

Thurston County Fire District 8

Strategic Communications Plan

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and District Staff



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>Executive Summary</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>Key Messages</u>	<u>4 & 5</u>
<u>Strategies & Tactics for Message Delivery</u>	<u>6</u>
<u>Membership Communications</u>	<u>6</u>
<u>Paid Communications</u>	<u>6 & 7</u>
<u>Earned Media</u>	<u>8-9</u>
<u>Owned Media</u>	<u>10</u>
<u>Social Media</u>	<u>11</u>
<u>Public Outreach</u>	<u>11 & 12</u>
<u>Communications Plan Calendar</u>	<u>Appendix</u>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Thurston County Fire Protection District 8 (the “District”, also known as the South Bay Fire Department or Sbfd) hired Liz Loomis Public Affairs (“LLPA”) to develop Key Messages and a Strategic Communications Plan (“Plan”) to guide the agency in improving communication with its stakeholders and sharing of its strategic direction and plans. One application for this process is anticipated to be a series of communications with District taxpayers in anticipation of a District sponsored ballot measure (election).

The purpose of this Plan is to provide a “blueprint” for the District to provide ongoing two-way communications with its citizens, its members, its neighbors and other stakeholders. The District will rely on its own staff to implement the Plan, so the selected projects need to be adequate in scope but also respectful of their time.

This Plan was prepared based on conference calls, interviews, communication materials, and reviewing web sites, news articles, and social media postings. It also considered demographics for the area, including political leanings, median home values, and income levels to better understand potential target audiences.

There were two parts to this project. First, LLPA developed *Key Messages* about what information the District should be sharing (for example, in anticipation of a ballot measure). Second, LLPA incorporated those messages into the Plan that provides an itemized list of projects, and a calendar of when to complete and deliver that information to stakeholders.

KEY MESSAGES

This section outlines the key messages developed by LLPA and the District staff. Key messages represent the main ideas to communicate to stakeholders. They are designed to share information about the District, address community issues and interests, and identify District priorities. District staff will work with the Board of Fire Commissioners (“Board”) to develop and adopt these key messages.

Once adopted, these four messages should be shared with all District personnel, so they are aware of what is being communicated appropriately and accurately. These messages then will be repeated throughout the materials the District creates and become the basis of all communication with the public, stakeholders and social media.

1) The South Bay Fire Department is staffed by a combination of career and volunteer members.

The South Bay Fire Department provides fire and emergency medical service (EMS) to approximately 13,000 members of the public across 32 square miles. The SBFD is a “combination department” staffed with 19 full-time, one part-time, and 35 volunteer personnel. In 2021, firefighters responded to over 1,200 emergency calls, 77% of which were EMS-related. Call volumes have increased 47% since 2008.

2) The South Bay Fire Department is accountable and transparent to its taxpayers.

The SBFD is debt-free, self-funds its capital assets’ replacement, and has passed all its independent audits by the state. It has a strategic plan in place to guide its spending decisions, including adequate reserves, and fire commissioners are elected locally by the community. All Board meetings are open to the public both in-person and virtually, and the community can attend or review the recorded meetings on the District website. To stretch tax dollars further, the SBFD actively recruits volunteers, seeks alternate forms of funding, and develops partnerships with neighboring agencies.

3) The community will drive service levels which determine South Bay Fire Department resource requirements.

There must be a balance between expected levels of service and funding for the SBFD. The level of service we can provide is important for the health and safety of our entire community as our population ages and as we grow. Service levels also define the community’s fire protection “risk rating,” which is linked to what many homeowners pay in fire insurance premiums. We regularly seek input on services we provide but the ultimate community decision on the service levels we can provide occurs through voter approved levies.

KEY MESSAGES (CONT.)**4) The South Bay Fire Department wants its community involved in funding decisions about the services it delivers.**

Currently, the Sbfd funds daily emergency operations through a regular fire levy of up to \$1.50 per \$1,000 of assessed property value paid through property taxes. Over time, levy rates fall as property values rise to limit the Sbfd to roughly the same amount of revenue per year (plus a 1% increase allowed by law). Occasionally, the Sbfd will ask for voter approval for additional revenue to fund needed service improvements. As costs have risen, our current level of funding is no longer enough to support our service goals. We are preparing to propose a levy increase above \$1.50 in November 2023 to continue to provide service at current levels.

In the event the Plan “blueprint” is used to facilitate communications with its voters and taxpayers to sponsor a tax ballot measure or other revenue enhancement, additional key messages can be used.

