property tax levies, as well as benefit charges. None of the agencies used for this comparison relied on excess Maintenance and Operations levies. South County Fire is the only agency of the group that collects a benefit charge. Benefit charges are normally assessed based on factors other than value. These factors include the type and use of an occupancy and the size of structural improvements on a given tax parcel. Benefit charges can vary from one parcel to another due to these factors. The rate used for this comparison was the average benefit charge paid per thousand dollars on the aggregate jurisdictional assessed value. Other potential revenue sources that agencies might use for their operations were not considered.

The data presented in the following figure depict the levy rates for the year 2023. Although not reflected in the figure below, the voters of SCFD4 have granted the authority to increase their fire levy rate to the statutory maximum of \$1.50 per thousand dollars of assessed value in 2024. A similar measure is also on the ballot for SRF in the upcoming general election. Furthermore, it's worth highlighting that SCFD4 is using a portion of its regular fire levy funding to support its capital facility replacement plan. This allocation for capital purposes accounted for roughly 23 cents out of the \$1.49 collected in the year 2023.

Figure 17: 2023 Regular Levy and EMS Levy Rates⁸

Jurisdiction	Fire Assessed Value	Fire Levy Rate	EMS Assessed Value	EMS Levy Rate	Benefit Charge	Total Tax Rate
SCFD4	\$8,198,586,659	1.1518	\$8,292,255,659	0.3411	N/A	\$1.4929
Snohomish Regional Fire and Rescue (SRFR)	\$43,721,382,973	1.1393	\$44,059,022,173	0.2625	N/A	\$1.4019
South County Fire	\$54,967,205,884	0.7504	\$55,017,830,384	0.3276	0.1212	\$1.1992
North County Fire	\$10,453,815,366	1.2542	\$10,629,076,066	0.2807	N/A	\$1.5350
SCFD22 (Getchell Fire)	\$1,431,078,966	1.0087	\$1,458,340,866	0.2350	N/A	\$1.2437

Financial Overview and Analysis

The District's effective financial management and strong positioning for the near future are evident in its prudent handling of finances and proactive use of reserve funds. Over the past five years, the District has made significant progress towards funding future liabilities by utilizing excess revenues to fund various reserves, including the Capital Equipment Replacement, Capital Projects, and the Leave Liability Funds.

This approach positions the District well for the near future, as it has prioritized long-term financial sustainability by responsibly allocating excess revenues. By funding the reserves, the District ensures it can address equipment replacement needs, execute vital capital projects, and meet employee leave obligations without relying solely on external financing or disrupting day-to-day operations.

A component within this project's scope involved aiding the District in crafting a financial projection model. This model encompasses the predicted growth of the jurisdiction's assessed value and the resultant revenue, along with the estimated expenses for sustaining the present or planned improvement of service levels. Additionally, the model forecasts the yearly contributions essential to align with the District's strategy for capital replacement and improvements.

Following the successful approval of the recent levy lid lift proposal, the ability to more accurately forecast revenues has enabled the adjustment of future planning to align seamlessly with these projections. These projections were based on conservative estimates drawn from historical data, the anticipated increase in various costs, and the estimated costs to implement the capital improvement plans. The following figure provides the projected revenue and expense trends for the next six years.

⁸ Data sourced from: <https://www.snohomishcountywa.gov/DocumentCenter/View/105793/Assessed-Values-Levy-Rates-and-Taxes-by-taxing-district-for-Tax-Year-2023>.

Figure 18: SCFD4 Projected Revenue and Expenses 2023-2029

Fiscal Year	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029
Beginning Cash Balance	5,312,142	4,794,741	4,916,468	5,123,333	5,876,797	6,646,610	7,887,696
Revenues	14,226,417	16,855,924	17,365,846	19,480,656	20,353,344	21,274,536	22,247,078
Operating Expenses	11,833,819	12,384,196	12,758,981	14,177,193	15,433,530	16,133,450	17,666,331
Transfers to Reserves	2,910,000	4,350,000	4,400,000	4,550,000	4,150,000	3,900,000	3,900,000
Ending Cash Balance	4,794,741	4,916,468	5,123,333	5,876,797	6,646,610	7,887,696	8,568,443

Overall, the District's commitment to managing its finances effectively and utilizing excess revenues to fund reserves highlights its dedication to responsible financial planning, operational readiness, and employee welfare. These practices contribute to the District's solid financial position and enhance its ability to provide reliable and efficient emergency services to the citizens served.

Recommendations:

- Update Fund Policies to reflect the purpose and funding levels/goals for each established fund.
- Consider consolidating the Leave Liability, Capital Expense and Replacement, and Training Center Funds into a single general reserve fund with internal sub-accounting for these various liabilities.
- Consider setting aside funds for the unanticipated and sudden loss of revenues or other unplanned contingencies.
- Formalize apparatus replacement schedule and funding plan.
- Evaluate the level of funding required for leave liability, current funding level could be more than is required.
- Update general ledger accounting to track labor and operational expenses by division or function (i.e., Administration, Suppression, EMS, Training, Fire Prevention, Facilities).

Partnership Options

Overview of Options

The prior section of this report provided an assessment of SCFD4's current conditions. This next section offers an overview of potential collaboration and consolidation options.

Fire service entities in Washington State have a range of options, from basic resource and program sharing to comprehensive legal partnerships through mergers or consolidations. The following alternatives have been identified as the primary feasible options for SCFD4

- **Maintain Autonomy (Status Quo):** Continue operating independently.
- **Interlocal Cooperation Agreement (Contract for Services):** Formulate collaborative agreements outlining the sharing of resources and cooperative programs for specific functions (Functional Consolidation), or the consolidation of all operations into a single entity (Operational Consolidation).
- **Merger:** Achieve full integration and consolidation of operations with another fire district.
- **Regional Fire Protection Service Authority (Regional Fire Authority):** Establish a regional entity to enhance fire protection services.
- **Annexation:** Join the South Snohomish County Fire and Rescue Regional Fire Authority (South County Fire) through an annexation into the RFA.

The subsequent segment of this section explores these diverse options available to SCFD4, providing insights and appropriate guidance.

Consolidating fire departments can offer several benefits. A larger fire department can typically employ more career personnel, offer comprehensive training programs, and deliver specialized emergency and support services. Furthermore, a larger department can assign individuals to specific roles and responsibilities, resulting in a more focused approach to service provision. In contrast, smaller departments must rely on a smaller workforce, requiring employees to take on multiple roles and manage various responsibilities.

A fire department covering a larger geographical area has a greater ability to strategically position specialized fire apparatus and personnel, such as ladder trucks, medic units, and technical rescue teams. This strategic placement can reduce redundancies in personnel, equipment, and apparatus, resulting in cost savings for taxpayers.

Besides cost savings from reducing redundancies, the consolidation of fire departments offers other financial advantages. These efficiencies stem from combined purchasing power for materials, supplies, equipment, and apparatus due to the increased volume requirements of a larger department.

In the case of SCFD4, various options provided by Washington State law were examined. These options include maintaining the current state, pursuing contractual consolidation, seeking a formal merger, annexing into an existing regional fire authority, or establishing one with another fire district or municipality.

Status Quo

In certain scenarios, maintaining the current system without making any changes might be the preferred course of action. SCFD4 could choose to remain an independent fire district and refrain from pursuing additional partnership options. Sustaining independence can offer distinct advantages, providing the Department with a higher degree of organizational control (autonomy) as decisions are made based solely on internal factors and the needs of the community. This approach essentially preserves the existing situation and serves as the benchmark for which other strategies can be evaluated.

However, the disadvantages associated with this approach are that the existing challenges faced by SCFD4 would remain unaddressed or left for the District to solve. Moreover, the potential benefits of increased efficiency, both in terms of financial aspects and service enhancements, through regional collaboration would go unrealized.

It's important to acknowledge that while most consolidation efforts will lead to improved efficiency and enhanced services, they often do not yield financial savings. While there are potential benefits to regional collaboration and consolidation, such as efficiencies through resource sharing and streamlined operations, these advantages are not guaranteed and can vary depending on the specific circumstances and the entities involved.

When fire departments merge or consolidate, there is a need to standardize pay scales and benefit packages for employees across the newly formed organization. This may involve increasing wages for some personnel to ensure parity, which can lead to higher labor costs. Moreover, the administrative complexities associated with managing a larger organization can result in increased administrative expenses. These higher labor and administrative costs can offset the anticipated savings from the consolidation effort. Therefore, it is essential to carefully assess the potential financial implications before proceeding with any consolidation plan.

Contract for Services

Contractual consolidation finds its primary application when agencies seek to establish closer collaboration but are either unprepared or unable to fully unify or merge. This strategy offers the greatest flexibility among available options, given that the agreement can be adjusted over time to align with the evolving needs of both parties as their partnership deepens. The contractual arrangement can be terminated should the partnership not yield benefits for one or both parties. Typically, protective clauses are integrated into the agreement to ensure that both parties are fairly compensated in case of separation. This approach can be adapted to encompass specific functions (partial) and/or all operational functions (full) within the context of a contractual consolidation. Participating agencies maintain their autonomy by retaining separate governance and independent taxing authority.

This strategy is provided for under Washington State Law through the "Interlocal Cooperation Act," Chapter 39.34 RCW. An Interlocal Cooperation Agreement (ICA) or joint operating agreement (JOA) is a legally binding arrangement between agencies, which can be structured in various formats. In Snohomish County, several fire agencies have implemented ICAs and JOAs concerning full operational services or specific functions such as fire prevention/fire marshal services, fire investigation services, training, and other support services.

Contracts for Services come in several forms, with the most common being administrative, functional, or operational consolidations. Some examples of agencies contracting for services in Snohomish County include SRFR, which provides Fire Marshal services to the City of Sultan, and, up until 2023, all operational services to the City of Mill Creek. South County Fire (RFA) has provided emergency and non-emergency services through contracts with the Cities of Brier, Mountlake Terrace, and Edmonds for many years.

It is important to note that Brier and Mountlake Terrace have decided to annex into South County Fire in 2024, and the City of Edmonds City Council recently approved a resolution stating its intent to annex into the RFA. These recent actions demonstrate how service agreements can lead to more permanent consolidations.

Administrative Consolidation

An administrative consolidation involves agencies maintaining their legal status and separate operational activities while combining administrative functions such as HR, IT, or financial tasks. This is legally achieved through an Interlocal Cooperation Agreement. Advantages include cost reduction, unified administrative leadership, and a gradual path toward consolidation, while potential drawbacks include conflicts in policy direction and personnel conflicts.

Functional Consolidation

A Functional Consolidation allows agencies to cooperate while remaining separate entities. They can share resources and services, such as training or fire prevention programs. Success in functional consolidation relies on trust, a well-defined agreement, and cooperative management. To effectively implement this option, alignment of standard operating guidelines, policies, procedures, and operational aspects is often necessary. This approach typically establishes a structure for shared administrative decision-making within the collaborative efforts. In many cases, a functional consolidation can fulfill cooperative objectives without necessitating a complete integration.

Advantages

Benefits include improved efficiency, reallocation of redundant resources to areas with deficiencies, and stronger working relationships between fire agency members. It offers a cost-effective and low-risk approach, fostering increased experience and trust among fire agencies. Additionally, this option can help dissolve barriers between the agencies' members leading to a more permanent consolidation.

Disadvantages

Functional Consolidation requires substantial collaboration among participating fire agencies compared to other partnership options. Interaction between operational personnel from different agencies can lead to friction. This approach may result in the loss of independence and autonomy in consolidated areas, potentially impacting seemingly unrelated aspects.

Operational (Full Service) Consolidation

This option represents a higher level of collaboration, encompassing full consolidation of operations under a single organization serving all participating jurisdictions. While fire districts remain independent entities legally, they function as a unified emergency services organization. A single organizational structure and chain of command are established. Operational consolidation is legally formalized through ICAs among participating organizations. Depending on the agreement's form, employees may remain with their original agency or transfer to another agency or a new entity. A single Fire Chief would oversee the consolidated organization.

To succeed, this option requires a formal and comprehensive agreement as well as strong commitment among agency policymakers, administrations, and labor groups.

Advantages

Contracting offers a notable advantage as it affords both parties a high degree of control, stemming from the fact that the terms outlined in the agreement are a product of mutual negotiation and concurrence. This ensures that the partnership aligns closely with the priorities and preferences of both the contractee and the contractor. Furthermore, the flexibility of contracting is evident in the distinct scalability of services, revenues, and expenses to cater to the specific requirements of each party involved.

In the realm of legal, political, and taxing control, contracting emerges as a strategic choice, allowing the District to retain a considerable level of authority. This control extends to matters that have a substantial impact on the District's operations and objectives. By maintaining such a degree of influence, the District can ensure that its core interests and objectives remain well-preserved throughout the collaborative endeavor.

Disadvantages

Administrators and policymakers must share power and consensus, forfeiting unilateral control. Aligning multiple bargaining unit agreements can be challenging. Determining the contracting agency might also pose difficulties. Long-term funding and debt financing remain issues, relying on funding contributions from participating agencies, each with separate revenue sources and often requiring voter approval. Consolidated agencies cannot independently issue debt and must rely on participating entities for financing.

Merger

In accordance with Washington State law, a fire protection district has the option to merge into another, creating a single unified fire district. The merging fire districts must be located within reasonable proximity to each other, which may be subject to review by the Boundary Review Board. The fundamental requirements for merging fire protection districts are outlined in Chapter 52.06 RCW. Within this statute, the district that seeks to merge into another is denoted as the "merging district," while the district where the merger is to take place is referred to as the "merger district." Following a successful merger, the merging district is dissolved, and its assets, including real and personal property, are transferred to the merger district, along with its employees. This process is delineated in RCW 52.06.080 and RCW 52.06.110.

This approach encompasses all legal functions that fire districts are authorized to carry out. Commissioners of the merging district are brought into the merger district. The newly consolidated board of commissioners assumes responsibility for establishing policies, strategies, and decision-making authority for the combined district. Under the merger legislation, the number of board members gradually reduces to match the positions held by the merger district before the consolidation, a process that occurs over successive election years as outlined in RCW 52.06.085.

The tax rate assessed in the newly merged jurisdiction must be equalized. This ensures that the newly merged taxing district maintains a uniform taxation rate across its entire jurisdiction as mandated by Washington law.

Advantages

When fire-service entities decide to combine their resources, there is often an expectation of improved efficiency, although the extent of this enhancement may vary based on the partner agencies involved. One notable advantage of such collaboration is the elimination of redundant governance structures and the establishment of a unified tax rate across the combined service area. It's important to note that while this can be beneficial, its impact may depend on the specific structures and financial foundations of the participating agencies. Furthermore, this approach is often viewed as a lasting integration, which can be advantageous in terms of reducing potential future uncertainties and volatility.

Disadvantages

Although not necessarily a disadvantage of this type of potential partnership, it's important to recognize that Snohomish Regional Fire and Rescue is the only viable candidate for such an endeavor. This is mainly due to Snohomish Fire District 16, the only other fire district in reasonable proximity, operates as a rural all-volunteer department, making it a less suitable partner.

While combining into a single entity would result in a unified tax rate across the merged service area, it's crucial to acknowledge that this may lead to an uneven impact on taxpayers. This is because one agency's taxes could increase while the others could decrease. The potential for one agency's taxpayers to inadvertently subsidize the other is a crucial consideration. To avoid such an outcome, a thorough analysis of the financial health of each agency is imperative. Factors such as outstanding debt, available resources including taxing capacity and reserve funding, as well as the state of capital assets like facilities, apparatus, and equipment, must be meticulously evaluated. This careful assessment helps ensure that the financial burden is equitably distributed, and taxpayers of each agency are not inadvertently shouldering the costs of the other.

Regional Fire Authority

The formation of a Regional Fire Authority (RFA) is authorized by statute⁹ for various entities, including cities and fire districts. The establishment of an RFA closely resembles a merger, involving shared governance, voter endorsement, and the creation of an independent municipal entity vested with its own taxing authority and statutory framework. Unlike a full contractual consolidation and similar to a merger, this consolidation is of a permanent nature. The key benefit of adopting an RFA lies in the ability to restructure the fire protection and EMS system from a regional standpoint. This approach necessitates a high level of collaboration compared to other integration options.

The initiation of this strategy involves the assembly of an RFA planning committee, consisting of three elected representatives from each participating agency who are charged with developing and adopting a RFA service plan. The RFA plan serves as the blueprint for the newly formed entity, outlining the governance, organizational design, financing, and development of fire protection and emergency services. This plan becomes the subject of voter approval when the formation of the RFA is put to a vote.

The process of creating an RFA planning committee, devising a RFA plan, educating the affected agencies' constituents, conducting an election, and transitioning from the existing governance structure to the new one typically spans around eighteen months to two years.

The statutes related to governance do not prescribe a specific number of board members for the RFA; the plan can stipulate the suitable count determined by the planning committee. It is often recommended to have an odd number to prevent tie votes whenever possible. This strategy will affect employees, as the newly formed agency could be restructured to capitalize on efficiencies and create a more effective deployment model. However, in the case of most successful RFA formations, labor groups are welcomed to participate in the planning process, where impacts on employees can be discussed and mitigated.

