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Guest Editorial [Column]

September 30, 2019

Hospital & Fire Districts Can Save You

What exactly is Hospital District or a Fire District and why are you asked to vote for its commissioners?

Hospital District

Public Hospital Districts are considered municipal governments under Washington state law (RCW 70.44) and as such, are governed by a board of commissioners who are elected to the position and serve a 6 year term, according to the Public Hospital District Commissioner Guide (published by the Association of Washington Public Hospital Districts).

There are two hospital districts in Kittitas County and each has 5 commissioners. These commissioners are nonpartisan and elected 'at large' in that they represent the entire district and not a particular area within the district's boundaries.

Hospital District #1 (HD1) covers lower county and provides care as Kittitas Valley Healthcare. It also operates KVH hospital. Hospital District #2 (HD2) covers upper county and provides care as Medic One ambulance service as well as some limited urgent care to upper county residents. Only voters in upper county can vote for commissioners to HD2 while only lower county voters can elect commissioners to HD1.

The Board of Commissioners sets hospital district policy and operational organization, including the delivery of quality care. The Board's role is to adopt general policies and to delegate day-to-day operations to the district administrator.

How are Hospital Districts funded?

A Hospital Board of Commissioners can raise money through property tax levies and bonds as well as through patient fees for healthcare services. To fund its services, HD1 relies mostly on patient revenues generated from medical treatment at Kittitas Valley Hospital and its clinics, while HD2 relies on property taxes paid by upper county property owners.

Your vote for hospital district commissioner will help determine what healthcare services are available to you, service location, potential tax burden, and more. Make your vote count. Go to VoteWA.org to discover which Hospital District you reside within.

Vote. It matters.

Fire District

What is the difference between a Fire District and a Fire Department? A Fire District is considered a municipal government under RCW 52.02 and is independent of a county or city government whereas a Fire Department is generally a subdivision of a city or county and under the control of that government.

Fire Districts can and do work closely with Fire Departments as their functions are often the same: fire prevention, fire suppression, emergency medical services, protection of life and property. Though there are 7 Fire Districts spread across Kittitas County, they do not cover all of it.

Fire Districts are overseen by a Board of Commissioners of 3 or 5 nonpartisan elected individuals who typically serve 6 year terms. As with Hospital Districts, the Fire Districts in our County elect their commissioners 'at large' which means they represent the entire Fire District.

The Board is usually responsible for determining levels of service and service goals, how the district will be funded, tax levies, budget approval, strategic planning, establishing policies and

approving operational procedures, employing key personnel and supervising the fire chief. The Fire Chief is the CEO of the District and responsible for day-to-day operations.

To meet District goals and operational needs, the Board of Commissioners can:

- ~ acquire, purchase, manage, and sell real and personal property
- ~ enter into contracts
- ~ appoint and employ necessary personnel
- ~ levy and enforce collection of taxes
- ~ carry out lawful acts that fulfill the purpose of RCW 52.

Only the voters within a Fire District boundary are eligible to vote for commissioners of that District. For example, a resident living inside Fire District 3 cannot vote for Fire District 7 commissioners. Some rural areas of Kittitas County are outside any Fire District's boundaries.

Fire Districts are funded principally through property taxes of property owners within the district's boundaries. RCW 84.52.069 (with some restrictions) gives Fire Districts the authority to level additional property taxes to provide emergency medical services, according to the Fire Commissioner Handbook (published by Washington Fire Commissioners Association).

Fire Districts can also raise funds through fees for Emergency Medical Services (EMS), recover the costs of unauthorized burns from property owner, contracting District's services to other uncovered areas, issuance of bonds (with voter approval) and more.

If you live inside a Fire District, its decisions about where and when to fight fire; whether to recover costs from you as a property owner, how much you may have to pay as a user of EMS care, all of this and more could impact you.

Therefore, you should carefully assess candidates for Fire District Commissioner because your vote will have immediate consequences. Do you know if you live inside or outside a Fire District? To find out, go to VoteWA.org and discover what Fire District - if any - has the duty to protect you and your property from fire.

Vote. It Matters.