STRATEGIES AND TACTICS FOR MESSAGE DELIVERY

MEMBERSHIP COMMUNICATIONS

Once adopted, the Strategic Communications Plan will be shared with the membership of the Department, to include the South Bay Firefighters' Association, Union members, The Community Outreach Team (COT) and local partnerships. Emphasis will be on the four key messages, to encourage consistent messaging by all members.

PAID COMMUNICATIONS

Paid communication activities are the backbone of a strategic communications plan. This is because the District controls the message, timing and delivery of information. There are two pieces of direct mail that it can do for this type of outreach:

Newsletter

The District should plan for a newsletter that is two pages (one 8.5" x 11" page printed on both sides). This newsletter format allows for three brief articles with photos and/or graphics. LLPA likes one article to be a personal message from the Fire Chief, which highlights current issues such as a ballot measure. Other articles can be current stories that staff would like to share about the District. The newsletter also should include how to access the District website and social media pages.

The District's goal is to produce and deliver newsletters on a quarterly basis every year.

The following are suggested stories for newsletters:

- Fire Chief's message should **thank** the community for its support, highlight the challenges facing the District, and introduce the idea of revenue challenges. Another article should be based on the second key message of financial stewardship. The third could be on fire prevention or life safety.
- The Fire Chief's message should **update** the community that the Board is considering the issue of District revenue and impacts on service levels and what potential measures to resolve the issue entails. Subsequent articles could be introducing challenges to service and how service improvements would save lives and property. Another article with pictures could be on the District's community involvement.
- The Fire Chief's message should **include** an update on any proposed revenue solutions (including ballot measures), the problems revenue solutions will solve, and where to find more information regarding the proposal. Another article could be prevention-related. A final article could profile the District's issue of importance that it is planning on solving.

Direct Mail Piece for Ballot Measures

A public agency can produce one piece of fact-based mail about a ballot measure. LLPA propose the District develop the piece in early enough prior to a proposed ballot measure so it can be copied and used at community meetings or other events. LLPA likes a *Frequently Asked Questions*

card that provides details of a ballot measure, why it is needed, and what it would fund. This content should be based on the key messages, and other questions the District receives.

By law, any mailed communication piece must be sent to all households in the District's service territory. Work with a professional mail house to do a "voter file overlay" of District data. This will capture people who are registered to vote in your area but receive their election ballots at a different address.

Keep in mind the time it takes to produce a piece of mail, which can be 4-6 weeks before the piece is delivered to the post office either by the District or a printer/mail house. This includes story development, photos, design, printing, bulk mail preparation, processing postage checks, and delivering the bulk mailing to the post office for your desired drop date.

Fire Chief's Report

The Fire Chief produces a monthly report that is sent to all stakeholders and posted on the District website. Communicating with all personnel is just as important as sending newsletters and a direct mail piece to the public. It's good to know that you have this vehicle to reach everyone who works for the District. LLPA recommends a monthly updates from the Fire Chief to all personnel including the status of any ballot measure. Articles should be no more than 300 words in length. Here is a breakdown of what to write about in different months:

- Share key messages with all personnel once adopted.
- Give people a heads up that the newsletter is going out and attach a copy before it hits mailboxes.
- Copy them on any news releases you send before they might see them in the paper or online
- Refer stakeholders to the website to learn more about any ballot measure.
- Ask personnel to refer you to community groups to whom you can deliver the message (for example, a PowerPoint presentation).
- Invite them to the public hearing where the Board is considering any ballot measure related resolutions.
- Remind them that the Board passed the resolution and attach the latest copy of the newsletter/monthly report.
- Copy stakeholders on press coverage with a reminder of what the District is trying to do.
- Invite stakeholders to attend question and answer meetings on ballot measures, especially after it is formalized with the county.
- Remind members to vote (not how to vote) and deadlines to mail or drop off their ballots.
- Thank personnel for supporting the SBFD and participating in the election. Regardless of the outcome, talk about next steps for the District.

Volunteer Recruitment

The District is committed to support and maintain its volunteer program as a major portion of its response and support force. Incentives, stipends and other value-added benefits are constantly being reviewed. It continues to update its volunteer recruitment program.

EARNED MEDIA

Earned media, or distributing information through local news sources, is one of the most cost-effective ways to educate the public about our key messages. It is important to develop positive working relationships with reporters, editors and/or producers for publications that cover your service area. Here are projects LLPA recommends the District address.

Media Sources

The first step to an effective earned media effort is to develop a comprehensive list of news resources that could publish or share information from the District. At a minimum, this should include print, television, cable and broadcast radio stations in your service area.