⁹ Chapter 52.26 RCW: Regional Fire Protection Service Authorities
Clearview Consulting and Investigations

Advantages

The establishment of a Regional Fire Authority (RFA) introduces a range of benefits arising from its collaborative nature. Through the formation of an RFA, each participating agency can leverage its unique strengths while addressing and minimizing individual weaknesses. This cooperative approach fosters the possibility of identifying and implementing new "best practices" that might not be present within any of the participating agencies individually. The RFA planning process offers an opportunity for the contemporary assessment of services, resources, and costs. This allows for the ability to appropriately size the organization and operational expenses, aligning them with the community's needs and expectations.

Another notable advantage of the RFA model is the potential to retain policymakers from the participating agencies in a governing board capacity. This retention of individuals would likely be committed to the initial implementation of this option, ensuring continuity and dedication in shaping the RFA's trajectory. Most importantly, it places the citizens who are recipients of these services in an active role, enabling them to influence their service level preferences and associated costs.

Disadvantages

While the formation of a Regional Fire Authority (RFA) presents notable advantages, it also comes with certain drawbacks. One significant disadvantage is the relinquishment of autonomy experienced by each participating agency. The transition to an RFA framework often entails ceding a degree of individual decision-making authority.

Another notable concern pertains to the considerable investment of time and effort required to craft an RFA plan. This investment can potentially be nullified if the participants choose to not go forward or if plan fails to garner voter approval. Furthermore, funding options for RFAs do not necessarily offer significantly improved prospects compared to those available for fire districts. This means that any present financial challenges will persist, even under the RFA model.

Annexation

Snohomish County Fire District No. 4 is positioned adjacent to a large regional fire authority: the South Snohomish County Fire and Rescue Regional Fire Authority (South County Fire). This makes annexation into a regional fire authority (RFA) a possibility. Annexation is initiated by the fire district requesting the annexation (in this option, SCFD4) by adopting a resolution requesting annexation. The resolution requesting annexation must then be filed with the governing board of the RFA.

Unless otherwise provided for in the RFA plan, the RFA governing board may respond to the receipt of the resolution to annex by adopting a responsive resolution of its own, amending its plan to establish terms and conditions of the requested annexation, and returning the RFA's resolution to the district requesting annexation. The RFA plan amendment can and should be discussed and agreed to between the parties in advance of exchanging resolutions. The RFA governing board will need to work with the District to determine how the annexation would affect governance, financing, employment, and operations of the RFA, as well as address asset and liability transfers.

An election to authorize the annexation may be held only if the governing body of the district seeking annexation adopts a resolution approving both the annexation and the plan amendment. The annexation is authorized if the voters in the district proposed to be annexed approve, by a simple majority vote, a single ballot measure approving the annexation and plan amendment.

Advantages

Annexing into an established regional fire authority offers a host of compelling advantages. By capitalizing on a process that has already been successfully executed to establish the RFA, annexation avoids needless duplication of this time-consuming process. This approach also achieves tax equalization and allows for input on the plan amendment regarding service levels and governance representation before committing to the annexation.

Disadvantages

The main disadvantage of this strategy would be the loss of autonomy and local control. Annexing into a regional fire authority that collects a benefit charge would also require voter reauthorization of this source of revenue every six or ten years. Furthermore, the impact this charge may have on commercial and residential property owners is currently unknown and would require further analysis.

Potential Partner - Snohomish Regional Fire and Rescue (SRFR)

The scope of this study focused exclusively on Snohomish Regional Fire and Rescue (SRFR) as the only agency considered for potential consolidation. This limitation does not imply the exclusion of other potential partners from future study and consideration.

The following section offers an overview of SRFR from the perspective of a potential partner for SCFD4. The information in this section has been sourced directly from SRFR through requested data, as well as information available on their official website and various online sources.

History

Snohomish Regional Fire & Rescue is an all-hazards fire and emergency service special purpose district located in the south-central area of Snohomish County, Washington. SRFR provides structural fire suppression, wildland fire suppression, basic and advanced life support emergency medical services, technical rescue, water rescue, hazardous materials, fire code enforcement, fire and life safety education, and fire investigation services.

The present day SRFR is the amalgamation of three fire protection districts: Snohomish County Fire District 7 (SCFD7) originally serving the Clearview, Maltby and Mill Creek areas; Snohomish County Fire District 3 (SCFD3), originally serving the Monroe area; and Snohomish County Fire District 8 (SCFD8), originally serving the Lake Stevens area. The first merger occurred in 2016 when SCFD3 merged into SCFD7. The second merger occurred in 2020 when SCFD8 merged into SCFD7. Subsequently, in August of 2020, the joint board of fire commissioners voted to alter the fire District's legal name to Snohomish Regional Fire & Rescue. This name change was aimed at more accurately reflecting the District's geographical area and the communities it serves.

In 2022, the contract for services with the City of Mill Creek was not extended. The area had been receiving services from SRFR (formerly known as Snohomish County Fire District No. 7) long before its incorporation in 1983. SRFR had requested an adjustment in cost to align with what other taxpayers within the jurisdiction were paying. Mill Creek decided to explore other options, eventually opting to annex into the South Snohomish County Regional Fire Authority following a vote by its residents. The termination of the Mill Creek contract led to a reduction of one SRFR fire station and was met with disappointment by SRFR. However, this loss did not adversely impact the organization's financial stability.

Currently, SRFR has a workforce of approximately 270 full time employees assigned to or operating from a network of 10 fire stations, 1 logistics center, and 1 administration building. The scope of the SRFR service area spans across a 135-square-mile area, serving a population of approximately 160,000 residents.

WSRB Rating and Accreditation

SRFR has a Protection Class 3 rating by the Washington Surveying and Rating Bureau (WSRB), effective since 2022. WSRB ratings range from Class 1 to 10, with 1 being the best rating. SRFR joins less than 10 percent of fire suppression agencies in Washington State with an overall Class 3 rating or better.

In February 2023, SRFR achieved a significant milestone by becoming the sole fire agency within Snohomish County and one of only eight in the entire state to attain accreditation from the Commission on Fire Accreditation International (CFAI). CFAI accreditation is an international recognition of achievement. It demonstrates SRFR's commitment to self-assessment and improvement. The voluntary accreditation process is long and arduous but has great value in setting organizational goals for reducing property and life loss and promoting employee safety. The process starts with a comprehensive self-assessment, which is subsequently subjected to rigorous third-party verification and validation.

Mission, Vision, Values - Goals and Objectives

SRFR's mission, vision, and values are integrated into a strategic plan that spans the years 2021 to 2026. This plan outlines specific initiatives based on the determined direction and serves as a guide for the agency's goals and objectives

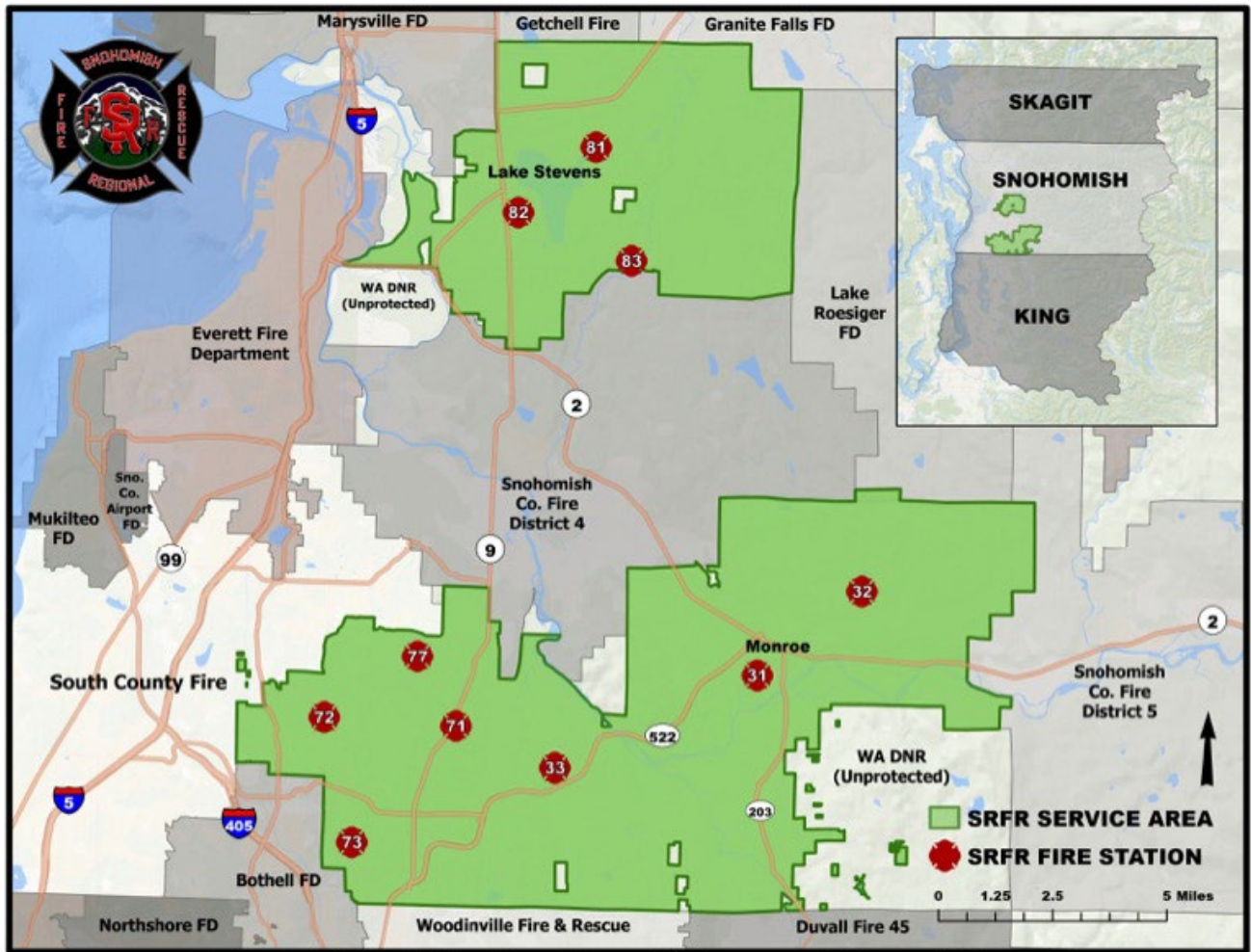
As a component of its proactive strategy towards risk management and operational enhancement, SRFR has contracted the development of a Community Risk Assessment and Standard of Coverage (CRA/SOC) document. This CRA/SOC initiative was driven by the agency's desire to develop a comprehensive understanding of potential risks, establish benchmarks for determining the optimal level of service provision and the implementation of a system for consistently monitoring operational performance.

Geographical Proximity

The SRFR service area is divided into two well-defined sections, sharing contiguous boundaries to the north and southeast with SCFD4. The northern section includes the City of Lake Stevens and its surrounding rural areas. The larger section to the south and east encompasses the City of Monroe, its adjacent rural areas, and the unincorporated areas of Clearview and Maltby. Within these sections, SRFR maintains a presence with three fire stations situated in the northern part and an additional seven in the south.

SRFR and SCFD4 frequently respond into each other's response areas as part of a county wide automatic aid agreement. This cooperative approach ensures that resources are effectively deployed to address emergencies, promoting efficiency, and enhancing the emergency response capabilities across the broader region.

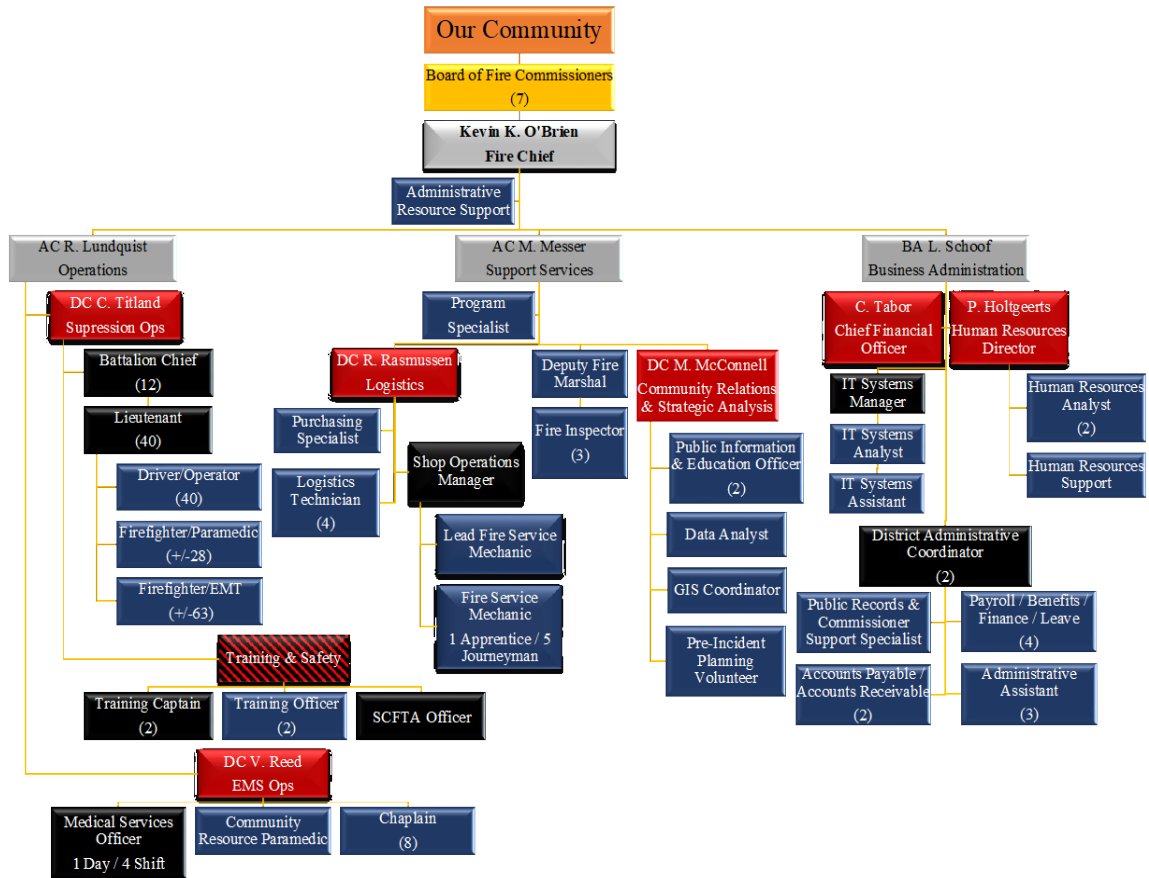
Figure 19: SRFR Jurisdictional Map



Organizational Structure

SRFR has a well-defined organizational structure that operates with a typical top-down approach. This structure comprises functional divisions, including Business Administration (encompassing finance, HR, and IT), Support Services (which include Community Risk Reduction services, Logistics, Fleet Maintenance, and Community Relations), and Operations (encompassing Fire Suppression, EMS, and Training and Safety).

Figure 20: SRFR Organizational Chart



Governance and Leadership

Governance and Leadership are provided by a seven-person Board of Commissioners and one Fire Chief. The Board of Commissioners is responsible for budget and policy decisions, while the Fire Chief oversees day-to-day operations.

The number of commissioners was temporarily expanded beyond the authorized five when the merger between SCFD7 and SCFD8 took place in 2020. In 2023, the number of commissioners was formally increased to seven through a citizens' vote. Commissioners are required to be registered voters and reside within the district. Presently, there are no established commissioner districts, which means commissioners can live anywhere within the district. This arrangement could potentially lead to a representation imbalance. At present, the seven commissioners' residences are reasonably well dispersed throughout the jurisdiction, helping to maintain balanced representation.

Operations

The Operations Division oversees fire suppression and EMS services, training and safety, and the Chaplain program. The division employs approximately 197 full-time employees. The Operations leadership includes an Assistant Chief, two Deputy Chiefs, and a dayshift Medical Services Officer.

Within the division, there are 187 emergency responders who staff the following apparatus:

- 10 fire engines companies (7 are cross staffed)
- 2 ladder companies (2 cross-staffed)
- 6 medic units (advanced life support ALS ambulances – 2 cross-staffed)
- 7 aid units (basic life support or BLS ambulance – 6 cross-staffed)
- 3 Battalion Chief command units
- 1 Medical Services Officer

Additionally, five personnel focus on training and safety functions, while one individual is assigned to a community resource paramedicine role. The division is further supported by the eight volunteer Chaplains who provide essential assistance with difficult incidents.

In 2022, SRFR responded to 18,917 calls for service, for an average daily service demand of 51.82 incidents. Of these, 2.19 percent were fire incidents, 61.53 percent were EMS incidents, and 36.28 percent were other incident types. The following figure utilizes the National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS) incident categories to analyze the nature of service demand within SRFR.

