

PRESS RELEASE

EMS Saves Lives Campaign Committee

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County First Responders Correct EMS Levy Misinformation

(Bellingham, WA) – Today local emergency medical first responders spoke out to clear up misinformation put forward by the Committee of Public Safety, a group formed to oppose the emergency medical services (EMS) levy on this November’s ballot.

“This isn’t about partisan politics for us, this is about saving lives,” said Robert Glorioso, President of Bellingham/Whatcom County Firefighters. “When the levy opposition tells voters they will continue to have excellent care without the EMS levy, that just isn’t true. The EMS Executive Oversight Board has stated that service will be reduced. As first responders trying to reach people in time to help, we know firsthand that the system is stretched thin and can’t stretch further.”

One of the questions raised is whether the 2005 public safety sales tax approved by voters could have funded a fifth paramedic unit. The Committee of Public Safety has stated, “In 2005 an EMS sales tax was approved after officials told us they would add a new ambulance.” To a voter, that sounds compelling. However, the July 2005 Emergency Services Plan placed the deployment of a fifth paramedic unit last on a list of thirteen planned system improvements. Unfortunately, the recession hit in 2008 and county sales tax revenue fell, underscoring why Whatcom County needs to move emergency medical services funding to a more stable revenue source.

Due to the lack of anticipated revenue from the sales tax, the four paramedic units that have been in place since 2001 continue to provide all advanced life support service countywide. Whatcom County has gained 40,000 new residents in the past 15 years with no additional paramedic units. Continued population growth without new resources will impact system response times.

One of the larger areas of misinformation comes from a misunderstanding of how Whatcom County’s demographics and geography affect the delivery of emergency medical care. “Whatcom County is a large, rural county with just one hospital,” said Michael Gustafson, President of Whatcom District 7 Firefighters. “Our call times will always take longer than urban areas like King County because we respond to medical emergencies from Mt. Baker to Lynden to the refineries, and then we transport people

into Bellingham. One call can take an hour and a half.” The Committee of Public Safety is comparing the Whatcom County system with urban environments, like King County, where there are multiple hospitals and paramedics travel short distances to transport a patient. The Whatcom County system needs enough paramedic units to cover a large geographic area with an increasing population, which is why the number of calls per day will always be lower.

“Let me tell you how the system works,” said Jerry DeBruin, Fire Chief of Whatcom County Fire District 14. “When you call 911 for a medical emergency, the first responders are your local firefighter/EMTs. They are at the patient’s location quickly and help to stabilize the patient. The EMTs are communicating with the paramedics to inform them of the patient’s condition. When the paramedics arrive, they immediately begin delivering emergency room care and continue to deliver that care as they travel to the hospital. From out in the county, all of this can take well over an hour between the time you call and the time you get to the hospital. But the way our EMS system works, you get emergency room care from the minute we reach you.”

The EMS Saves Lives Campaign Committee is providing factual information to voters about the levy and the consequences to the countywide EMS system if the levy fails. The Committee of Public Safety members lack an understanding of the EMS system and the factors involved in providing emergency medical service in Whatcom County.

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