

# Strategic Communications Plan 2022-23

**South Bay Fire Department**



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Thurston County Fire District 8 (known as the South Bay Fire Department) hired Liz Loomis Public Affairs (LLPA) to develop Key Messages and a Strategic Communications Plan to guide the agency in improving communication with taxpayers in anticipation of a Maintenance and Operations Levy (M&O Levy). The intent is that the Fire District will ask voters for this type of excess levy to fund daily operations and capital items.

The purpose of this plan is to provide a communications “blueprint” for the Fire District to use each month leading up to the election. The Fire District will rely on internal personnel 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. We also took into account demographics for the area, including political leanings, median home values, and income levels to better understand the target audience.

There were two parts to this project. First, we developed Key Messages about what information the Fire District should be sharing in anticipation of a ballot measure. Second, we incorporated those messages into a Strategic Communications Plan that provides an itemized list of projects, and a calendar of when to complete and deliver that information to the community.



## KEY MESSAGES

This section outlines the key messages developed by LLPA and the Fire District. Key messages represent the main ideas to communicate to taxpayers over the next several months. They are designed to share information about the Fire District, address community concerns, and identify agency priorities.

Once approved, these messages should be shared with all personnel so they are aware of what is being communicated leading up to the election. These messages then will be repeated throughout the materials you create and become the basis of all communication with the public and news media.

### ***Thank you for supporting the South Bay Fire Department***

*Thurston County Fire Protection District 8 (known as the South Bay Fire Department) provides fire and emergency medical service (EMS) to approximately 13,000 people across 32 square miles. The SBFDF is a “combination department” with 19 full-time, one part-time, and 40 volunteer emergency personnel. In 2021, firefighters responded to over 1,200 emergency calls, 77% of which were EMS-related. Call volumes have increased 47% for the agency each year since 2008.*

### ***The South Bay Fire Department is accountable and transparent to its taxpayers.***

*The SBFDF is debt-free, operates under a balanced budget, 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, and the community is encouraged to attend. We actively recruit volunteers, seek grants, and develop partnerships with neighboring agencies to stretch your tax dollars further.*

### ***We want our community involved in funding decisions about emergency services.***

*The SBFDF funds daily emergency operations through a regular fire levy of \$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 SBFDF to roughly the same amount of revenue per year (plus a 1% increase allowed by law). Occasionally, we ask for a “lid lift” or “excess levy” to fund needed service improvements. Excess levies help us keep up with increasing costs for service due to higher call volumes and inflation. Historically, this has been adequate to fund both daily operations and capital needs.*



***Our community requires a higher level of care.***

*Our community is growing and people are aging, which requires more emergency calls for medical care. Call volumes have increased 47% since 2008, and it is difficult to recruit and retain volunteers. Some firefighter positions are currently funded out of reserves, which is not sustainable. Additional emergency personnel are needed to respond to calls. The Sbfd is considering asking the community to vote on a four-year maintenance and operations levy in 2023 to help fund additional emergency personnel.*

***More firefighters will improve response times, and emergency services.***

*The M&O levy would maintain and improve service levels to support an improved emergency response without further draining emergency reserves. This would enable the Sbfd to staff both its stations 24-hours a day and have two fire engines in service at all times. These service level improvements are important as our community grows and ages to help people have safety, security, and adequate care. It also will maintain the community's "risk rating," which is linked to what some homeowners pay in fire insurance premiums.*



## STRATEGIES AND TACTICS FOR MESSAGE DELIVERY

Leading up to the election, it is important to hold monthly meetings with a project team. We had good participation on our intake call, and that group could be the basis for your project team moving forward.

At those meetings, participants discuss what communication projects were completed last month and the public's reaction. The next step is to cover the communication projects planned for the upcoming month and identify who will do what to accomplish the plan. These in-person meetings are important to hold people accountable and move the project forward.

This section of the plan identifies communication projects and public outreach that should be completed leading up to the election. Communication projects are recommended based on what would be most cost-effective and time-wise for the SBFD.