Figure 21: SRFR Service Demand by NFIRS Category (2022)

NFIRS Category	Count	% of Total
1—Fire	413	2.18%
2—Rupture/Explosion	4	0.02%
3—Rescue/EMS	12898	68.18%
4—Hazardous Condition	229	1.21%
5—Service Call	1469	7.77%
6—Good Intent Call	3031	16.02%
7—False Alarms	859	4.54%
8—Severe Weather/Natural Disaster	0	0.00%
9—Other Incidents	14	0.07%
Total (2022)	18,917	100.00%

Business Administration

The Business Administration Division oversees several key areas, including finance (fund management, payroll, accounts payable and receivable), human resources, information technology systems, and public records. The division is composed of a total of 21 full-time employees. It operates under the leadership of one Business Administrator. Within the division, seven individuals are assigned to finance-related tasks, four handle HR functions, three manage IT functions, one individual is responsible for public records and Commissioner support duties. Additionally, five employees provide assistance in various coordination and administrative support roles.

Support Services

The Support Services Division plays a crucial role in various areas, including:

- Fire Marshal services, which involve new construction plan review and fire code inspections.
- Community Relations and Strategic Analysis, encompassing tasks such as public education, data analysis, GIS mapping, and pre-incident planning.
- Logistics, ensuring efficient resource management.
- Maintenance Shop operations, responsible for equipment maintenance.

The Division is staffed by a total of 26 full-time employees and is led by an Assistant Chief. This includes four individuals dedicated to fire prevention, six staff members handling Community Relations and Strategic Analysis duties, five logistics specialists, and a Maintenance Shop managed by a Shop Operations Manager with a team of seven mechanics

Capital Infrastructure

Snohomish Regional Fire and Rescue maintains a robust capital infrastructure designed to support its emergency services. This infrastructure includes:

- Ten strategically located fire stations serving as frontline response points.
- A Logistics Center responsible for resource and equipment management.
- A dedicated fleet maintenance shop.
- An Administrative Headquarters functioning as the administrative hub.

SRFR's fire stations are strategically located throughout the jurisdiction, each differing in age and operational capabilities. Despite their current functionality and well-maintained status, SRFR has recognized the necessity to address deficiencies in its capital infrastructure. To address this need, SRFR has contracted with an architecture firm to perform a comprehensive assessment and develop a Capital Facilities Plan. This plan outlines the necessary improvements and/or replacements of its fire stations.

Among these stations, seven were constructed over 30 years ago, with the oldest being 46 years old. The only modern station, Fire Station 33, was completed in 2017. While some upgrades have been made over the years, these stations still face operational deficiencies and do not meet current building codes for new construction. In several instances, it has been determined that renovating these stations to meet modern building codes and address their deficiencies would be cost-prohibitive.

The comprehensive capital facility improvement plan is projected to span a ten-year period at an estimated cost ranging from \$130,000,000 to \$142,000,000. The Capital Facility Plan does not provide details on how these capital projects would be funded.

Fiscal Overview

Revenue

SRFR's primary revenue sources include two separate property tax levies: a general fire levy and an EMS levy. In 2023, the assessed valuation for the fire levy was \$43,838,664,294, and for the EMS levy, it was \$44,173,596,094. The tax rates imposed on these valuations were \$1.15 for the fire levy and \$0.26 for the EMS levy. This is expected to generate a total of \$62,018,654 in revenue from property taxes, with \$50,326,787 coming from the fire levy and \$11,691,867 from the EMS levy.

Additionally, SRFR plans to collect \$10,459,624 in revenue from fees for contracted services and other miscellaneous sources. Notably, ambulance transport fees and GEMT reimbursements constitute 87% of this additional revenue. Therefore, the total revenue for 2023 is projected to be \$72,478,278.

Like most fire districts that rely solely on property taxes to fund operations, SRFR must periodically request voters to restore the levy rate as it naturally declines over time. In 2021, voters approved the restoration of the levy rate to the statutory maximum of \$1.50 per \$1,000 of assessed value. However, due to the growth of property value and the one percent limitation on levy collections, the rate has already decreased to \$1.15. In the November 2023 general election, SRFR received voter approval for a fire levy lid lift of \$0.36 per \$1,000 to restore the rate to the statutory maximum of \$1.50 per thousand of assessed value.

Expenses

SRFR’s expense budget is broken out into separate programs. The figure below details each program and budgeted expense for 2023.

Figure 22: SRFR 2023 Expense Budget

Program	2023
Legislative	\$299,347
Administration	\$2,795,428
Finance & HR	\$2,273,315
Suppression	\$36,868,802
Community Risk Reduction	\$1,374,000
Training	\$2,662,649
Facilities	\$2,165,904
Volunteers & Chaplains	\$29,231
EMS	\$12,411,478
Health & Safety	\$299,065
Non-Departmental	\$1,080,938
Technical Services	\$2,896,049
Special Ops	\$83,545
Public Affairs	\$668,032
Strategic Planning	\$168,326
Total Budget	\$66,076,109

Wage and benefits account for 82% of all SRFR expenses which is in the normal range for fire protection districts. Fire suppression and EMS service delivery account for approximately 75% of the budget with the remaining 25% going towards support services and administrative overhead.

Fund Management

SRFR maintains a General Fund to account for and report all financial resources, except those required to be accounted for in another fund. General Fund accounting encompasses revenues from regular property taxes, service charges, other miscellaneous revenues, operating expenses, and transfers to assigned reserves.

SRFR appears to have appropriate reserves and maintains several funds for the purpose of funding known and unanticipated future liabilities. As of the beginning of 2023, the total fund balance for all SRFR reserves was approximately \$28,700,000. Below, we describe the purpose and funding level goals for each reserve fund:

Emergency Reserve Fund: This fund was established to reserve funds in the event of an unanticipated and immediate loss of revenue, allowing for the continuation of services until funding is restored or stabilized. The long-term funding goal for this fund is 25% of the annual budget, and the current funding level is approximately 13% of the 2023 annual budget.

Retirement Reserve Fund: This fund was established to finance the payment of accumulated leave liabilities for retiring employees and cover early retirement medical costs of retired employees. Contributions are regularly made to this fund to align with projected liabilities.

Apparatus Reserve Fund: This fund was established to finance the replacement of front-line apparatus. Annual contributions are made to enhance budget stability and prevent debt accumulation due to apparatus replacement. The funding level is determined by the vehicle replacement schedule, the expected service life of the apparatus, and projected costs.

Equipment Reserve Fund: This fund was established to finance the replacement of equipment with defined service life expectancies. Annual contributions are made to improve budget stability. The funding level is determined by a comprehensive equipment replacement plan based on expected service life and projected costs.

Construction Reserve Fund: This fund was established to cover the costs of repairing, maintaining, and improving capital facilities. SRFR makes annual contributions to this fund, and projects to allocate \$6,359,000 to this fund each of the next seven years. It's important to note that this funding level falls short of what is needed to fully finance the Capital Facility Plan that was previously discussed.

Bond Reserve Fund: This fund was established to finance contractual debt service payments on outstanding debt. Annual contributions are made to this fund, and the funding level is determined by the debt service payment obligations each year.

Debt and Post Employment Benefit Liability

Snohomish Regional Fire and Rescue (SRFR) has two councilmanic bond issuances that are currently outstanding. The first bond was issued in 2015 for the construction of the Fales Road fire station, and it is set to mature in the year 2035. The second bond was issued in 2017 for the construction of the administrative building located in the City of Monroe, and it is scheduled to mature in the year 2031. Additionally, there is a small outstanding balance related to the financing of a ladder truck, totaling \$225,025, with a due date in 2024. In total, the remaining principal on this debt amounts to \$5,028,025, with an annual debt service payment of \$516,882. It's worth noting that SRFR does not have any outstanding voter-approved bond debt.

The Capital Facility Plan is anticipated to require up to \$142,000,000 in funding over the next 10 years. It seems unlikely that the general levy alone will be sufficient to fully cover the costs of this plan. While SRFR has not explicitly stated it was committed to it, it appears that additional bond funding would be necessary to fully execute the Capital Facility Plan.

SRFR administers a defined benefit post-employment healthcare plan. This healthcare plan is offered as a retirement incentive for employees who are a minimum of 53 years of age and have at least 25 years of service (five of which must be with SRFR). The plan provides this benefit for a maximum of 12 years or when the retiree becomes eligible for Medicare. Currently 28 retirees are receiving these benefits with another 204 who will be eligible in the future. The calculated liability for these benefits on December 31, 2022, was \$11,259,611¹⁰. SRFR currently has slightly less than 50% of this liability in the Retirement Reserve Fund.

Projections

SRFR uses a financial projection model for financial planning, tracking revenues, expenses, and reserve funding requirements. Revenue growth is based on projected increases in assessed value, statutory limits on levy increases, and successful levy lid lift adjustments. Projected expenses reflect current and planned service level increases and projected cost increases for those services. Transfers to reserves follow current reserve fund policies, capital replacement and improvement plans, and other known liabilities.

SRFR's General Fund accounts for all financial resources except those required to be in another fund. It includes revenues from regular property taxes, service charges, miscellaneous revenues, operating expenses, and transfers to assigned reserves. The General Fund balance is typically lowest in April and September when tax collections are received. The end fund balance must cover first-quarter expenses and provide operating reserves for contingencies. A recommended best practice is to maintain an end fund balance of at least 35-45% of the operating expense budget.

With the successful levy lid lift for the 2024 tax year, SRFR's revenues can support planned operations and maintain adequate General Fund balances through 2027. Beyond 2027, another lid lift for the fire and/or EMS levies will likely be necessary.

SRFR did not provide an up-to-date financial projection model that includes the projected decline in assessed value in 2024 or the approval of their upcoming levy lid lift measure. The figure below presents a seven-year projection of SRFR's revenue, expenses, and the resulting impact on General Fund balances with the assumption of a five percent decline in assessed value and a successful levy lid lift for the 2024 tax year.

¹⁰ Data sourced from SRFR's 2022 Annual Financial Report to the Washington State Auditor's Office.

Figure 23: SRFR Projected Revenue and Expenses 2023-2029¹¹

	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029
Beginning Balance	\$36,740,863	\$30,302,930	\$35,181,571	\$39,130,910	\$38,733,166	\$36,361,161	\$31,916,593
Fire Assessed Value	43,838,664,294	41,646,731,079	42,896,133,012	44,611,978,332	47,288,697,032	51,071,792,795	54,136,100,362
Proj. Fire AV Change	N/A	-5%	3.00%	4.00%	6.00%	8.00%	6.00%
EMS Assessed Value	\$44,173,596,094	\$41,964,916,289	\$43,223,863,778	\$44,952,818,329	\$47,649,987,429	\$51,461,986,423	\$54,549,705,609
Proj. EMS AV Change	N/A	-5.00%	3.00%	4.00%	6.00%	8.00%	6.00%
Fire Levy Rate	1.148	1.5	1.4709	1.4284	1.3611	1.2728	1.2128
EMS Levy Rate	0.2647	0.2814	0.2759	0.268	0.2553	0.2388	0.2275
Fire Taxes	50,326,787	62,470,097	63,094,798	63,725,746	64,363,003	65,006,633	65,656,699
EMS Taxes	11,691,867	11,808,786	11,926,874	12,046,143	12,166,604	12,288,270	12,411,153
New Construction	N/A	N/A	817,068	834,226	842,667	851,095	859,606
Total Tax Revenue	62,018,654	74,278,883	75,838,739	76,606,114	77,372,274	78,145,998	78,927,458
Miscellaneous Revenue	10,459,624	10,470,921	10,482,391	10,499,185	10,505,864	10,517,876	10,530,075
Total Revenue	72,478,278	84,749,804	86,321,130	87,105,299	87,878,138	88,663,874	89,457,533
Operation Expenses	66,076,109	68,459,471	70,938,398	76,047,385	78,771,639	81,606,495	84,557,051
Transfers Out							
Emergency Reserves	420,000	428,400	436,968	445,707	454,622	463,714	472,988
Retirement Reserves	1,975,500	437,750	450,883	464,409	478,341	492,691	507,422
Vehicle Replacement	2,459,060	2,560,000	2,560,000	2,560,000	2,560,000	2,560,000	2,560,000
Equip Replacement	1,109,660	1,109,660	1,109,660	1,109,660	1,109,660	1,109,660	1,109,660
Facility Improvement	6,359,000	6,359,000	6,359,000	6,359,000	6,359,000	6,359,000	6,359,000
Debt Service	516,882	516,882	516,882	516,882	516,882	516,882	516,882
Total Transfers Out	12,840,102	11,411,692	11,433,393	11,455,658	11,478,505	11,501,947	11,525,952
End Balance	30,302,930	35,181,571	39,130,910	38,733,166	36,361,161	31,916,593	25,291,123

Potential Annexations

As mentioned earlier, the City of Mill Creek had been served by SRFR through a contract since the City’s incorporation in 1983. In 2022, Mill Creek decided to annex into the South County RFA and terminate its relationship with SRFR. A review of county records found there are three Municipal Urban Growth Areas (MUGA) that if annexed could have a potential for similar impact on SRFR’s revenue and service area. They include the Bothell MUGA, Mill Creek MUGA, and the Maltby MUGA.

¹¹ Estimates contained in this figure were not developed or verified by SRFR. However, projections were based data provided by SRFR using similar assumptions regarding AV growth as used in SCFD4 projections.

All three MUGAs include areas currently served by SRFR. Station 72, located at 180th Street and 35th Ave SE, falls within the Mill Creek MUGA. Annexation of this area into Mill Creek would result in a loss of revenue for SRFR, changes to the service area, and potential loss of a fire station.

The Bothell MUGA extends north and east of the City's current boundary into areas currently served by SRFR. Annexation by Bothell could also affect SRFR's revenues and its current service area. The expanded Bothell City Limits would be at 45th Ave SE where SRFR Station 73 is located.

The decision to annex unincorporated regions into a municipality is a multifaceted process that involves thorough analysis. Control over future development and financial considerations play significant roles in motivating or discouraging a city from pursuing annexation. Annexation decisions tend to be influenced by the desire to manage development in adjacent areas or to secure a net increase in revenue. Frequently, cities target commercial zones to tap into beneficial sales tax revenues. For instance, the City of Woodinville has expressed interest in the Maltby MUGA, likely driven by the potential advantages in acquiring this predominantly commercial area.

Predicting a timeline for potential annexations or gauging the specific impacts on SRFR would be highly speculative. Nevertheless, potential annexations have possible implications that warrant consideration.

Partner Suitability

As previously discussed, Snohomish Regional Fire and Rescue (SRFR) is a significantly larger organization with adjacent service areas to the north and southeast of SCFD4. SRFR is accredited by the Commission on Fire Accreditation International and is financially sound as a fire service agency and provides the full spectrum of emergency services with minimal operational or administrative gaps. Additionally, SRFR serves a similar mix of urban and rural areas as SCFD4. Based on these factors, SRFR emerges as a highly suitable partner for SCFD4. The following points highlight some of the areas of importance regarding potential collaboration:

- **Well-Developed Administration:** SRFR's well-developed administration could be an asset. The presence of personnel assigned to specific functions such as finance, human resources, logistics, and other critical areas within SRFR should provide enhanced expertise in critical areas and could facilitate the smooth integration of administrative and services within SCFD4.
- **Fire Prevention/Fire Marshal Services:** SCFD4 has recently agreed to assume responsibility for Fire Marshal/Fire Code-related services within the City of Snohomish. This includes recommending fire code amendments, conducting new construction site and plan reviews, performing new construction building inspections, and conducting inspections of existing buildings. SRFR has a well-developed Fire Prevention Division that currently provides all these services. SCFD4 could explore collaboration options with SRFR to quickly acquire the skills required for providing these services

- **Full Array of other Support Services:** The fact that SRFR offers a full array of support services can immediately benefit SCFD4. Access to SRFR's support services, including IT support, GIS analysis, finance, HR, and logistics, could lead to cost savings, improved resource management, and better personnel and equipment utilization.
- **Enhanced Deployment Options:** Collaboration between SCFD4 and SRFR would substantially improve deployment options if the agencies were to fully integrate. Such consolidation could lead to the efficient deployment of ladder trucks, transport-capable aid units, MSO units, and technical rescue equipment. By centrally locating specialized apparatus and specialized response capabilities, both organizations could enhance their ability to provide a timely response while reducing redundancies.
- **Station Placement Evaluation:** Efficiencies can often be found when fire stations are consolidated, and staffing is reassigned where needed most. SCFD4 and SRFR serve a large adjacent rural area from three fire stations: SRFR Stations 83 and 32, and SCFD4 Station 42. All three of these stations average approximately two call per day and Stations 83 and 42 have been identified as needing significant improvements or replacement. Although outside the scope of this study, the consolidation of SRFR and SCFD4 could enable a comprehensive assessment of geographical coverage, response times, and service levels in these areas. The possibility of consolidating these three stations into two, if viable, could lead to cost savings and more efficient resource allocation.

In summary, partnering with SRFR provides SCFD4 access to a well-structured administrative framework and comprehensive support services. This collaboration would have the potential to immediately enhance operational capabilities and create opportunities for optimizing station placements, especially in rural areas. Ultimately, the partnership between SCFD4 and SRFR can strengthen emergency response services and offer the possibility for a more efficient and cost-effective delivery of fire and rescue services to the community.