In addition to this list, the District will want to develop a secondary group of service organizations, homeowner associations, water districts, church groups, parent-teacher organizations, elected officials, and social media pages that serve the area.

It's important to have the contact information of these publications and organizations in an electronic format for ease of communication. The District should create a simple email distribution list that includes information for all media contacts. This email group receives all media releases that contain strategic content, or significant incidents in the District. The District should assign a person, ideally the Fire Chief, who would be the appropriate person to send this information.

Media Release Template

The District should have a media release tool that features its logo and contact details. Content is typed into this template, all of which is then copied and pasted into the body of an email to send to the approved media list. It is better to have the media release in the body of the email as opposed to attaching it. An attachment requires another step by the receiver and lowers the chance of opening and publishing it. Also, some media outlets block incoming e-mail with attachments for security reasons.

Media Releases and Ballot Measures

LLPA recommends that the District do several strategic media releases, including events leading up to an election. Strategic media releases are different than incident reporting. In these media releases, LLPA uses the key messages for the content.

Based on the publication deadlines for your print media, the District will want to send the media releases 5 days before a time sensitive event.

Suggested topics are as follows in this order:

- Challenges to service based on the key messages. (Content should be repeated in the Fire Chief's report and for his/her message in the first newsletter.)
- After outlining what those are, it is shared that the Board may be considering an excess

levy as the revenue solution. Be sure to point out that the District has been working to minimize impacts to taxpayers through grants, reserves etc., but these funding sources are not sustainable. However, service demands have increased to the point where it can no longer keep up financially.

- The Board may meet to consider a resolution asking voters to approve an excess levy in an upcoming election. The public is invited to attend and learn more. Provide details of the meeting, the proposal and what it will fund.
- When the Board passes any resolution asking voters to consider an excess levy the text should include when the measure will be on ballot; details about the proposal; what it would fund; why it is necessary; and, where to find more information.
- Invite people to public meetings you are scheduling to answer questions about any ballot measure. (See the *Public Outreach* section below.) Remind people that the proposal is on the ballot. Explain what the ballot measure proposal would fund (i.e., personnel and apparatus), and how these items are essential to saving lives and property.

Letters to the Editor Regarding a Ballot Measure

Letters to the Editor are another way to get information published and repeat messages that are timely and relevant. It also can reach an entirely different audience, i.e. some people read opinion pages exclusively while others prefer straight news. Refer to the media list for where to send a letter to the editor, and make sure letters do not exceed the word count limit. Here are suggested authors and topics before and after the Board takes action:

- The Fire Chief invites the public to participate in the discussion. The letter should describe increasing call volumes, and the challenges that full-time and volunteer firefighters see daily. It should contain content as to how the excess levy will help the District better save lives and property.
- A firefighter thanks the Board for placing the excess levy on the ballot reiterating content.
- The Fire Chief thanks the public for participating in the recent election –regardless of the outcome. If the District’s ballot measure passes, it should thank them and plan to report back as the money is used to save lives and property. If it fails, the District will use this piece to communicate next steps as to how you will continue to provide the best service possible within budget.

Editorial Board Meetings

It’s important that the District work to build relationships with local news media. As a result, LLPA recommends that the Fire Chief, Board President and a member of the union, and one from the volunteer association meet with reporters and editors once a year. During these meetings, the team will cover the Key Messages and simply socialize. The District cannot ask the media to editorialize on any ballot measure, however, it can ask them if they have any questions about a proposal if they planned on doing so or any other topic of the conversation.

OWNED MEDIA

Owned media includes assets owned by the District that can be used to deliver key messages. For this portion of the Plan, LLPA is referring to the District website and signage owned by the District.

LLPA understands that there may be signage at different stations in various states of use or development. The District will want to make sure that they reflect the message the District is sharing through other communication channels.

LLPA recommends a dedicated page on your website to share information about any ballot measure. If possible, add a tab to the top with the title “Ballot Measure” as opposed to “burying” it somewhere else on the site.

Make sure the website is updated before the District mails or sends news releases in case people come to check it based on you referring to it as a resource for more information. Use content from our Key Messages to introduce information in phases:

- Challenges to service and the idea of a revenue related ballot measure in a few brief paragraphs, why it is needed, and what it will fund.
- Add information about when the Board is considering any resolution.
- Update the website language to let the public know when the Board has passed any such resolution and when they will see it on their election ballots.
- After the election, update the website with a strong thank you message. Use this area to report back with pictures of what you have accomplished with the funding.
- The District website effectively becomes a resource/library for information on the excess levy or future funding requests.

