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Skagit 911 raising fees for police, fire agencies

By BRANDON STONE @brandon_svh

Should railroad workers strike, Skagit County may have to close its transfer station. Railroad strike would likely affect Skagit County transfer station

The Skagit 911 Board of Directors narrowly passed a 2023 budget Wednesday that calls for significant fee increases for local law enforcement agencies and fire departments.

The budget, which passed by a vote of 4-3, includes average fee increases for law enforcement agencies of 28% and for fire departments of 21%, though most of the fire department fees are covered by the county.

Skagit County Emergency Medical Services covers 85% of fire department fees through a retroactively approved EMS levy.

The county’s emergency dispatch center needs more revenue primarily to cover negotiated salary increases, according to Executive Director Helen Raasmussen.

The measure passed one budget option to the board Wednesday — one that fully funds the second option, 37 dispatcher positions, and one that reduced staff payroll by 8% in exchange for smaller increases in law enforcement agency and fire department fees.

The board passed the fully-funded option.

Raasmussen said the second option reflects the staffing situation at Skagit 911. The agency has been fully staffed in years due to high turnover and a lengthy six-month training process for new dispatchers.

On the off chance the center is able to reach full staffing, Raasmussen said in large cash reserves could be seen.

“The only reason that I would be comfortable doing this is based on that large ... fund balance,” she said.

Mount Vernon Fire Chief Brian Broo, who asked that the fully-funded option not be considered, said he felt Skagit 911 has other things on which to spend its fund reserves.

While not necessarily opposed to continuing staffing costs, he said fund reserves should be committed to providing appreciation for the dispatch center.

The center has several capital funding commitments and plans to fund a new annex building.

“If we know we have fund balance, let’s use it if it’s needed,” he said.

Earlier this year, the board considered asking voters for a sales tax increase, but failed to get approval from each of the member governments as required.

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About 4,900 members of the Teamsters Local 250, representing Machinists and Aerospace Workers District 19 voted to reject the tentative agreement negotiated by IAM leadership with the railroads, the union said Wednesday. But the IAM agreed to delay any strike by its members until Sept. 29 to allow more time for negotiations and to allow other unions to vote.

Railroads are trying to reach an agreement with all their other unions to avoid a strike before Friday’s deadline. The unions called for strike to begin Friday under the federal law that governs railroad contract take.

Government officials and a variety of businesses are bracing for the possibility of a nationwide rail strike that would paralyze shipments of everything from crude oil and clothing to cars, a potential calamity for businesses that have struggled for more than two years due to COVID-19-related supply chain breakdowns.

Two vote results will be announced Thursday after the ballots are counted.

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By brandon stone @brandon_svh

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Public Works Director Grace Kane said the station, on Ovenell Road west of Burlington, could have the space to accommodate garbage that builds up during a one- or two-day strike.

Anything longer is much more likely to result in a closure, she said.

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