Potential Partner - South Snohomish County Fire and Rescue Regional Fire Authority (South County Fire or SCF)

The original study focused exclusively on Snohomish Regional Fire and Rescue as the primary agency for potential consolidation. After completion of the initial report, the Board of Commissioners of Snohomish Fire District 4 authorized an addendum to examine South Snohomish County Fire and Rescue Regional Fire Authority, also known as South County Fire (SCF).

The following section provides an overview of South County Fire as a potential partner for SCFD4. The information has been sourced directly from SCF through requested data, their official website, and various other online sources.

History

South County Fire is a regional fire authority (RFA) established in 2017 by voters served by Snohomish County Fire District No. 1 and the City of Lynnwood. Since its inception, voters in three additional cities have approved annexation into the RFA: Mill Creek in 2022, and Brier and Mountlake Terrace in 2023. Additionally, SCF provides fire and emergency medical services (EMS) to the City of Edmonds under a service contract.

SCF is the largest provider of fire and EMS services in Snohomish County and one of the largest in the state. The organization operates 15 fire stations, staffed around the clock to ensure prompt emergency response across more than 57 square miles in southwest Snohomish County.

With a workforce of over 355 uniformed firefighters, SCF maintains a minimum of 70 firefighters on duty during the day and 64 overnight. EMS calls constitute 76% of 911 responses, with all firefighters certified as either emergency medical technicians or paramedics. In 2023, SCF responded to 37,687 emergency calls.

In December 2023, SCF notified the City of Edmonds of its intent to terminate the existing service contract. SCF was concerned that the City was paying less for services than the rate paid by taxpayers within the formal RFA. In response, the City of Edmonds hired a consultant to evaluate its options, which included annexing into the RFA, contracting with the Shoreline Fire Department, or reestablishing a municipal fire department. The study indicated that the most cost-effective option was to annex into the RFA. After considering its options, the City of Edmonds recently approved a resolution expressing its intent to proceed with annexing into the RFA.

WSRB Rating

SCF has maintained a Protection Class 3 rating from the Washington Surveying and Rating Bureau (WSRB) since 2020. WSRB ratings range from Class 1 to Class 10, with Class 1 being the highest rating. SCF is among the top 10 percent of fire suppression agencies in Washington State with an overall Class 3 rating or better.

It is important to note that the WSRB assesses all of the different jurisdictions served by the RFA, including the cities of Lynnwood, Brier, Mountlake Terrace, Edmonds, and the unincorporated areas served by SCF. Each of these areas received a solid Class 3 rating, placing them in the middle of the Class 3-point range. This indicates a very balanced level of service across the entire service area.

Mission, Vision, Values

South County Fire is dedicated to enhancing the lives of the community, as articulated in its Purpose Statement. While SCF does not have traditional mission, vision, and value statements, its commitment to serving the community is embodied in a Purpose Statement and reinforced through a set of Core Values. All employees of SCF are expected to uphold and demonstrate these core values at all times:

Integrity: Acting with honesty and strong moral principles.

Humility: Serving with a humble attitude and respect for others.

Compassion: Showing empathy and concern for the well-being of others.

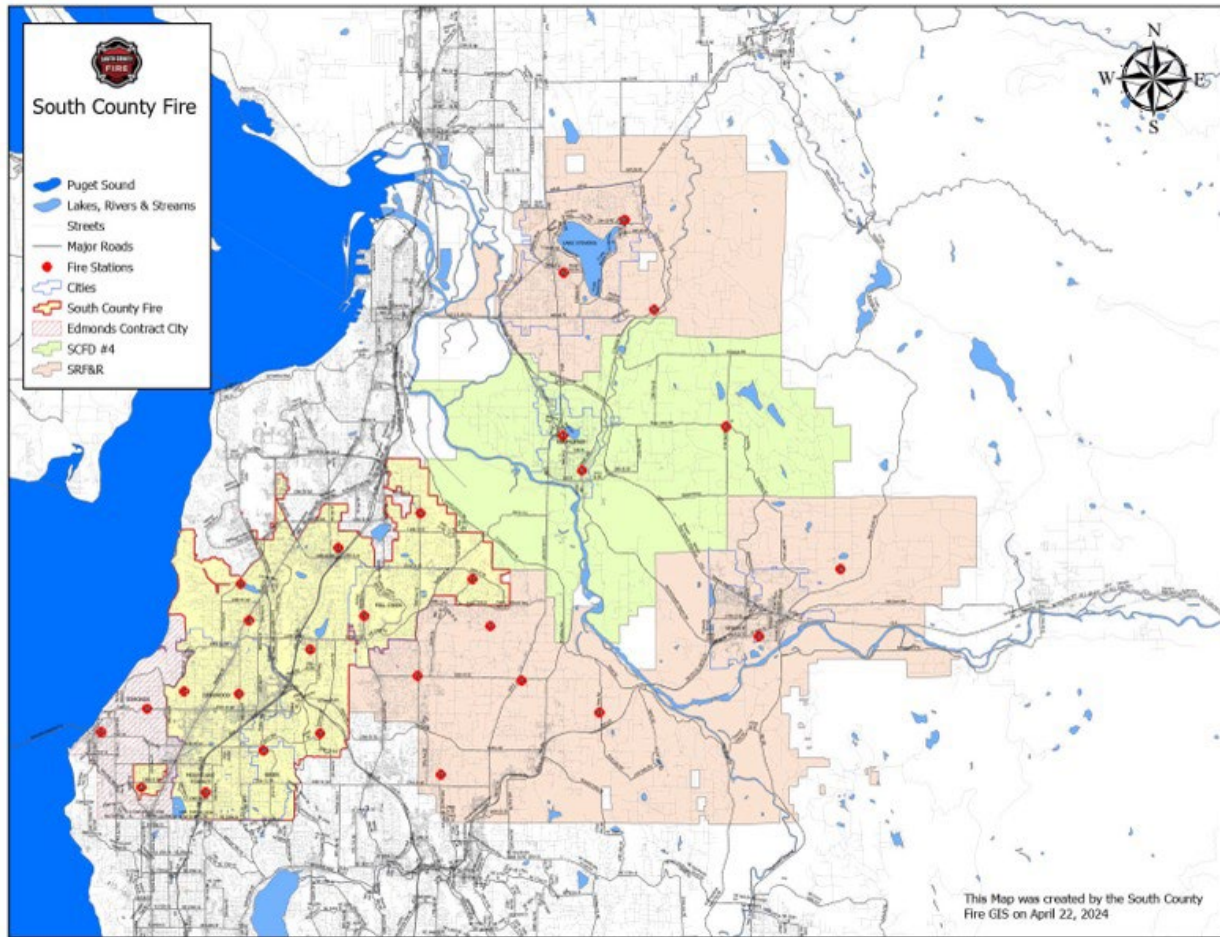
Family: Fostering a sense of belonging and support within the organization and community.

Trust: Building and maintaining confidence through reliability and transparency.

Geographical Proximity

South County Fire (SCF) covers an approximate service area of 57 square miles and shares a contiguous border to the southwest of SCFD4. The Snohomish River Valley, which lies between SCF and SCFD4, consists of sparsely populated agricultural land. Both agencies frequently respond to emergencies within each other's response areas as part of a county-wide automatic aid agreement. SCF is the primary responder to areas along and west of Lowell Larimer Road. This cooperative approach ensures that resources are effectively deployed to address emergencies, promoting efficiency and enhancing emergency response capabilities across the broader region.

Figure 24: SCF Jurisdictional Map



Organizational Structure

South County Fire has a well-defined organizational structure that operates with a typical top-down approach. This structure is designed to ensure effective management and coordination of various functions essential to providing high-quality fire and emergency medical services. The organization comprises seven functional divisions, each with specific responsibilities and areas of expertise:

Communications: The Communications division oversees community outreach programs, including public information, public education, and access to public records. It ensures that the community is well-informed and engaged with SCF's activities and services.

EMS and Health and Safety: This division is responsible for overseeing emergency medical services (EMS) and ensuring the health and safety of SCF personnel. It includes training programs and protocols to maintain high standards of care and safety.

Logistics: Logistics handles purchasing, facility maintenance, and vehicle maintenance. This division ensures that SCF has the necessary equipment and resources to operate effectively and that all facilities and vehicles are well-maintained and ready for use.

Community Protection and Readiness: Community Protection and Readiness encompasses typical fire marshal services, including fire prevention, inspections, and readiness programs. It plays a crucial role in ensuring community safety and preparedness for emergencies.

Operations: The Operations division is the backbone of SCF, overseeing fire suppression, EMS response services, training, volunteer support, and the Chaplain program. It ensures that emergency responders are well-trained and equipped to handle incidents effectively.

Finance and IT Technologies: Finance and IT Technologies manages the financial aspects of SCF, including budgeting, accounting, and financial planning. This division also oversees information technology services, ensuring that SCF's technology infrastructure supports its operational needs.

Human Resources: Human Resources handles personnel management, including recruitment, hiring, training, employee relations, and benefits administration. This division ensures that SCF attracts and retains skilled and dedicated employees.

Each division within SCF works collaboratively to achieve the organization's mission of enhancing the lives of the community. This structured approach ensures that all aspects of SCF's operations are managed efficiently, with clear lines of responsibility and accountability.

The commissioners also establish policies that guide the day-to-day operations of SCF. These policies are implemented by the administrative staff, who manage the agency's personnel, resources, and activities in accordance with the board's directives. By providing oversight and direction, the commissioners help ensure that SCF maintains high standards of integrity, efficiency, and effectiveness in fulfilling its mission to enhance the lives of the community.

Administration

The Administration Division oversees several key areas, including finance (fund management, payroll, accounts payable, and accounts receivable), human resources, and information technology systems. The division is composed of a total of 14 full-time employees and operates under the leadership of a Chief Financial Officer and a Human Resources Director. Within the division, five individuals are assigned to finance-related tasks, four handle HR functions, and three manage IT functions.

Operations

The Operations Division oversees fire suppression and EMS response services, training, volunteer support, and the Chaplain program. The leadership of the Operations Division includes an Assistant Chief, a Deputy Chief of Operations, a Deputy Chief of Training, and a Battalion Chief of Training.

Within the division, there are approximately 308 emergency responders who staff the following apparatus:

- 3 Battalion Chief command units
- 13 Fire Engine Companies (6 are cross-staffed)
- 2 Ladder Companies
- 10 ALS Medic Units (6 are cross-staffed)
- 4 BLS Aid Units (2 are cross-staffed)
- 1 Medical Services Officer
- 3 Peak Activity Units (12-hour units - 1 ALS and 2 BLS)

Additionally, a Hazmat Unit, Rescue Truck, Marine Unit, Air Unit, and Brush Truck are cross-staffed and available for response based on incident type and need.

In 2023, SCF responded to 37,687 calls for service, averaging 103 incidents per day. Of these, 2.10% were fire incidents, 76.47% were EMS incidents, and 21.43% were other incident types.

The following figure utilizes the National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS) incident categories to analyze the nature of service demand within SCF.

Figure 26: SCF Service Demand by NFIRS Category (2023)

NFIRS Category	Count	% of Total
1—Fire	790	2.10%
2—Rupture/Explosion	12	0.03%
3—Rescue/EMS	28818	76.47%
4—Hazardous Condition	341	0.90%
5—Service Call	1968	5.22%
6—Good Intent Call	3796	10.07%
7—False Alarms	1917	5.09%
8—Severe Weather/Natural Disaster	2	0.01%
9—Other Incidents	43	0.11%
Total (2023)	37,688	100.00%

Training

The Training Division is responsible for in-service training programs and scheduling, employee and officer development, and assists with the recruitment and training of new hires. This division ensures that all personnel receive continuous education and skill enhancement necessary for effective performance. It is led by a Deputy Chief, a Battalion Chief, four Captains, and an Administrative Support Specialist.

EMS and Safety

The EMS Division is responsible for the oversight, management, licensing, certification, and quality control of EMS operations and training. It manages equipment maintenance and disposable supplies used in EMS incidents, coordinates paramedic school training and integration, and oversees the EMS billing and electronic medical reporting system. Additionally, the division manages the Community Resource Paramedicine and Community Health Workers programs.

The Division is led by a Deputy Chief who supervises three Medical Services Officers, a Captain, four Community Resource Paramedics, a Community Resource Specialist, and two additional support staff.

The Safety and Health program manages and enforces rules, regulations, and policies related to the safe operation of the Fire Department. The Safety Officer responds to emergency activities and oversees various programs, including the Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) program, the SCBA program, the Wellness Program, and the Exposure Control Program. Additionally, the Safety Officer collaborates with the Training division on new and existing programs to ensure the ongoing safety of all RFA personnel.

The Safety programs are overseen by a Deputy Chief and an Administrative Specialist. Medical direction for health and safety-related programs is provided through contractual relationships with a medical doctor (MD), a naturopathic physician, and a clinical psychologist.

Support Services

The Support Services are broken out into functional groups, they include:

- Community Protection and Community Readiness Division, encompasses typical Fire Marshal and Code Enforcement services, including new construction plan review, fire code inspections, and other tasks aimed at maintaining community safety. SCF provides Fire Marshal Services to the cities of Lynnwood, Mill Creek, Brier, Mountlake Terrace, and Edmonds. The division is managed by two Deputy Chiefs and supported by six Deputy Fire Marshals and one Administrative Support Specialist.
- The Communications Division oversees community outreach programs, including community information and education, coordination of community volunteers, and access to public records. It is managed by a Communications Director and a Community Outreach Manager, supported by a Public Information Officer, two Public Education Specialists, a Public Records Officer, and a Support Specialist.
- The Logistics Division provides oversight of vehicle and facility maintenance, and is responsible for purchasing supplies, materials, and equipment. SCF's GIS and Data Analyst programs are also managed within this division. Led by a Deputy Chief, the Logistics Division is supported by Facility Specialists, Warehouse Specialists, a Data Analyst, and a GIS Specialist.

Capital Infrastructure

South County Fire (SCF) maintains a robust capital infrastructure designed to support its emergency services. This infrastructure includes:

- Fifteen neighborhood fire stations strategically located throughout the 57 square mile service area.
- An Administrative Headquarters functioning as the administrative hub, which includes adjacent classrooms and a training facility.

SCF fire stations are strategically placed across the jurisdiction, each varying in age and operational capabilities. Recently, SCF initiated an analysis of its current infrastructure status and future needs, resulting in the development of a comprehensive Capital Facilities Plan.

The Capital Facilities Plan for SCF documents current service demands and facility conditions, projects future facility needs based on community changes, and identifies necessary expenditures for facility renovations, replacements, and additions. After assessing needs and costs, a phase-three financing strategy will be developed based on prioritization. This plan serves as a guide to address future emergency response needs resulting from growth, changing demographics, and identified risks.

The Phase 1 Report outlined service boundaries, population demographics, hazards, and critical infrastructure, while analyzing past incidents using actual and modeled responses. It also inventoried existing facilities and assessed their physical condition. This baseline information, combined with regional growth forecasts, helped model and understand the gap between current capabilities and future needs.

Phase 2 focused on forecasting future requirements for renovating, replacing, and adding new facilities, including detailed cost estimates specific to each facility. Design and renovation plans for these stations are informed by similar facilities in local urbanized communities.

The plan recommends replacing four existing stations, renovating two existing stations and the RFA headquarters, and enhancing other support facilities. Additionally, it identifies the need for up to four new stations to cover service area gaps. The estimated costs for Phase 2 recommendations are as follows:

- Existing SCF Station Renovations: \$21,517,657
- Existing Station Replacements: \$63,530,563
- New and Renovated Support Facilities: \$55,456,145
- New Service Gap Fire Stations: \$78,508,021
- City of Edmonds Replacement and Renovations: \$15,980,362

The estimated total cost to complete the capital facility plan is \$234,992,748. This assumes full implementation of the plan, which could span up to ten years or longer.

Fiscal Overview

Revenue

South County Fire's primary revenue sources include two separate property tax levies: a general fire levy and an EMS levy. In 2024, the assessed valuation for the fire levy was \$59,924,440,250, and for the EMS levy, it was \$59,968,804,950. The tax rates imposed on these valuations were \$.818 for the fire levy and \$0.348 for the EMS levy. This is expected to generate a total of \$69,850,000 in revenue from property taxes, with \$49,000,000 coming from the fire levy and \$20,850,000 from the EMS levy.

In 2020, SCF received voter authorization to impose a benefit charge as provided through RCW 52.26.180, Benefit Charges. Fire protection service authorities authorized to utilize a benefit charge have their regular fire levy maximum rate reduced by one-third, from \$1.50 to \$1.00 per thousand dollars of assessed value. Unlike property value-based taxes, the benefit charge is a fee calculated using a formula that considers factors such as building size, type of use, and hazards present. The total benefit charge collection is capped at 60 percent of the agencies operational budget.