All of the materials created by the SBFD should be fact-based and educational. They cannot advocate for or against the ballot measure. Once approved, they should be cross-posted to the agency's web site and social media accounts.



## PAID COMMUNICATIONS

Paid communication activities are the backbone of a Strategic Communications Plan. This is because the SBFD controls the message, timing and delivery of information. There are two pieces of direct mail that the agency can do for a ballot measure project:

### **Newsletter**

The SBFD 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. We like one article to be a personal message from the Chief, which highlights current issues such as the M&O Levy. The two other articles can be current stories you would like to share about the SBFD. The newsletter also should include how to access your website and social media pages.

One edition of the newsletter must be mailed in 2022 to be able to use this as a communication tool in 2023. We are proposing one edition in 2022, and two for next year.

The following are suggested stories for the three newsletters:

By November 2022 – Chief’s message should thank the community for support, highlight the challenges facing the SBFD, and introduce the idea of an M&O Levy to resolve those challenges. Another article should be based

on the second key message of financial stewardship. The third could be on fire prevention or life safety.

February 2023 – Chief’s message should update the community that the Board is considering a resolution to be on the August Primary Election ballot and what the measure 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 SBFD’s community involvement.

Summer or Fall 2023 – Chief’s message should include an update on the M&O Levy, the problem it will solve, and where to find more information on the website. Another article could be prevention-related.

Mail this piece one week after ballots drop.

A final article could profile the SBFD’s issue of importance that it is planning on solving.

### **Direct Mail Piece**

Summer or Fall 2023 – A public agency can do one piece of fact-based mail about its ballot measure. We propose you develop the piece in early Spring so it can be copied and used at community meetings or other events. You could choose a different format, but we like a Frequently Asked Questions card that provides details of the M&O Levy, why it is



needed, and what it would fund. This content should be based on the key messages, and other questions the SBFDD receives.

Mail this piece the same day ballots drop. Contact your county elections department to find out if they may go early and coordinate accordingly.

By law, any mailed communication piece must be sent to all households in your service territory. Work with a professional mail house to do a “voter file overlay” of your 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 SBFDD 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.

### Chief’s Report

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 Fire District. We recommend monthly updates from the Chief to all personnel about the status of the excess levy. Articles should be no more than 300 words in length. Here is a breakdown of what you want to write about in different months:

1. Share key messages with all personnel once approved.
2. Give people a heads up that the newsletter is going out and attach a copy before it hits mailboxes.
3. Copy them on any news releases you send before they might see them in the paper or online
4. Refer them to the website to learn more about the excess levy.
5. Ask personnel to refer you to community groups to whom you can deliver the PowerPoint presentation.
6. Invite them to the public hearing where the Board of Fire Commissioners is considering the resolution.
7. Remind them that the Board of Fire Commissioners passed the resolution, and attach the latest copy of the newsletter.
8. Copy them on press coverage with a reminder of what you are trying to do.
9. Invite them to attend question and answer meetings after ballots drop.
10. Remind emergency personnel to vote (not how to vote) and deadlines to mail or drop off their ballots.
11. Thank personnel for supporting the SBFDD and participating in the election. Regardless of the outcome, talk about next steps for the Fire District.

### Recruitment Brochure (Appendix A)

The Fire District has said it wants to update its recruitment brochure to add to its volunteer program. We have included an example of what that might include.



## 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 we recommend the Fire District complete through the election.

### **Media List (Appendix B)**

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 Fire District. At a minimum, this should include print, television, cable and broadcast radio stations in your service area. We have provided a draft media list for you in the appendixes.

In addition to this list, the Fire 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 to add to this appendix.

It's important to have the contact information of these publications and organizations in an electronic format for ease of communication. The Fire 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 Fire District. The Fire District should assign a person, ideally the Fire Chief, who would be the appropriate person to send this information.

### **Media Release Template (Appendix C)**

The Fire District should have a media release template that features its logo and contact details. The first key message is the "boilerplate" paragraph to end the communication. We have provided a draft layout including this content for you to use in Appendix C.