Such content with corresponding links to PDFs would include:

- Frequently Asked Questions on a District Ballot Measure – This can be a running list of questions District staff can develop or are asked by community members. Keep it updated throughout the project and then an abbreviated version of the content can simply be cut and pasted for your direct mail piece.
- Media Releases – Put the date and title of the media release in a list format under this link.
- Media Coverage – Again, list the date and title of any news article or coverage for any ballot measure in the order it occurs.

For the District website and social media, it is recommended that it archive both if it is not doing so already. This is necessary if the District should get a public records request during the project.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is a communication strategy that has grown in importance. Strategic messages should also be shared on any other social platforms added including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, NextDoor, and so on. All communication materials District staff create should be cross posted to the social media accounts. Also, encourage personnel and staff to share information you develop through their social media accounts, as well.

LLPA is including short video recommendations to share information as needed. District staff can use the videos repeatedly during the pre-election for any ballot measure, or other events. Here are what they should cover:

- Three minutes – Briefly cover facts about the District and its accomplishments in the past year. Spend the last two minutes talking about challenges to service.
- Two minutes – Board meeting on any related resolution, and what the revenue related ballot measure would fund or event impact(s).
- 90 seconds – If/when the Board passes a resolution, it's on the upcoming ballot, and how the revenue related ballot measure would improve service.
- 60 second – Thank voters for supporting the District's ballot measure or event. This should include a follow-up communication that will report back on the improvements here including "X, Y and Z".

PUBLIC OUTREACH

The final component of an effective communications plan is determining a public outreach strategy. This includes spending time sharing our key messages at different community gatherings. It also means inviting people into the District through organized meetings to show the organization is transparent and accountable to the public.

All communications must be consistent with and related to the KEY MESSAGES.

The District has formed a Community Outreach Team ("COT") consisting of representatives of administration, operations, volunteer and career staff. The Team's goal is to communicate with our community in a meaningful and organized way. Communication methods include messaging on our website, social media, community newsletters, Department reader boards, personnel and crew interactions and public events. The COT would lead most of the public outreach efforts.

LLPA recommends that the first step is to develop a brief PowerPoint that reflects the adopted key messages. The presentation should be no more than 20 minutes in length and contain images of the District, its operations and emergency personnel. Do not select all photos of things on a fire incident, but include happy personnel in turnout gear, and public events are more effective. Ideally, the Fire Chief would present the material, but a Board member could do so, as well.

Some of the content may need to be broken up into multiple slides, but here is a general outline:

- "Thank You" – Lead with a positive and thank your audience for their support. Recognize the women and men who serve the community in their roles as emergency responders.

- Key Messages 1 – 4.
- “How We Are Funded” – Give details about how the District is funded for its operations. You may explain how the regular fire levy has decreased and the pressure that has placed on the District.
- “Challenges to Service” – What challenges is the District facing to provide service? Explain those here.
- “Proposed Solutions” – Introduce potential actions including propose ballot measures, what the actions or measures will cost, how much they will raise and what they will fund. Emphasize that the District is asking just for what is needed at the time.
- “Volunteer with Us” – Recruitment message!
- Questions – Provide contact details for the speaker, the District, website and Facebook.

In a draft form, share the presentation with all personnel for input. This will help to educate everyone associated with the agency about the District and its key messages. Make edits based on their input and promote that the Fire Chief is available to speak to community groups. Reach out to these organizations and request an opportunity to present at their upcoming meetings. Be sure to take copies of the newsletter or Frequently Asked Questions card to leave behind after the presentation.

Open Houses also are an important part of this plan. Inviting residents to tour the fire stations, talk to firefighters and see fire engines makes emergency services real. It also is an excellent way to engage young families with activities for children and attract older residents with offerings like blood pressure checks.

In addition to community events, the District should plan on organizing a couple meetings geared toward any ballot measure using the prepared PowerPoint. The first would be the public hearing where the Board deliberates on a resolution for the ballot measure.

Other public meetings should be scheduled closer to an election date, approximately when ballots “drop”. Determine the best time to hold the meetings based on the community’s demographics. Morning meetings are good for retirees. Weekend or evening meetings are good to try and attract those who are unavailable during working hours. It is a nice touch to provide refreshments, but not required.

As a final note, don’t worry if there is low attendance at these meetings. It’s not about getting many people. It’s about showing that the District is transparent in how it conducts business and open to their questions.