In 2024, SCF imposed a total benefit charge of \$7,754,590, allocated to all non-exempt properties within the jurisdiction based on specific criteria. Typically, residential properties pay less than commercial properties, properties with larger improvements pay more than those with smaller improvements, and undeveloped land incurs no charge. SCF’s benefit charge collection has been extremely modest compared to other agencies using this form of revenue. In 2024, benefit charge collections accounted for approximately 7.5 percent of SCF’s operational budget, well below the average utilization seen by other agencies.

The benefit charge requires voter reauthorization within six or fewer years of the initial authorization. Reauthorization options include periods of six consecutive years, ten consecutive years, or permanent reauthorization. SCF is seeking a ten-year reauthorization of its benefit charge in the upcoming primary election on August 6, 2024.

Additionally, SCF plans to collect \$30,126,124 in revenue from fees for contracted services and other miscellaneous sources. This includes revenue for contracted services provided to the City of Edmonds, ambulance transport fees and GEMT reimbursements. As depicted in the figure below, the total projected revenue for 2024 is \$105,795,018.

Figure 27: SCF 2024 Revenues

Revenue Type	Revenue	% of Total
Property Taxes	69,850,000	64.18%
Benefit Charges	7,764,590	7.34%
GEMT	9,059,084	8.56%
Ambulance Services	5,272,971	4.98%
Contracted Services	13,137,423	12.42%
Miscellaneous Revenues	2,656,646	2.51%
Total (2024)	\$105,795,018	100.00%

Expenses

SCF’s expense budget is broken out into separate programs. The figure below details each program and budgeted expense for 2024.

Figure 28: SCF 2024 Operating Expenditures

Program	2023
Administration and Support Services	\$16,808,783
Station Operations (Suppression)	\$70,746,253
Emergency Medical Services	\$5,826,546
Training	\$2,830,190
New Hire Training	\$2,307,745
Safety	\$1,047,005
Volunteers	\$216,874
Physical Fitness	\$63,540
Peer Support	\$63,000
Community Readiness	\$3,049,072
Total Budget	\$103,274,162

Wages and benefits account for 92% of all SCF expenses, which is on the higher end of the normal range for fire protection districts. Fire suppression and EMS service delivery account for approximately 68% of the budget, with the remaining 32% allocated to support services and administrative overhead.

Fund Management

South County Fire manages its financial operations through a structured accounting system consisting of six distinct funds. Each fund operates independently with its own cash flow, investments, revenues, and expenditures. Annually, SCF establishes budgets for each of these six funds. Below is a concise description of the purpose for each fund.

General Fund: The General Fund serves as the primary operating fund where most of the RFA's financial transactions are recorded. It includes revenues from diverse sources such as taxes, fees, and service charges. This fund is utilized to finance day-to-day operational expenditures, including employee salaries, utilities, maintenance expenses, supplies, and essential services. Additionally, the General Fund tracks transfers to other reserve funds that are utilized by the RFA for specific purposes or contingencies.

SCF has set a target to maintain an ending fund balance that covers a minimum of 90 days of operating expenses. This strategic financial goal is crucial for ensuring liquidity and stability in sustaining operations, particularly given that the RFA primarily relies on semiannual tax collections, which occur in April and October each year.

Emergency Reserve Fund: This fund was established to create an emergency reserve to provide funding in the event of revenue disruptions, emergent events, or unanticipated acquisitions. The funding target for the emergency reserve is five percent of projected General Fund revenues.

LEOFF 1 Medical Reserve Fund: This fund was established to create a financial reserve designated for future medical claims of retired LEOFF1 (Law Enforcement Officers' and Fire Fighters' Retirement System Plan 1) employees. According to policy, contributions to this reserve are made equal to 125% of the anticipated annual LEOFF1 expenses.

Compensated Absence Reserve Fund: This fund was established to maintain reserves for covering vacation and sick leave bank payouts to employees upon separation. According to policy, 12% of the compensated absences liability, as reported in the most recent annual financial report, is contributed to this reserve.

Capital Projects Reserve Fund: This fund was established to maintain funds for capital replacement and improvements. It is structured as a single fund segregated into three asset class subcategories: apparatus, equipment, and major maintenance of facilities. Although all capital reserves are pooled within the Capital Reserve Fund, resources and expenditures are allocated to these distinct asset classes for the purpose of financial planning.

Healthcare Self Insurance Fund: This fund was established to manage funds associated with the RFA's self-insurance program for healthcare benefits. The program is overseen by a Third-Party Administrator and includes reinsurance through individual and aggregate stop-loss insurance policies. It provides coverage for former District 1 employees as well as all new hires at the RFA.

Debt

One of SCF's significant strengths is its debt-free status. This financial position enables SCF to allocate resources directly to operational and capital improvements without the obligation of debt repayments. Maintaining a debt-free status enhances SCF's financial flexibility, stability, and ability to respond promptly to emerging needs and opportunities, ensuring optimal service delivery to the community.

Although SCF is currently debt-free, there are critical capital infrastructure improvements needed. The first two phases of a three-phase capital facilities plan have been adopted. To fully implement this plan, additional revenues will be required. This may involve exploring various funding options to secure the necessary resources for these critical improvements.

Phase 3 of the Capital Facilities Plan will involve the RFA prioritizing its needs and evaluating various options for financing the identified capital improvements. Possible funding sources include:

- Regular Levy Funds: Increasing revenue through property tax levies, either temporarily or permanently, for single or multiple years.

- Councilmanic Debt: Issuing debt without voter approval, to be repaid over time using existing funds and regular revenues.
- Voted General Obligation (GO) Bonds/Excess Levy: Issuing debt through voter-approved general obligation bonds.
- Impact Fees: Municipalities served by the RFA could help fund new facilities necessitated by development and infill by collecting impact fees on behalf of the RFA. This collaboration would involve the RFA and the cities developing and adopting comprehensive plans that identify the growth-related need for additional fire facilities.

To effectively implement the Capital Facilities Plan, the RFA may utilize a combination of financing sources. By leveraging multiple funding options, the RFA can establish a flexible and resilient financial strategy. This approach aims to balance immediate infrastructure needs with long-term sustainability.

Post-Employment Benefit Liability

Compensated Absences

The RFA maintains a dedicated fund specifically for vacation and sick leave payouts upon employee separation. For represented employees, vacation leave can be accumulated up to 768 hours, while non-represented employees can carry over up to 1.5 times their annual vacation accrual. Upon separation, employees with less than 20 years of service receive payment for sick leave hours at 25% of their balance, up to 360 hours. Represented employees with 20 or more years of service receive 35% of their sick leave balance, up to 504 hours.

To cover these liabilities, the RFA contributes 12% of the total liability for compensated absences, which amounts to approximately \$6,000,000 based on the latest annual financial report. This fund ensures that the RFA can meet its obligations for vacation and sick leave payouts without adversely affecting the budget.

LEOFF 1 Medical

In Washington State, public agencies such as South County Fire are mandated to provide medical coverage and reimbursement for non-covered medical expenses for retirees under the Law Enforcement Officers and Fire Fighters Retirement System 1 (LEOFF 1). These retirees receive healthcare benefits managed and funded by their former employing agencies, which must budget and plan for ongoing healthcare needs.

The RFA is responsible for approximately 49 former Fire District 1 and City of Lynnwood LEOFF 1 retirees, with a calculated liability of approximately \$10,000,000. To ensure it can meet these obligations, the RFA maintains a dedicated fund specifically for LEOFF 1 medical expenses. Annually, the RFA contributes 125% of the anticipated expenses for LEOFF 1 medical care. Currently, this fund holds approximately 35% of the total calculated liability, providing financial security and stability for fulfilling its commitments to LEOFF 1 retirees.

Healthcare Self Insurance

South County Fire operates a self-insurance program for healthcare benefits, managed through a dedicated fund. This program is overseen by a Third-Party Administrator (TPA) and is further protected by individual and aggregate stop-loss insurance policies. Participants in the program include both former District 1 employees and all new hires at the RFA. Funding for the self-insurance program comes from contributions made by employers and retirees.

The fund's end balances are designed to cover approximately 30% of the annual program costs, serving as a buffer against unexpected liabilities. This approach helps the RFA manage healthcare expenses effectively while ensuring financial stability and resilience within its self-insurance program.

Financial Projections

South County Fire utilizes a financial projection model for comprehensive financial planning, encompassing revenue tracking, expenses, and reserve funding requirements. Revenue growth projections are based on anticipated increases in assessed property values, statutory constraints on levy increases, and potential for adjustments through voter approved levy lid lifts. Projected expenses consider existing service levels and anticipated cost escalations for these services. Also considered are the necessary transfers to reserves to adhere to established policies governing reserve funds, capital replacements, and other known liabilities.

The General Fund serves as the primary repository for all financial resources not designated for other funds. It encompasses revenues from regular property taxes, service fees, miscellaneous income, operational expenditures, and allocations to designated reserves. The General Fund balance typically fluctuates, reaching its lowest points in April and September during tax collection periods. The target ending balance of the General Fund is established to cover first-quarter expenses and provide operational reserves for contingencies. A recommended best practice advises maintaining an end fund balance equivalent to 35-45% of the operating expense budget.

As of the 2024 fiscal year, SCF has not provided an updated financial model. While the budget document includes a long-term projection, it lacks the necessary adjustments to revenue collection required to maintain General Fund targets and sustain current service levels. SCF acknowledges adjustments are required but intends to defer such financial planning until after the reauthorization of its benefit charge later in the year.

The chart below provides a projected financial outlook for South County Fire, following a methodology similar to that used for SCFD4 and SRFR. This projection is based on data from the 2024 SCF budget and employs comparable assumptions used in previous forecasts. It is crucial to note that numerous variables and future decisions impacting revenue and expenses are uncertain at this time. As such, this projection serves as a guide, subject to adjustments based on evolving financial conditions and strategic priorities of SCF.

Figure 29: SCF Projected Revenue and Expenses 2024-2030¹²

	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030
Beginning Balance	\$36,740,863	\$34,956,225	\$32,019,181	\$27,894,439	\$20,569,167	\$11,814,874	\$1,583,142
Fire Assessed Value	59,924,440,250	61,122,929,055	62,956,616,927	65,474,881,604	69,403,374,500	74,955,644,460	79,452,983,128
Projected AV Change		2.00%	3.00%	4.00%	6.00%	8.00%	6.00%
Fire Levy Rate	0.818	0.810	0.794	0.771	0.735	0.687	0.655
EMS Assessed Value	59,968,804,950	61,168,181,049	63,003,226,480	65,523,355,540	69,454,756,872	75,011,137,422	79,511,805,667
Projected EMS AV Change		2.00%	3.00%	4.00%	6.00%	8.00%	6.00%
EMS Levy Rate	0.348	0.345	0.338	0.328	0.313	0.292	0.279
Fire Taxes	49,000,000	49,490,000	49,984,900	50,484,749	50,989,596	51,499,492	52,014,487
EMS Taxes	20,850,000	21,058,500	21,269,085	21,481,776	21,696,594	21,913,560	22,132,695
Benefit Charge	7,754,590	8,142,320	8,549,435	7,000,000	7,280,000	7,571,200	7,874,048
Levy and Benefit Charge Revenue	77,604,590	78,690,820	79,803,420	78,966,525	79,966,190	80,984,252	82,021,231
Effective Tax Rate	1.295	1.287	1.268	1.206	1.152	1.080	1.032
Contracted Services/Transports/GEMT	27,469,478	28,018,868	28,579,245	29,150,830	29,733,846	30,328,523	30,935,094
Miscellaneous Revenue	2,656,646	2,709,779	2,763,974	2,819,254	2,875,639	2,933,152	2,991,815
Total Revenue	\$107,730,714	\$109,419,466	\$111,146,640	\$110,936,609	\$112,575,676	\$114,245,927	\$115,948,139
Operational Expenses	\$103,274,162	\$105,959,290	\$108,714,232	\$111,540,802	\$114,440,863	\$117,416,325	\$120,469,150
Transfers Out							
Emergency Reserves	400,000	410,000	420,250	430,756	441,525	452,563	463,877
LEOFF 1 Medical Reserve	1,289,231	1,321,462	1,354,498	1,388,361	1,423,070	1,458,647	1,495,113
Compensated Absences Reserve	717,111	735,039	753,415	772,250	791,556	811,345	831,629
Capital Projects Fund	3,834,848	3,930,719	4,028,987	4,129,712	4,232,955	4,338,779	4,447,248
Total Transfers Out	\$6,241,190	\$6,397,220	\$6,557,150	\$6,721,079	\$6,889,106	\$7,061,334	\$7,237,867
Total Expenses (Including Transfers)	\$109,515,352	\$112,356,510	\$115,271,382	\$118,261,881	\$121,329,969	\$124,477,659	\$127,707,016
General Fund End Balance	\$34,956,225	\$32,019,181	\$27,894,439	\$20,569,167	\$11,814,874	\$1,583,142	-\$10,175,735
Excess/Deficiency to Target	\$7,952,440	\$4,314,836	(\$528,642)	(\$8,591,297)	(\$18,102,105)	(\$29,109,979)	(\$41,665,136)

¹² Estimates contained in this figure were not developed or verified by SCF. However, projections were based data contained in SCF 2024 Budget and Snohomish County Assessor’s Office using similar assumptions regarding AV growth as used in SCFD4 projections.

The future revenue shortfall depicted in the figure above can be addressed with a combination of a modest, short-term benefit charge increase and a levy lid lift for either the EMS or Fire Levy, taking effect in the 2026 or 2027 budget year. The current assessed value, or tax base, is more than capable of supporting SCF's future revenue requirements while maintaining an effective tax rate consistent with current levels.

Potential Annexations

The incorporated municipalities served by South County Fire have annexed into the RFA, with the exception of the City of Edmonds. The RFA has notified Edmonds of its intent to terminate the contract between the agencies. Edmonds commissioned a study to evaluate its options, which included annexing into the RFA, contracting with the Shoreline Fire Department, and reestablishing its own fire department. The Edmonds City Council recently approved a resolution expressing its intent to proceed with annexing into the RFA. If Edmonds decides to annex, it would further stabilize the service area.

Mill Creek annexed into the RFA in 2023 after years of service provided by Snohomish Regional Fire and Rescue (SRFR). Mill Creek has a Municipal Urban Growth Area (MUGA) that could be annexed by the city in the future, potentially expanding the RFA's service area. The Cities of Lynnwood, Brier, and Mountlake Terrace all have MUGAs, although these areas are already served by the RFA.

Several municipalities outside the RFA have Municipal Urban Growth Areas (MUGAs) that extend into the RFA's unincorporated service area. These include:

- Mukilteo: Areas south and east of its current city limits, including the Lake Serene Station 23 response area.
- Bothell: Areas north and west of its current city limits, overlapping with both SCF and SRFR response areas, including the Hilltop Station 22 response area.
- Everett: Areas south and west of its current city limits, covering the Mariner Station 11 and Hilton Lake Station 12 response areas.

As of now, there are no immediate plans for annexation by these cities. Over time, unincorporated areas could gradually join neighboring cities through the annexation process. While annexations within the RFA could potentially impact the service area and capital facility planning, any effects are expected to be gradual.

The most pressing current issue regarding service area is the potential loss of service within the City of Edmonds. However, if Edmonds decides on a different course, it is not expected to significantly impact SCF's finances or service delivery. In fact, there is a perception that the RFA subsidizes service in Edmonds to some extent, given the cost of services and the differing tax rate paid by RFA taxpayers.

Partner Suitability

SCF presents itself as a suitable partner for SCFD4, primarily due to SCF's fully developed administrative structure, comprehensive number of support services, and the positive working relationship that currently exists between the agencies. These strengths offer significant advantages that could facilitate a smooth integration and enhance current operational capabilities. However, it is important to note that geographical and topographical factors may limit some operational benefits available in this partnership compared to a collaboration with SRFR, specifically in the context of a full consolidation. Additionally, SCF's service area can be described as primarily urbanized and developed, contrasting with SCFD4, which serves a mid to small-sized city surrounded by more rural areas. Nonetheless, the strong foundation of collaboration and shared expertise between SCF and SCFD4 provides the potential for a successful partnership. The following points highlight some of the areas of importance with regard to potential collaboration:

- **Well-Developed Administration:** Similar to SRFR, SCF boasts a comprehensive administrative structure with specialized personnel dedicated to finance, human resources, logistics, and other vital functions. SCF's wealth of expertise could significantly support the integration of administrative services within SCFD4. Furthermore, the established history of collaboration and positive working relationships between SCF and SCFD4 lays a strong foundation for a seamless transition and an effective partnership.
- **Fire Prevention/Fire Marshal Services:** SCFD4 has recently taken on the responsibility for Fire Marshal and Fire Code-related services within the City of Snohomish. This includes recommending fire code amendments, conducting new construction site and plan reviews, performing new construction building inspections, and inspecting existing buildings. As SCFD4 begins to develop its fire prevention program, it may require technical support. In contrast, SCF operates a well-developed Fire Prevention Division that provides all these services to five different municipalities. SCF is capable and willing to offer any level of support desired by SCFD4. Exploring partnership options with SCF could provide SCFD4 with the necessary support to enhance its fire prevention programs while maintaining internal control, soothing that is very important to SCFD4. Alternatively, SRFR prefers a model where all Fire Marshal services are contracted on a cost basis fee.
- **Full Array of other Support Services:** Similar to SRFR, SCF offers a full array of support services that can immediately benefit SCFD4. Access to SCF's support services, including IT support, GIS analysis, finance, HR, and logistics, could lead to cost savings, improved resource management, and better personnel and equipment utilization. SCFD4 has already utilized SCF for support with HR issues, GIS mapping, and Incident Data Analysis. However, there is one exception: vehicle maintenance. SCF vehicles are maintained by the City of Lynnwood, which may not have the capacity to accommodate SCFD4 apparatus and vehicles.