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**

We are recommending that the Fire District do several strategic media releases leading up to the election. Strategic media releases are different than incident reporting. In these media releases, we use the key messages for the content.



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

Suggested topics are as follows in this order:

1. Challenges to service based on the key messages. (Content should be repeated in the Chief's report and for his/her message in the first newsletter.)
2. After outlining what those are, it is shared that the Board of Fire Commissioners is considering an excess levy as the solution. Be sure to point out that the Fire 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.
3. The Board of Fire Commissioners will 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.
4. The Board passed the resolution asking voters to consider an excess levy. 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.
5. Invite people to public meetings you are scheduling to answer questions about the excess levy. (See the Public Outreach sec-

tion below.) Remind people that the proposal is on the ballot. Explain what the excess levy would fund (personnel and apparatus), and how these items are essential to saving lives and property.

### Letters to the Editor

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 of Fire Commissioners take action:

1. 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 on a daily basis. It should contain content as to how the excess levy will help the Fire District better save lives and property.
2. A firefighter thanks the Board for placing the excess levy on the ballot reiterating content in topic 1.
3. The Chief thanks the public for participating in the recent election – regardless of the outcome. If your excess levy passes, you thank them and say you will report back as the money is used to save lives and property. If it fails, you 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 Fire District work to build relationships with local news media. As a result, we recommend 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, you will cover the Key Messages and simply socialize. We cannot ask the media to editorialize on our ballot measure. However, we can ask them if they have any questions about the proposal if they planned on doing so.



## Owned Media

Owned media includes assets owned by the Fire District that can be used to deliver key messages. For the purpose of this portion of the plan, we are referring to your website and signage owned by the Fire District.

Let's tackle signage first. We understand that there may be signage at different stations in various states of use or development. At the point they are usable, you will want to make sure that they reflect the message you are sharing through other communication channels.

We recommend a dedicated page on your website to share information about the excess levy. If possible, add a tab to the top with the title "Excess Levy" as opposed to burying it somewhere else on the site.

Make sure the website is updated before you mail or send 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:

1. Challenges to service and the idea of the excess levy in a few brief paragraphs, why it is needed, and what it will fund.
2. Add information about when the Board is considering the resolution.
3. Update the website language to let the public know that the Board has passed the resolution and when they will see it on their election ballots.

4. 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.
5. Your 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 – This can be a running list of questions you 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 the excess levy in the order it occurs.

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



## Social Media

Social media is a communication strategy that has grown in importance. For the purpose of this plan, we recommend developing a Facebook page for the Fire District. Strategic messages should also be shared on any other social platforms added by the Fire District - Twitter, Instagram, NextDoor, and so on.

All communication materials you create should be cross-posted to your social media accounts. There are applications that allow you to cross-post to all accounts at once. Also, encourage personnel and staff to share information you develop through their social media accounts, as well.

We are including short video recommendations to share information as well. You can rerun the third video repeatedly up to the election. Here are what they should cover:

1. Three minutes – Briefly cover facts about the fire district and accomplishments in the past year. Spend the last two minutes talking about challenges to service.
2. Two minutes – Board meeting on resolution, and what the M&O levy would fund.
3. 90 seconds – Board passed resolution, it's on the upcoming ballot, and how M&O levy would improve service.
4. 60 second – Thank you for supporting the Fire District. We 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 Fire District through organized meetings to show we are transparent and accountable to the public.

The first step is to develop a brief PowerPoint that reflects the approved key messages. The presentation should be no more than 20 minutes in length and contain images of the Fire District, its operations and emergency personnel. Please do not select all photos of things on fire. Featuring 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 you can follow with suggested titles:

- 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.
- Who We Are & What We Do – Provide your audience with an overview of the Fire District. Include a map of your service area. (Key message #1.)
- Accountable & Transparent – Provide

information about how you are fiscally responsible (Key message #2). Add the fact that the Board is elected from the community. Provide meeting dates and times for the Board of Fire Commissioners.

