

Beyond the Benefit Charge: Alternative Funding Sources

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Recent reports suggest the hard downturn in property values is finally easing up. While that's good news, those same reports say it could be years before we achieve economic recovery. It's clear the fire service, which has traditionally relied heavily on some form of property tax to fund operations, needs to pursue alternative funding as part of a new, long term financial strategy.

A benefit charge is generally the first option to come to mind. But I've found that it may not be a department's best option. In sparsely populated areas, a benefit charge may not raise enough revenue. There may also be considerable and costly resistance, especially from the business community, that could defeat a benefit charge—and make citizens less willing to support other funding measures.

So what can you do? Here are four, additional funding options to consider:

EMS Levy

RCW 84.52.069 authorizes emergency services levies of up to fifty cents per thousand of assessed value. These levies can be imposed through counties, cities, towns, hospital districts or fire districts. If the county imposes the emergency service levy, the city or fire district cannot impose an emergency service levy for those amounts taken by the county. What this means is that if the county takes twenty-five cents of the available fifty cents the city or fire district is able to request the remaining twenty five cents from their constituents for a total of fifty cents.

Ambulance Utilities

RCW 35.21.766 allows for cities to create an ambulance utility and impose a utility fee following a process where the city finds ambulance service to be inadequate. This is not to the exclusion of the EMS fees. Both can be imposed concurrently.

Fire District Emergency Medical Service Fees

RCW 52.12.131 authorizes fire districts to impose emergency medical service fees. This is an alternative that many fire districts have been using for years. Again, this can be done whether an EMS levy has been passed or not. The imposition of charges, while not always popular, does require the end user of the

service to pay the direct costs. Although there will always be arguments of equity and fairness many times this may be a compelling argument. Finally, while there is always a concern that these charges will be most difficult on those less fortunate in the community, most cities and fire districts are free to adopt Hospital Charity Care guidelines established in WAC 246-453-001 through – 090 as a way to lessen the impact on those less fortunate in the community.

Fire District Local Improvement Districts Fees

RCW 52.20, et. seq. allows for the creation of a local improvement district within a Fire District for the acquisition, maintenance and operation of facilities, specifically benefiting an area within a Fire District. This can be used to bolster the services in a somewhat isolated portion of a Fire District and can be set up in conjunction with other charges and fees.

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