- **Deployment Options:** While SCF and SCFD4 share a contiguous border, the area between the more populated areas of each jurisdiction consists primarily of undeveloped agricultural land within the Snohomish River Valley. Unlike collaborations with SRFR, redeploying resources across these borders may not yield the same level of mutual benefits due to distance and geographical barriers. However, opportunities for collaboration between SCF and SCFD4 exist within their respective jurisdictions. Through joint training exercises, sharing of specialized equipment, and coordinated response protocols, both agencies can enhance their emergency response capabilities. By focusing on internal optimization and fostering partnerships, SCF and SCFD4 can work together to enhance overall emergency response effectiveness.
- **Preference for Annexation:** SCF was formed in 2017 with SCFD1 and the City of Lynnwood as the original members. The Cities of Brier, Mountlake Terrace, and Edmonds initially continued as contracted partners. In 2023, the City of Mill Creek annexed into the RFA, followed by Brier and Mountlake Terrace in 2024. In December 2023, the RFA notified the City of Edmonds of its intention to terminate the service contract. SCF's decision was purportedly driven primarily by the variance in effective tax rates between RFA taxpayers and those living in the city. Regarding SCFD4, the RFA expressed a preference for annexation but stated they would consider a contractual relationship with SCFD4, either functional or for all services, provided there is full cost recovery for any services rendered.
- **Potential Impacts on Service Delivery Goals:** SCFD4 has established operational goals for enhanced service, including increasing staffing, deploying a ladder truck within the City of Snohomish, and providing fire marshal services to the City. The feasibility of achieving these service enhancements will be a crucial point of evaluation when considering annexation. In this scenario, operational decisions would align with the broader jurisdiction of SCF, which encompasses a larger geographic area with potentially different service priorities. This framework may not fully accommodate SCFD4's specific goals, potentially limiting the feasibility of expanding service levels as originally envisioned within the smaller agency's operational scope.
- **Benefit Charge:** SCF relies on a benefit charge in combination with a reduced property tax levy as its main revenue sources, a method proven effective for funding essential emergency services. Proper analysis and application ensure taxes and fees are fairly apportioned to property owners. However, specific factors must be considered to determine if a benefit charge is suitable for a particular jurisdiction. Additionally, the complexity of the benefit charge requires clear communication to gain community understanding and support.

- **Positive Relationships:** The relationship between SCFD4 and SCF is characterized by a positive state of administrative familiarity and cooperation. Both entities have established a history of collaboration, marked by existing contractual agreements and prior instances of administrative assistance provided by SCF to SCFD4. Importantly, there is no history of significant conflicts or negative interactions between their respective labor groups, fostering a harmonious working environment.

In summary, partnering with SCF would provide SCFD4 access to a well-structured administrative framework and comprehensive support services, potentially enhancing administrative and fire prevention/fire marshal service capabilities immediately.

Moreover, under a full consolidation via contract, the district could maintain autonomy and desired service levels. However, under a full cost recovery contract, the cost of services could increase, impacting budget considerations for SCFD4.

Alternatively, annexation could potentially reduce costs. However, this approach might present challenges in maintaining original service level goals, as alignment with broader jurisdictional priorities and operational standards may be required. Service level concerns would be thoroughly addressed during the annexation process eliminating any surprises post-annexation.

Each option warrants careful evaluation to align with SCFD4's long-term strategic goals and financial sustainability.

Stakeholder Feedback

Numerous stakeholder interviews were conducted. These included discussions with internal members of SCFD4, representatives from the City of Snohomish, and individuals representing both SRFR and SCF, ranging from the Board members to Union Presidents and Executive Leadership. The discussions were enlightening, offering valuable insights that influenced the consultant's perspectives. Individual identities will be kept confidential, and this section will provide an overview of general ideas and themes.

Governance Perspective

In 2023, there was a significant level of interest and support for analyzing the potential benefits of regionalization of fire and emergency services between SCFD4 and SRFR. The primary motivation is to enhance the level of service for each community and leverage the positive values inherent in each organization. It was strongly believed that cooperation between the districts could eliminate redundancy and improve the effective deployment of emergency response units across the broader agency. This includes assets such as ladder trucks, Medical Services Officers (MSOs), and technical rescue resources. The governing boards also held the view that SCFD4 would gain immediate benefits from the existing support services available at SRFR.

With the change to the governing board at SCFD4 the current board still believes there is value in exploring the options and benefits of regional collaboration. However, the new board also believes the investigation should not be limited to SRFR.

Communication among board members has been described as highly effective, indicating a shared interest in evaluating existing regional service delivery methods and exploring options for efficiency and enhancement. Commissioners from all three agencies examined in this study appear to agree on the potential advantages. However, there is a diversity of opinions regarding the type of collaboration to pursue and the timeline for its establishment.

Commissioners from several Snohomish County fire service providers have initiated informal meetings to discuss fire service-related issues in the southern portion of the county. These meetings are specifically designed to address fire service delivery issues rather than focusing on consolidations.

Leadership Perspective

The leadership at SCFD4 is relatively new, with all members having assumed their positions within the last three years. They recognize the potential benefits of collaborative endeavors with SCF and SRFR. While there is a strong inclination to pursue cooperative services, many within SCFD4 believe that consolidation should proceed incrementally, allowing the District to address issues step by step.

The leadership at SCFD4 described a difference in philosophy and approach in the discussions with SRFR regarding partnership opportunities. While SRFR placed an initial emphasis on building relationships, SCFD4 was more inclined to directly address specific areas of consolidation deemed beneficial. Leaders from both SCFD4 and SRFR have reported that communication between the leadership of each organization has not always been smooth. Much of this appears to stem from varying philosophies and significantly different leadership styles that have persisted for decades.

SRFR's leadership appears fully committed to the complete consolidation of SCFD4 into their organization. They view SCFD4 as filling the geographical gap between their own two service areas and firmly believe that a complete consolidation would create a well-rounded organization. SRFR's leadership is convinced that their well-established administration and comprehensive support service programs would greatly expedite SCFD4's efforts to enhance services, particularly within the City of Snohomish.

Conversely, the relationship between SCFD4 and SCF is characterized as positive and supportive. SCF has demonstrated a strong commitment to assisting SCFD4 in various capacities, offering technical support and being open to exploring options ranging from contractual consolidation to annexation. This collaborative approach reflects a mutual respect between the two agencies, fostering an environment where both entities can work together effectively.

Labor Perspective

The SCFD4 labor group was highly transparent about their concerns regarding the Board's initiation of efforts to explore consolidation with SRFR. They believe that the Board's initial decision to limit discussions with SRFR while excluding other potential partners was influenced by the fact that two out of the three board members have direct affiliations with SRFR.

The labor group felt there was insufficient communication to solicit their input and involvement in the process. They believed they had a lot to contribute, but the Board didn't seem interested in seeking or considering their input. The entire process gave them the impression that the process of consolidation was being done to them rather than with them.

There have also been expressions of fear regarding the potential takeover by SRFR and longstanding feelings of being undervalued by SRFR over the years. This feeling is compounded by the fact they currently enjoy the working conditions present at SCFD4. Furthermore, the labor group has conveyed a strong sense of appreciation for the direction and progress achieved under Chief Waller's leadership. They find the current culture and working conditions at SCFD4 very satisfying. Additionally, they've emphasized their satisfaction in serving the broader community in and around the City of Snohomish.

The labor group at SRFR has expressed a strong desire for consolidation with SCFD4. However, they understand that the SCFD4 labor group is hesitant to engage due to perceived “process errors” related to the Board’s initiative to explore a consolidation with SRFR. In an effort to address these concerns, the SRFR labor group has shared information with the SCFD4 labor group about labor regulations and bargaining rights related to mergers. They believe there are substantial contractual benefits available to the SCFD4 labor group if they were to fully merge with SRFR. Despite these efforts, the SRFR labor group has stated that their attempts to communicate with SCFD4’s group have received little to no response.

Concerning a formal merger, SRFR labor clearly stated their position, indicating that they would support such a merger only under the following conditions: no one loses their job, and the majority of the SCFD4 labor group shows support for the merger.

SCFD4 labor has expressed appreciation for the decision to include SCF in the evaluation process, viewing the initial exclusion of this potential partner as concerning. While interactions with SCF have been limited, they have generally been positive. SCFD4 labor did not express a preference for or against consolidation with SCF but emphasized the importance of exploring all options thoroughly. They stressed the need to have a seat at the table in any direction taken to ensure their input is heard and considered throughout the decision-making process.

External Perspective

The City of Snohomish provided feedback in the form of questions. They wanted to know what benefits of a consolidation with SRFR would bring, specifically service enhancements and/or cost savings.

The City also praised the efforts of the current fire chief to improve what has been a poor relationship between the fire district and city for many years. At the time, agreements regarding joint property ownership and improvements to fire prevention services within the city were nearing completion. The City expressed concern that the new and improved relationship may not continue under a different management.

The City also expressed concerns about the survivability of the terms and conditions of the pending agreements.

General Themes

There appears to be a prevailing consensus that there are significant opportunities to improve service delivery by fostering collaborative efforts among multiple agencies in the region. From a geographical perspective, there is agreement that consolidating SCFD4 and SRFR makes the most sense and offers significant opportunities for improving services.

However, the feedback received suggests that historical and current relational dynamics, cultural differences, and divergent philosophies represent substantial obstacles that need to be acknowledged and surmounted for SCFD4 and SRF to progress collaboratively. SCFD4 appears to be very interested in regional collaboration provided such is more of a partnership rather than a takeover.

The relationship between SCFD4 and SCF is reported to be much more conducive to establishing functional partnerships. However, SCFD4 and SCF differ significantly in jurisdictional size and demographics. Despite these differences, SCF has demonstrated the willingness and capability to assist SCFD4 in areas of need, particularly in administration, technical support, and fire marshal services.

Labor often plays a pivotal role in shaping the outcome of consolidation initiatives. For any consolidation option to progress seamlessly, it is imperative that the labor group aligns with and supports the initiative. The SCFD4 labor group initially expressed concerns about the limited number of potential partners studied and the perceived rush to achieve a desired outcome. However, they were pleased with the additional analysis of SCF, hoping for a more balanced and complete picture of available options. This broader evaluation has helped to address some of their initial apprehensions, demonstrating the importance of thorough consideration and inclusive planning in consolidation efforts.

Labor challenges have the potential to introduce unforeseen difficulties and delays into the consolidation process. This can manifest as disagreements over labor conditions, staffing levels, job security, and other employment-related issues. When labor groups are not actively engaged or do not share a common vision for the consolidation, it can result in resistance, bargaining demands, or even legal obstacles that hinder the progress of the merger or consolidation.

To mitigate these challenges, proactive engagement with labor representatives is essential. It entails open and transparent communication, addressing concerns, and involving labor in decision-making processes. When labor groups are brought into the fold as active participants and their interests are considered, the consolidation process stands a better chance of proceeding smoothly. Their support is integral to the success of any consolidation initiative, as it ensures that the workforce remains committed and aligned with the overarching goals of the organization.

Strategies for Shared Services

The focus of this portion of the study is to examine the options for potential consolidation available to SCFD4. In recent years, SCFD4 has actively explored regional consolidation possibilities. This exploration has included formal discussions with the City of Everett to assess the potential formation of a regional fire authority. However, those discussions have been paused without a set timeline for resumption. Additionally, there have been informal discussions with South County Fire, although these conversations have primarily occurred at the administrative level.

Motivations for regional consolidations often revolve around the potential for cost efficiencies and/or service enhancements. Consolidation typically aims to streamline administrative functions, reduce duplications, and optimize resource allocation, potentially leading to cost savings and improved service.

When evaluating the potential for cost savings in any consolidation scenario, labor costs play a crucial role and must be thoroughly analyzed. It is essential to determine whether actual cost savings will be achieved. In many consolidation efforts, there is a desire to ensure smooth transitions, often resulting in the equalization of wages and benefits at the higher level and the adoption of a "nobody loses a job" approach. However, it's vital to acknowledge that this approach can sometimes lead to unintended consequences, such as increased labor costs due to role redundancies and elevated wages. Consequently, this approach may hinder any realization of significant cost savings in the short term.

When considering service enhancements, it is essential to evaluate the cost-effectiveness of improvements achieved through consolidation compared to those achievable through the status quo. SCFD4 must weigh the expenses associated with independently enhancing service levels against the potential benefits of regional collaboration.

In essence, the decision between maintaining the status quo and exploring consolidation options should be informed by a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis. This analysis should consider both short-term and long-term financial implications, including potential labor cost increases, administrative efficiencies, and the actual costs of enhancing services under each scenario. Ultimately, it's a balance between fiscal responsibility and the pursuit of superior service delivery that should guide SCFD4's strategic decisions

The remainder of this section aims to outline the key strategies available for consideration. Each of these strategies presents a set of unique advantages and challenges. The strategies include the option of maintaining the status quo and exploring options for regional collaboration, which can range from establishing a relatively small joint consortium to contracting for specific services, and even the possibility of a fully integrating with another entity. Each pathway brings forth distinct opportunities and implications, requiring a thorough analysis and careful consideration to determine the most suitable course of action for SCFD4.

Strategy A: Status Quo

Maintaining the status quo is a strategic choice that deserves careful consideration as it is the baseline against which all other options should be measured. This approach involves continuing current practices and structures without significant changes. While it might seem conservative, it can yield positive outcomes, especially when adequate services are being delivered and strategies for self-improvement are underway.

Additionally, by examining its current conditions, SCFD4 can identify areas where efficiencies can be found, and service enhancements made to address gaps in current conditions. This allows for a more nuanced approach to optimization, focusing on what's working well and addressing identified challenges, rather than implementing sweeping changes that may not always be necessary or beneficial. However, the downside of maintaining the status quo is that it may result in missed opportunities for improvement through consolidation.

Based on the findings of this study the option of maintaining the status quo is a viable one for SCFD4. The District has made a great deal of progress in the last few years to address identified deficiencies and improve service quality. As identified in the 2021 Standards of Coverage study, the District provides an adequate level of emergency response services in both the urban and rural areas of the jurisdiction. Additionally, the level of emergency service is unlikely to change dramatically in the event of a full consolidation.

Notably, the District maintains a strong financial position, more than capable of funding the existing and desired enhancements to service levels. The recent approval of the levy lid lift is particularly significant because it enables SCFD4 to proceed with its facility replacement plan without incurring significant interest and issuance costs associated with bond debt. Most importantly, this strategy aligns with the preference of the labor group, eliminating a potential disruption to what is a relatively positive labor/management relationship. This strategy balances the need for progress with fiscal responsibility, ensuring the sustained delivery of high-quality services.

As mentioned, the decision to maintain the status quo could eliminate or delay opportunities for improvement through regional collaboration. If the decision is to maintain the current state, it should not halt the evaluation of potential collaborative efforts; the focus should remain on pursuing efficiency and service enhancement, including those opportunities stemming from regional collaboration.

Strategy B: Contract for Services

A contractual consolidation approach is typically utilized when agencies desire to collaborate more closely but aren't yet ready, are unable to unify or merge, or prefer not to fully integrate. This approach offers the greatest flexibility compared to other consolidation options, as the agreement can evolve over time to meet the evolving needs of both parties. If the partnership doesn't prove beneficial for one or both parties, the contract can be terminated. Washington State Law enables this approach through the "Interlocal Cooperation Act." This strategy can be applied to specific functions like administration, training, fire prevention, or to all operational functions. With this approach, participating agencies maintain their independence with separate governance structures and autonomous taxing authority.

The two primary approaches used by agencies when engaging in these types of cooperative efforts are: (a) governance through a Joint Board or (b) a Contract for Service.

Under the first approach, leadership from participating agencies would guide the policy direction of the specific function, consolidated division, or entire department. In the case of full consolidation, this could involve the elected commissioners from both agencies or could be as simple as the two fire chiefs providing direction to a training consortium that offers joint training to both departments.

Under the second approach, the Contract for Service model involves one district agreeing to provide some or all services to the other district. The "served" district agrees to relinquish control and not directly participate in the policy direction of the consolidated department or specific services provided.

In either model, each agency still holds separate commissioner meetings and fulfills its fiduciary responsibilities to support the partnership and service delivery. The district boards would continue to independently govern the separate agencies, levying taxes at their respective rates.