- How We Are Funded – Give details about how you fund operations. (Key message #3.) Explain how the fire levy has decreased and the pressure that has placed on your agency.
- Challenges to Service – What challenges are you facing to provide service? Explain those here. (Key message #4.)
- Proposed Solutions – Introduce the excess levy, what it will cost, how much it will raise and what it will fund. Emphasize that you are asking just for what is needed at the time. (Key message #5.)
- Volunteer with Us – Recruitment message!
- Questions – Provide contact details for the speaker, the Fire District, website and Facebook.

In a draft form, share the presentation with all personnel for input. Doing so helps to educate everyone associated with the agency about the Fire District and our key messages. Make edits based on their input, and promote that the 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 your presentation.



Open Houses also are an important part of this plan. Inviting residents to tour the fire stations, talk to firefighters and touch 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 Fire District should plan on organizing three meetings geared toward the excess levy using the prepared PowerPoint. The first will be a public hearing where the Board of Fire Commissioners deliberates on the resolution to place the excess levy on the ballot.

The second and third public meetings are closer to the election, approximately when ballots drop. Determine the best time to hold the meetings based on your community's demographics. Morning meetings are good for retirees. Weekend or evening meetings are good to try and attract younger members of the community who are unavailable during working hours. It is a nice touch to provide refreshments, but not required.

As a final note, do not worry if you have low attendance at these meetings. It's not about getting a large number of people. It's about showing that the Fire District is transparent in how it conducts business and open to their questions.



COMMUNICATIONS PLAN CALENDAR

Category/Month	Month 1	Month 2	Month 3	Month 4	Month 5	Month 6 - Board meets on and passes resolution	Month 7	Month 8 - Last day to file resolution	Month 9	Month 10	Month 11— Ballots mailed/ Public meetings	Month 12 - Election Day
<b>GENERAL COMMUNICATIONS</b>	Communications (Comm.) Committee	Comm. Committee	Comm. Committee	Comm. Committee	Comm. Committee	Comm. Committee	Comm. Committee	Comm. Committee	Comm. Committee	Comm. Committee	Comm. Committee	Comm. Committee
<b>PAID COMMUNICATIONS</b>	Key Messages/ Strategic Communications Plan		Update recruitment brochure	Develop FAQ/ Direct Mail	Newsletter— <b>DROP BY END OF NOV 2022</b>			Newsletter			Direct Mail Piece (When ballots drop)/ Newsletter (One week later)	
	Chief's Report	Chief's Report	Chief's Report	Chief's Report	Chief's Report	Chief's Report	Chief's Report	Chief's Report	Chief's Report	Chief's Report	Chief's Report	Chief's Report
<b>EARNED MEDIA</b>	Media List/ News Release Template		News Release	News Release	Letter to the Editor (LTE)	News Release	News Release	LTE	Editorial Board Meetings		News Release	LTE - Thank you and next steps
<b>OWNED MEDIA</b>		Review Website & Incorporate Key Messages	Web Updates	Update Website with Levy Page (LP)	Web Updates	Update LP with Board having passed the resolution	Web Updates	Web Updates	Web Updates	Web Updates	Web Updates	Update LP with thank you messages / Report back as improvements are made
		Signage Update	Signage Update	Signage Update	Signage Update	Signage Update	Signage Update	Signage Update	Signage Update	Signage Update	Signage Update	Signage Update
<b>SOCIAL MEDIA</b>		Start Facebook page	Social Media Updates	Social Media Updates	Social Media Updates	Social Media Updates	Social Media Updates	Social Media Updates	Social Media Updates	Social Media Updates	Social Media Updates	Social Media Updates
			Video - Annual Report summary & challenges to service (3 mins)		Video - Intro M&O levy; invite public to meeting (2 mins)		Video - Board passed resolution; this is what it would pay for (90 seconds)					Video - Thank you and we'll report back (60 seconds)
<b>PUBLIC OUTREACH</b>			Develop Community Presentation/ Present to All Personnel	Community Presentations	Community Presentations	Board meets on resolution	Community Presentations	Community Presentations	Open Houses - Young Families, Blood Pressure?	Community Presentations	Q&A Public Meetings	