If SCFD4 chooses to fully consolidate with another agency, the contract-for-services model might be the best approach. This model would enable SCFD4 to maintain specific service levels, such as staffing and the number and type of deployed units. Maintaining these service levels is crucial, particularly in light of recent agreements with the City of Snohomish. Additionally, contracting would allow SCFD4 to retain its capacity to levy the additional funds necessary to implement its capital facility replacement plan. A consolidation through a formal merger would necessitate a uniform levy collection rate, and as the merging District, SCFD4 would cease to exist thus forfeiting its ability to levy the funds necessary to address its capital facility needs. With a contract for service approach, the taxpayers in the partner jurisdiction would not bear the financial burden of addressing capital needs in SCFD4, and vice versa.

The most common approach when contracting for fire and EMS services is for the served agency to specify service levels. This usually includes specifying minimum staffing for each in-service fire station, the type and number of in-service units, and potentially performance benchmarks to ensure the maintenance of service quality. A performance-based contract of this nature could help alleviate concerns about the loss of control over desired service levels. The cost of services for this type of agreement is typically based on direct labor costs for the specified staffing levels, the cost of supplies and equipment required to outfit those levels, the cost of apparatus maintenance and replacement, as well as a proportionate share of administrative and overhead costs. Determining these costs is usually accomplished through a negotiated process conducted before the delivery of contracted services.

A functional (partial) consolidation might involve a contract-for-service arrangement, wherein one agency delegates specific service responsibilities to another agency. For instance, SCF currently provides fire marshal and fire code services to five cities within the RFA, while SRFR offers similar services to the Cities of Monroe, Lake Stevens, and Sultan. Other examples of contracting for services include the agreements between SCFD4 and SRFR. In these agreements, SCFD4 vehicles and apparatus are maintained by SRFR, with costs based on either a fixed fee schedule or an hourly rate plus the actual cost of parts and supplies. Additionally, SCFD4 recently decided to contract with SCF for Incident Data Analysis services, another example of leveraging external expertise to enhance its operational capabilities.

Alternatively, a consortium could be established, with agencies pooling staffing and funding to jointly operate a service, such as a shared training division. In this model, employees from participating agencies collaborate to achieve common goals and objectives while remaining employed by their respective employers. There are numerous regional examples of this consortium approach.

There are potential partnership avenues for SCFD4 to explore, each with the possibility of mutual benefit. Both SRFR and SCF, being a considerably larger organizations have comprehensive administrations and an extensive range of established support services, all of which offer the potential for collaboration.

For example, SCFD4 has identified a need to establish a fire prevention division following its recent agreement with the City of Snohomish. Although SCFD4 has recently filled a fire marshal position, it may still benefit from outside support to provide comprehensive fire prevention services. SRFR and SCF have well-established programs that currently provide fire code and fire marshal services to the cities within their service areas. SCFD4 has the option to contract with one of these agencies for additional support.

Other areas that could be considered for collaboration include:

- **Information Technologies (IT) Maintenance:** SRFR and SCF provide internal IT support and may have the capacity to assume SCFD4's IT maintenance. It is likely that the types of programs and security measures are similar.
- **GIS Data Analysis:** SCFD4 lacks internal GIS capabilities, whereas SRFR and SCF do not. Collaboration in this area is sensible as data used by these other agencies likely includes information relevant to SCFD4. Additionally, the type of analysis desired by SCFD4 is likely consistent with to what the others already utilize.
- **Public Education Programs:** While SCFD4 does not have a dedicated Public Education program, it places a high priority on public education. Programs already developed and delivered by SRFR or SCF would likely align with SCFD4's objectives.
- **Emergency Management:** SCFD4, SRFR, and SCF are all agencies that provide services to cities responsible for developing Comprehensive Emergency Management Plans (CEMPs). Special purpose fire protection agencies can offer significant support to smaller cities in plan development, staff training, and Emergency Operations Center (EOC) activations. Collaborative efforts among SCFD4, SRFR, and/or SCF with the cities they serve offer considerable benefits. By leveraging their combined resources and knowledge, these agencies can enhance emergency preparedness, response capabilities, and overall community resilience.
- **Logistical Support:** SRFR and SCF boast well-established Logistics Divisions. The opportunity to receive support and benefit from a larger volume of purchases may be worth exploring.

Exploring these collaborative opportunities holds the promise of heightened efficiency, enhanced services, and increased resilience, which can ultimately benefit partner agencies and the communities they serve. However, it's crucial to recognize that agencies may possess distinct philosophies regarding the extent and scale of administrative and support services, potentially introducing complexities into the collaborative process, including concerns about the potential loss of local control. Ensuring that all the components align seamlessly is of paramount importance.

Strategy C: Merger

A merger between SCFD4 and SRFR (Snohomish County Fire District 7) would create a single legal fire district. In this scenario, SCFD4 would be dissolved, and all its assets, including real and personal property, would be transferred to SRFR. Employees of SCFD4 would also become part of the merged district.

This strategy encompasses all legal functions authorized for fire districts. The commissioners of the merging district would automatically become commissioners of the merged district. Over time, the number of board members would gradually decrease to match the number of authorized positions the merged district had before the merger, following a gradual attrition process during each election year, as per RCW 52.06.085.

The decision to proceed with a merger involves compliance with the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) and initiating the election or petition processes. These steps lead to boundary review board approval and approval by the voters in the merging district. The entire merger process can take anywhere from one to two years to complete, depending on various factors and potential issues that may arise.

Washington State law governing annexations, mergers, and RFAs stipulates the equalization of tax rates or the establishment of a blended tax rate between the merging districts. In the scenario where SCFD4 merges into SRFR, tax rates would be equalized, and SRFR's existing annual levy inflation factor would be applied. This is significant due to SCFD4 voters recently approving a levy lid lift. This authorization restored SCFD4's levy rate to the statutory maximum of \$1.50 per thousand of assessed value and permits annual levy collection increases of up to six percent for the next six years. This provision empowers SCFD4 to utilize regular levy funds for its capital facility replacement plan.

However, if SCFD4 were to merge into SRFR, the merged agency would no longer have the ability to collect this additional funding required to complete the capital projects in the current SCFD4. This specific factor should be thoughtfully considered by both agencies when evaluating their consolidation options.

Considering the equalization of tax rates in the event of a merger with SRF, it is likely that tax rates will remain relatively consistent. Historically, levy rates have closely tracked between the two agencies, so taxpayers could anticipate costs to align with their past experiences.

Nonetheless, a critical factor to consider is SCFD4's recent contributions of approximately \$0.20 of its levy collection to its capital project fund. In the context of the merger, this allocation suggests that the cost of actual services could be slightly higher under this strategy.

The impact on taxpayers largely depends on how the merging districts address the funding of capital projects. If the merger allows for the continuation of general levy collections to fund SCFD4's capital projects, the cost of current services might remain stable. Conversely, if additional funding, such as bond debt, is required post-merger, this could lead to a shift in the cost structure for taxpayers.

Therefore, when evaluating the potential cost of a merger, it's crucial for both agencies to carefully assess how capital projects would be funded to ensure transparency and to minimize unexpected financial impacts on taxpayers. Clear communication and planning in this regard will be instrumental in making the merger process as smooth and cost-effective as possible.

The merger strategy closely aligns with SRF's preference. SRF, an organization experienced in navigating merger complexities, has successfully undergone two previous mergers in the recent past. Their comfort with the merger process, along with the valuable lessons learned in merging operations and cultures, underscores their preference for this approach. Additionally, SRF views the permanence of a merger as a favorable outcome, providing stability and a unified vision for the future of fire and emergency services in the region.

However, to successfully implement this strategy, building stronger relationships among the commissioners, Chief Officers, and staff of both organizations is paramount. Currently, these relationships are not strong, and substantial improvements are necessary, particularly given the complexities of a merger process. Neglecting to address these underlying relational challenges before a merger could lead to significant post-merger complications.

It is imperative for both parties to collaborate closely, addressing identified issues, aligning their visions and philosophies, and gradually progressing towards the consolidation of their organizations. A practical step in this direction could involve establishing a planning committee tasked with developing a comprehensive strategic master plan. This plan would serve as a guiding document, fostering a shared vision, mission, and a unified set of values for the new, merged department. Such a collaborative effort will play a crucial role in ensuring a harmonious and effective merger process.

Strategy D: Establishing a Regional Fire Authority

The establishment of a Regional Fire Authority represents a significant strategic opportunity for SCFD4 to consolidate operations and enhance the efficiency of fire and emergency service delivery to its communities. SCFD4 could consider forming an RFA with SRF or resuming the efforts initiated with the City of Everett.

To initiate the process of forming an RFA, the following steps would typically be required:

- The establishment of an RFA planning committee. This committee must consist of three elected representatives from each participating agency, and should also include members of the administrative staff, and labor representatives from all agencies. The committee's primary role would be to thoroughly assess the feasibility and benefits of creating an RFA. They would be responsible for conducting a comprehensive study that includes financial, operational, and legal considerations.
- The planning committee would also be responsible for the development of a formal RFA plan. The plan must include the following elements: the services to be provided by the RFA, the structure of the governing body, the funding mechanism to be utilized (property tax levies, benefit charges, excess levy, etc.), the level of service/standard of cover, the makeup of the administration, and the level of involvement and integration of the labor groups.
- Engaging the public and stakeholders is a crucial component of the RFA formation process. Public input, through community forums and public surveys, would help gauge community support and gather valuable insights and concerns. Transparency in the decision-making process is essential to ensure that residents are informed and involved in shaping the future of their fire and emergency services.
- Establishing an RFA requires adherence to state laws and regulations. The planning committee would work closely with legal counsel to navigate the legal complexities involved in creating an RFA. This includes addressing governance structures, taxation, and the transfer of assets and liabilities from the individual agencies to the RFA.
- Once the decision to proceed with an RFA is made, the planning committee would need to create a detailed plan for integrating the governance, administrative and operational functions of the consolidating parties. This plan would involve establishing a governance model, combining administrative functions, standardizing response protocols, and optimising resource allocation to ensure a streamlined and efficient service delivery across the new entity.
- The financial aspects of the RFA would be of utmost importance. The planning committee would need to determine how the RFA would be funded, how taxes would be levied and distributed, and how shared resources and costs would be managed. A comprehensive financial plan is vital to ensure the long-term sustainability of the RFA.

- During the transition to an RFA, participating agencies would need to continue providing essential services to their communities. A transition plan would be developed to ensure a smooth handover of responsibilities and minimize disruptions in service delivery.
- The RFA would require a governance structure that adequately represents the interests of the citizens served. There is significant flexibility in establishing a governance board for an RFA. The only real requirement is that governance board must be made up of elected officials. Some of the options include the formation of an elected board of commissioners for the RFA, fire commissioners from both current fire districts, or could be a hybrid model comprised of elected councilmembers from the served cities and elected members from the at-large unincorporated areas of the jurisdiction.

Forming a Regional Fire Authority (RFA) offers the potential for increased efficiency and improved service delivery. However, as detailed above the creation of an RFA is a time-consuming process. This extensive timeline can lead to delays in achieving the desired consolidation, potentially prolonging the realization of efficiency gains. Even after the comprehensive work of the planning committee there is no guarantee of success.

Unlike a merger, which typically requires a vote only in the merging district, the formation of an RFA necessitates a ballot measure involving the entire service area. This means that communities served by SCFD4 and any other participating agency would need to vote on the RFA proposal, adding complexity and requiring broader voter support, which may not be guaranteed.

Another downside to consider is the possible perception by SRFR, which may view the RFA planning process as unnecessary, offering them very little return on investment. After experiencing two previous mergers, SRFR may question whether the potential gains are substantial enough to warrant the time and resources required for the formation of a RFA. Additionally, the City of Everett's previous withdrawal from discussions raises concerns about their commitment, which could impact the stability and viability of future RFA negotiations.

On the other hand, the RFA process holds greater appeal for internal stakeholders within SCFD4. Engaging in the RFA planning process would provide SCFD4 with the opportunity to actively contribute to the creation of a new agency, rather than simply being absorbed by another agency. This participation encompasses crucial matters that impact service delivery systems, the labor group, existing community relationships, and governance structure. This approach ensures that SCFD4 maintains a more active role in shaping the future direction of fire and emergency services in the region, aligning with its specific priorities and needs.

In weighing the pros and cons of RFA formation, SCFD4 should carefully consider whether the benefits outweigh the drawbacks, considering the time, effort, and uncertainties associated with the process.

Strategy E: Annexing to a Regional Fire Authority

Annexing into the existing South Snohomish County Fire and Rescue Regional Fire Authority is an option for SCFD4. The annexation process is governed by Washington State law, specifically RCW 52.26, which outlines the procedures for jurisdictions to join an existing RFA. This process is notably more straightforward and less cumbersome than the alternative of establishing a new Regional Fire Authority with the City of Everett or SRFR. By opting to annex into the SCF, SCFD4 can take advantage of the established operational framework, resources, and infrastructure that the SCF has already developed.

Moreover, the SCF RFA service plan includes provisions for modification by the SCF governing board. This adaptability ensures that the unique needs and requirements of SCFD4 can be seamlessly integrated into the existing service model of SCF. The flexibility of the service plan is a critical factor, as it allows for tailored adjustments that can enhance service delivery and operational efficiency.

It is also important to highlight that, in the case of annexation, only the voters within SCFD4 would need to approve the annexation proposal. This localized voting requirement simplifies the approval process, concentrating the decision-making power within the community directly impacted by the change. This focused approach not only streamlines the process but also ensures that the voices of SCFD4 residents are prioritized.

Annexing into the SCF RFA presents a strategic opportunity for SCFD4 to enhance its fire and emergency medical services. This strategy could provide significant benefits, including improved resource allocation, operational support, and community safety, making it a prudent option for SCFD4.

Findings

From the analysis conducted throughout this process, it's evident that SCFD4 is fully capable of operating independently as an agency. However, there are numerous opportunities for collaboration to consider with either SRFR or SCF.

While the current relationship between SCFD4 and SRFR might not be optimal, and the potential for operational efficiencies with SCF may be lacking, there is significant potential for improvement and enhanced efficiency through collaborative efforts. Despite existing challenges, it is important for the three organizations to continue strengthening their relationships and exploring opportunities for deeper partnerships.

Based on the information gathered throughout this study, several conclusions can be drawn regarding SCFD4 and its potential for regional collaboration. The following list highlights the significant and applicable findings:

SCFD4 has Progressed – SCFD4 has demonstrated a forward-looking approach to improvement in recent years, making notable strides both financially and operationally with further enhancements planned. Initiatives aimed at enhancing call processing and response times have yielded positive results, with room for further improvement with continued emphasis.

SCFD4 Provides an Adequate Level of Service – Considering the district's coverage of an expansive 62-square-mile area with topographical challenges, SCFD4 provides an effective response in relation to the present level of risk. Automatic aid plays a crucial role in optimizing response times, particularly in areas affected by distance and topographical barriers.

SCFD4 Maintains a Strong Financial Position – The jurisdictional assessed value not only supports the current service levels but also accommodates planned enhancements. Additionally, the District has taken significant steps to bolster its reserve funding for known liabilities, ensuring long-term financial stability.

SCFD4 Maintains a Positive Workplace – SCFD4 appears to maintain a workforce that is both happy and content, fostering a positive and productive environment for all its members.

SCFD4 Values Customer Service – Throughout the process leading to this report, members of SCFD4 consistently exhibited a strong commitment to serving those who reside, work, and visit the area served. The district's personnel genuinely take pride in serving the community and are dedicated to its well-being.

SCFD4 Strives to Meet Expectations – SCFD4 has consistently demonstrated a significant commitment to delivering satisfactory levels of service to its community. The recent adoption of its strategic plan serves as an example to these ongoing efforts.

SCFD4 Levy Has Been Crucial – The 6% levy inflation factor has allowed the district to not only avoid debt but also minimized the need for more frequent levy lid lifts, ensuring fiscal stability for the near future.

SCFD4 Capital Facility Improvements – As has been identified, SCFD4 needs to upgrade its capital facilities. The three stations are 30-40 years old and were primarily built on residential type standards. Current configuration does not accommodate additions to staffing or specialized apparatus. SCFD4 has a plan to finance capital improvement primarily with regular levy funds.

SCFD4 Capital Facility Replacement Funding Plan Will Save Money – By funding critical capital replacements through the general levy, the District avoids incurring debt-related expenses, ultimately leading to cost savings and financial stability.

SRFR and SCF Capital Facility Improvements – SRFR and SCF also have significant need to upgrade, replace or add new fire facilities. Both agencies have developed comprehensive capital facility plans, however the source of funding for these projects has yet to be determined. It is safe to assume that full implementation of SRFR and SCF capital facilities plans will likely require excess funding beyond regular revenue collections.

Collaborative Partnership Options Exist – There are numerous partnership opportunities available for consideration, all with the potential for mutual benefits for SCFD4, SRFR and/or SCF. These options span from establishing a training division consortium to contracting for fire marshal services, up to a full consolidation through a comprehensive service agreement or formal consolidation¹³.

SCF is a Suitable Partner – SCF presents itself as a suitable partner, thanks to its well-developed administration and extensive set of support services, which could assist in filling gaps present at SCFD4. SCF's financial stability further enhances its attractiveness, providing a reliable foundation for sustained collaboration. Moreover, SCFD4 and SCF have fostered a positive working relationship characterized by mutual respect and shared goals in enhancing community safety.

However, despite sharing an adjacent border, the geography and topography between the jurisdictions may limit the opportunity for mutually beneficial unit deployment options. Moreover, while SCF is open to a contractual relationship, it may have a preference for annexation, aiming for a more integrated and unified approach.

¹³ Formal consolidation could be in the form of any of the following: Contractual, Merger, Annexation, or the formation of a Regional Fire Authority.

SRFR is a Suitable Partner - SRFR is a suitable partner due to its geographical adjacency, financially sound position, effective operational performance, and extensive set of support services. These qualities make them well-aligned for possible collaboration, clearly possessing the capacity to assist in filling some of the identified gaps at SCFD4. Collectively the parties could enhance efficiencies and emergency fire and rescue services to the communities served.

Communication Among SCFD4 and SRFR is Poor – The existing level of communication between SRFR and SCFD4 at almost every level falls short of what is necessary for effective collaboration. In moving forward, a concerted effort must be made to enhance communication channels and establish regular, open lines of dialogue between the two organizations.

Recommendations

Drawing upon the findings of the study conducted, which extensively scrutinized SCFD4's administration and operations, it is evident that SCFD4 currently delivers a satisfactory level of service and maintains a sound financial position. Notably, there is no compelling evidence suggesting an urgent requirement for consolidation or merger. This finding affords SCFD4 the opportunity to exercise deliberate consideration and thoughtful exploration of the best path forward, without the pressure of urgency.

It is crucial for SCFD4 to develop a clear and comprehensive understanding of bargaining obligations in any proposed consolidation strategy. Ensuring compliance with labor laws and regulations before, during and after the consolidation process is essential. Failing to navigate these aspects correctly could lead to disputes, disruptions, and potential legal challenges that might hinder consolidation efforts. Therefore, obtaining legal guidance and labor expertise is essential to safeguard the interests of all parties, maintain labor harmony, and ensure a smooth transition during consolidation. This approach enables SCFD4 to proactively address labor-related issues, negotiate agreements, and uphold the rights and benefits of its employees while fostering a collaborative and legally compliant consolidation process. This recommendation holds true to any of the potential options SCFD4 may consider.

Recommendation

Based on the study findings and valuable stakeholder feedback, the recommendation is for SCFD4 to adopt a phased approach. Initially, SCFD4 should maintain the status quo in the short term while simultaneously preparing for a transition towards Strategy B. This transitional strategy should involve a deliberate exploration of opportunities aimed at achieving increased efficiencies and improved services through functional consolidations, facilitated through the use of inter-local cooperative agreements. This approach allows for a structured and flexible evolution that considers both the immediate needs and long-term goals of SCFD4.

The initial focus of collaborative efforts should be to address the pressing need for SCFD4 to augment its ability to provide fire code and fire marshal services to the City of Snohomish. Subsequently, attention can turn towards consolidating training divisions, which has the potential to foster synergy, optimize resources, and promote cultural integration across the agencies. This approach aligns with SCFD4's commitment to continuous improvement while ensuring the seamless delivery of critical services to the community.

Rationale

The rationale for not pursuing a full consolidation at this time is multifaceted. First and foremost, the absence of a unified and enthusiastic approach among the organization's members is a significant concern. Achieving consensus and securing buy-in within the organization and among stakeholders are paramount when considering a consolidation effort. A lack of unity can impede the successful transition and realization of the benefits that consolidation can offer.

Moreover, the existing relational dynamics and communication between SCFD4 and SRFR, both at administrative levels and among labor groups, underscore the current lack of readiness and receptivity for a full consolidation or merger between those agencies. Although the relationship may be more conducive to collaborative partnerships between SCFD4 and SCF, there are potential limitations to the benefits of a full consolidation between these agencies.

Furthermore, the recommendation for a phased approach, as opposed to immediately pursuing a full consolidation or merger, considers the absence of labor support. The lack of labor backing could potentially lead to delays and legal complications, threatening the positive workplace environment within SCFD4, which, in turn, may affect the community's perception of the organization. Avoiding these potential disruptions and maintaining a harmonious work environment underscores the importance of a phased approach, emphasizing cooperation and minimizing the risk of disputes or legal issues that could impact both internal and external relationships within SCFD4.

Separate from the relational issues previously discussed, the capital replacement and improvement necessities of all three agencies play a role in this recommendation. The estimated capital facility outlays for SCFD4, SRFR, and SCF appear to be proportionally similar, reflecting the need for significant investments in infrastructure improvements. However, a critical distinction lies in the funding capacity of these projects. SCFD4 has successfully secured the ability to fund a majority of its capital projects, providing a degree of financial stability and predictability in its planning. In contrast, it is currently unknown how SRFR or SCF intend to fully fund their capital projects. This uncertainty regarding funding sources, capacity, and timing factors significantly influences the recommendation of a phased approach through a series of functional consolidations. By collaborating in a step-by-step manner, the agencies can better align their capital facility needs with available resources, without an unintended subsidy from one agency or the other. This ensures a more sustainable and efficient path forward for all.

Additionally, it's essential to recognize that SCFD4 has recently adopted a strategic plan outlining a thoughtful and methodical approach to future collaborations, including mergers and consolidations. This strategic plan emphasizes the organization's commitment to a well-structured and deliberate approach aimed at achieving more efficient service delivery models. Developed collaboratively through an internal process, this plan places a strong emphasis on operational improvement. It identifies various potential strategies to enhance operational efficiency and optimize service delivery, such as regional resource allocation, regional service delivery, and objective evaluation of consolidation opportunities. This strategic roadmap aligns organizational objectives with the pursuit of more efficient and effective service delivery while ensuring that the timing and readiness for consolidation are carefully considered.

In summary, proceeding with an approach that aligns with the internally developed goals and objectives of the strategic plan is likely to boost support and engagement in the process of exploring various options. The well-thought-out development and practicality of the plan offer a logical path forward. However, to enhance its effectiveness, it is important to include specific objectives and completion timeframes, which will elevate their priority and ensure a structured and accountable implementation process. While this plan provides a strong starting point and direction, additional work and details will be required to fully realize its potential and achieve the desired outcomes.

For this phased approach to be successful, it will rely on the support of all members of the organization, including the governing board, administration, and labor. It is crucial that this journey maintains an inclusive, open, and transparent process with clear communication as it evolves.

Considerations for a Full Consolidation

The decision to pursue a full operational consolidation or formal merger ultimately rests with the governing board. As identified throughout this study, the benefits of a full consolidation certainly justify consideration. However, the governing board must carefully weigh these benefits against the current circumstances and the organization's overall readiness for such a transition.

This study originally focused on SRFR as a potential partner, and the findings indicate SRFR is a highly suitable candidate. SRFR is an adjacent agency, and its service area comprises a comparable mix of urban and rural areas, making it a compatible match for SCFD4. Additionally, SRFR is a larger accredited organization with fully developed support service programs, which could significantly expedite the ability to address the identified service delivery gaps within SCFD4, especially in the area of fire prevention. Moreover, the flexibility to adjust staffing and unit deployment across the broader jurisdiction offers substantial benefits, potentially enhancing overall emergency response capabilities. However, if a full consolidation with SRFR is the desired outcome, developing positive working relationships between SCFD4 and SRFR, on both administrative and labor fronts, will be paramount. These relationships serve as the bedrock for successful collaboration and integration efforts.

The project scope was expanded to include an assessment of South County Fire (SCF), which presents similar opportunities for consolidation as SRFR. As the largest fire service agency in Snohomish County and one of the largest in Washington State, SCF possesses a well-developed administrative structure and offers a comprehensive array of support services. Furthermore, the existing positive relationship between SCFD4 and SCF would be advantageous for integration efforts.

A consolidation with SCF could promptly address SCFD4's requirements to enhance administrative capabilities and support evolving services. However, despite sharing a small adjacent border with SCFD4, the geography and topography between the two response areas may not facilitate the mutually beneficial redeployment of response units. While SCF is willing to explore a contractual relationship, annexation would be preferred if a full consolidation were to occur. Annexation would enhance organizational stability and ensure uniform tax collection throughout its jurisdiction.

If a full consolidation with either SCF or SRFR is the desired outcome, the recommendation would be to pursue it through a contractual relationship, at least initially. This approach would enable SCFD4 to proceed with the implementation of its facility replacement plans while leveraging the advantages available through consolidation. A contractual arrangement could serve as a transitional phase, allowing the organizations involved to evaluate and explore the feasibility of a more formal and permanent integration in the future. This phased approach ensures flexibility and allows for careful assessment of the benefits and challenges before committing to a complete consolidation through a formal merger or annexation.

Regardless of the direction taken, proactively engaging the labor union and securing their support is essential to ensure a smooth transition and avoid potential conflicts during the consolidation process. Gaining public support and trust, including the support of the City of Snohomish, is equally vital. Transparent communication with the community and city officials is necessary to explain the benefits of consolidation and address any concerns or misconceptions that may arise.

Full Consolidation Implementation Planning

In the event of a decision to pursue a full consolidation, initiating a collaborative planning process focused on crafting an Implementation Strategic Plan is advisable. Engaging an experienced professional skilled in strategic planning is recommended to guide this process.

The initial strategic planning session should serve several key purposes:

- Elaborating and refining the joint vision held by the agencies for the full consolidation.
- Identifying critical implementation issues, including potential obstacles from organizational culture, labor matters, external influences, and time constraints.
- Defining specific goals, objectives, and timelines for implementation.
- Establishing the necessary Implementation of Working Groups.

This process should culminate in the creation of an implementation planning document. Accessible to all governing board members, stakeholders, and individuals involved in or impacted by the implementation process, this document will summarize the shared vision, describe the service strategy considered, specify goals and objectives, and lay out tasks and timelines for implementation. Upon adoption by both agencies, such a document can serve as a comprehensive guide, detailing each step of the process and providing clear direction for subsequent actions, including the formation of working groups and assignment of responsibilities.

During the planning process, it is crucial to establish work groups responsible for conducting in-depth analyses, evaluating options, and making decisions on specific processes. The structure of these working groups may vary based on the consolidation strategies under consideration. Below are common working groups typically employed in consolidation processes:

Governance and Legal Group: Focuses on defining roles and responsibilities of each agency's governing board, ensuring compliance with legal requirements, addressing legacy costs, and facilitating a smooth transition.

Finance Group: Develops cost and financial projections, explores funding mechanisms, and assesses impact on local revenue sources. Develops costing models for determining annual cost of service and plans for capital facility replacements and improvements.

Operations Group: Responsible for detailed planning of operational changes, analyzing service demands, staff and unit availability, and deployment options. Provides recommendations for service improvements and economic efficiencies, and addresses changes to operational procedures and training standards.

Labor Group: Focuses on labor-related matters, including consolidation of bargaining units, negotiation of collective bargaining agreements, safeguarding employee rights and benefits, and facilitating integration of organizational cultures.

Calculating Costs

The calculation of costs for a full consolidation depends significantly on the type of consolidation chosen. For a contractual arrangement, estimating costs requires a comprehensive analysis of several critical factors. The initial step involves precisely defining the desired service levels, including specifying the number and types of response units (such as fire engines, ladder trucks, and aid units), and identifying non-emergency services like fire prevention and public education. Stipulated performance standards must also be incorporated into the cost calculation process.

Labor costs constitute the most substantial part of the calculation, encompassing wage and benefits costs for operational personnel required to meet established service levels. This typically ranges from four to four and a half full-time employees per position in minimum daily staffing. Additionally, costs for supplies, equipment, and apparatus necessary to support services must be determined.

Administrative and overhead costs are also critical and should be proportionally distributed between the agencies. These costs include management expenses, facilities upkeep, utilities, insurance, and shared resources. Distribution is typically based on the ratio of operational personnel from the contracting agency to the total number across both agencies.

Developing a cost model for contracted services involves a negotiated process where both parties collaborate to establish a mutually agreeable financial arrangement ensuring equitable cost-sharing and sustainability throughout the contract's duration. It's crucial to maintain an annually updated costing model for consistency and accuracy in cost determination.

In contrast, calculating costs for a formal merger or annexation follows a straightforward process due to state law requirements mandating a uniform tax rate. Should SCFD4 merge into SRFR or annex into SCF, a uniform tax rate across the newly combined jurisdiction would apply. Historical tax rate analyses suggest minimal changes for SCFD4 taxpayers in a merger with SRFR. However, the earmarked reserves currently set aside by SCFD4 for capital facility replacements might need reevaluation for operational funding post-merger, potentially challenging sustained capital project funding.

A merger with SRFR may result in somewhat higher operational costs due to factors like higher labor contract costs and a larger administrative structure. Conversely, annexation into SCF could potentially lower SCFD4 taxpayers' property taxes, reflecting SCF's historically lower effective tax rate.

To ensure fiscal prudence, SCFD4 must carefully evaluate the timing and funding sources required for SRFR's and SCF's significant capital projects. This evaluation will mitigate the risk of SCFD4 assuming a disproportionate share of future costs and uphold service level goals established by SCFD4 residents.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this document serves as a comprehensive assessment of SCFD4's current status and its potential for enhanced service delivery. It reflects SCFD4's commitment to continuous self-assessment and improvement. Through collaboration with both internal and external stakeholders, rigorous data analysis, and exploration of future service models, this report provides insights and actionable recommendations.

The scope of the study was expanded in March 2024 to include an analysis of South County Fire as a potential partner, broadening SCFD4's evaluation of consolidation options. This expanded analysis has identified additional opportunities for SCFD4 to consider, emphasizing a phased approach that prioritizes immediate enhancement through collaboration.

By seizing available opportunities, SCFD4 can effectively address current challenges and strategically position itself for sustained success. It is our hope that this document serves as a guiding resource, supporting SCFD4 in achieving service excellence and fostering a safer, more resilient community.

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Appendix B: Budget and Finance Survey Table

SURVEY 2: BUDGET & FINANCE

SURVEY COMPONENT	AGENCY INFORMATION
FINANCE OVERVIEW	
Designated fiscal year?	Jan 1- Dec 31
Current year assessed property value	\$8,233,367,130
Current year FD general operating fund budget	\$11,762,179
FD general fund property tax levy (if district)	\$9,433,716
Levy rate (5-year history, plus current year)	2023- 1.15, '22-1.419, '21- 1.459, '20-1.397, '19-1.283
Levy collection, expected vs actual (5-year history)	GF '22- , '21-99.6%, '20-100.1%, '19-99.6%, '18-100%, EMS '22- , '21-99.8%, '20-99.7%, '19-99.7%, '18-111.3%,
Outstanding bonds, fire district	None
Bond levy rate (principal & interest); expiration	NA
Other tax levies/fees (include specific purpose)	NA
Levy rate & annual amount from last 2 years	NA
EMS Levy, rate & annual amount from last 2 years	'23-0.337 \$2,2,833,702, '22-0.440 \$2,780,280
Benefit Charge collected? Date initiated	NA
Percent of general fund from Benefit Charge?	NA
BUDGET & MONETARY CONTROLS	
Budget officer (Name)	Thad Frater/Don Waller
Describe budget development/approval process	Custodians submit line-item requests, details, and justifications to the Fire Chief. The Fire Chief adjusts as needed and presents a full budget revenue/expense to the Board with levy options and full detailed line-item information. Fire Chief consults with AC of Finance through the process and other AC's and line-item custodians
Financial control officer	AC Frater
Financial report (include previous 5-year annual CAFR)	This has only been the finalized budgets that you have.
Financial review	Same as above, along with all documents for SAO Audit
Auditor (include previous 5-year annual audits)	Uploaded
Basis of accounting	Cash basis
Purchasing	See Policy and resolutions

SURVEY COMPONENT	AGENCY INFORMATION
Describe purchasing policy	If approved in the budget and 1,500- 50k, Chief approves, under 1,500 and in the budget custodian approves. If not approved in the budget or over 50k board approval is needed. Controlled by policy and resolution
Is there an FD central supplies/logistics?	Limited
Are there joint agreements/ventures?	No
Purchasing controls in place? (describe)	See above. Limit credit cards. Purchase Auth forms for anything over 1,500, Invoices go through a custodian, AP/AR and AC of Finance
Are there current leases?	No
Is capital inventory maintained?	Yes
Asset security system used? (describe)	Trying to move to operative IQ
Frequency of capital inventory performed?	From weekly to yearly
Monetary controls used	
Cash access controls in place? (describe)	Yes, policy in place. Secured holding, regular deposits of receipted funds. 2 persons required with separated responsibilities
Credit card controls in place? (describe)	10 card holders, 3 with low limit. CC invoices must be approved if within policy. Non card holder checks all CC invoices and payments. No cash withdrawals allowed. Fraud notification system and transaction verification.
DEBT	
Bonded debt amounts	NONE
Capital lease amounts	NONE
Unfunded liability amounts	NONE
LEOFF1 Liability	NONE
Outstanding Workers' Compensation claims	NONE