

## **And what's the hubbub about the RFA (Regional Fire Authority) Annexation**

Wow, so much media attention for this special election on April 22, 2025 regarding voting for or against Edmonds' annexation into the Regional Fire Authority (RFA). Yes, I have made many comments in the media, joined the "Edmonds Can Do Better" group and applied to Council to be in the voter's pamphlet as a representative of the CON committee and I was not selected.

Please keep in mind, the City has the "final" approval of the two statements that appear in the voters' pamphlet. Since the Mayor hired a media "annexation expert" consultant to help the City with winning this issue, do not get caught up with words like "the annexation is the best option". There is a LOT of information and it is biased, incomplete or even "fearful" - like losing our fire service. So, please educate yourself.

My biggest issue is Edmonds' policymakers will lose CONTROL of performance standards geared towards citizens' needs and our three fire stations will be given away. Additionally, a vote yes will have a significant strain on your pocketbook and it is not the cheapest option.

A bit of history, the "fire authority" concept dates back to 2009 when I was still a citizen. The City was in financial dire straits as a result of the "Great Recession" and Mayor Haakenson had created a large levy committee (60+ citizens) with Fire District 1 (FD1) and Council Members available. I was opposed to joining FD1 and felt a public safety levy would work better since the City's financials were not complete with a "modified working capital calculation" being used to identify the General Fund balance. The FD1's numbers/projections were not supported as this was a new trend of consolidating.

In late 2009, the Council approved the sale of the fire services and the fire stations' inventory to FD1. Edmonds' Fire Chief Tom Tomberg led the charge with Mayor Haakenson and they created performance standards specific to Edmonds needs which are heavy on medic services.

Once Mayor Earling was in office, FD1 approached the City again for "consolidating" and Council Member Lora Petso along with Earling were on that review committee. Petso questioned the "numbers" like I had done previously; and the City Council decided to walk-away and retain our contractual obligations with those Edmonds' specific performance standards.

In 2016, Earling and Council hired "fire experts" Fitch and Associates to review our contract, performance standards, inventory, etc. so that Policymakers could understand all our options. Many good ideas and options were given and that 2016 PowerPoint presentation is found on my website (<https://diane buckshnis.com/dianes-corner/>).

After extensive vetting, Council chose one option of removing a "car redundancy" as it would save the City more than \$1.0M a year. The Council vote was 6-1; and after the vote, Council Member Mike Nelson walked off of the Dias and left with the fire representatives that were at

the meeting. Once Nelson became Mayor, along with a simple majority vote of Council, the added car service was restored.

Now Mayor Rosen is faced with extreme financial problems as evidence by the City borrowing \$6.0M from utilities to fund operations (at a rate of 5% for three years). So, it became a surprise when a citizen uncovered that in September 2024, Rosen had hired a media consultant for \$64,000 to “get the RFA annexation passed”. Council had yet to decide if annexation was going to even be pursued. That resolution was approved in 2025. Citizens questioned Rosen’s action as being illegal since Policymakers should not push for approval of a ballot measure and can only educate and Council had yet to vote for annexation. A complaint was sent to the Public Disclosure Commission and the code is on my website. Also, Rosen should have increased the budget line item for elections from \$70,000 to \$250,000 to represent a special election cost.

Why choose a special election? Special elections generally have low turnouts. Like the newly created Shoreline RFA was approved by only 20% of Shoreline’s population (or about half of voter turnout at a general election).

So, let’s look at examples of property tax increases and these numbers will change once new assessed values are performed.

First thing you will notice is a new line item on your property taxes that is for “Regional Fire Authority”. Using 2024 assessed property estimates, here are the calculations: A home valued at \$500,000 will see about a \$625 a year increase; a home valued at \$1 million is \$1,250; a \$1.5 million home is \$1,875; and a home valued at \$2 million is \$2,500.

For those with a fixed income and part of the senior tax exemption program, yes, you will see that new property tax line item as it is a new “district”. Your increase will depend on which classification your net income fell within and my website provides those formulas.

Why the substantial increase? It is a new “District” and this taxation is based on property values. Since Edmonds has the highest property values in the entire RFA group (Lynnwood, Brier, unincorporated Snohomish County, Mill Creek and Mountlake Terrace) Edmonds’ property owners will be subsidizing the RFA for other Cities. If you are familiar with the Sno-Isle Library system which maintains 23 libraries, Edmonds taxpayers’ pay for the majority of operating costs because our City has those high average/values (A/V) assessments.

In 2023, RFA Commissioners voted to accelerate the expiry of the contract terms from a 2030 expiry to a 2025 expiry. Council behind closed doors chose to rehire Fitch fire experts. The Council President failed to vet the scope in public or obtain Council approval. As such, as a surprise to me, the scope was targeted only towards annexation. The scope should have simply been to update the 2016 report. Many options were left out like selling one fire stations or even forming a small RFA with Mukilteo. Or even the 2016 recommendation Council chose of

reducing the “redundancy vehicle” that was restored by Nelson. Is that option still viable and would it save Edmonds over a \$1.0M a year or more?

As a former Councilmember, my main concern is the loss of contractual CONTROL as Edmonds has far more medic needs. If the annexation passes, RFA can implement a status quo standard used by all participating Cities and our policymakers would have no control. Remember, beloved Fire Chief Tom Tomberg helped write those performance standards specific to Edmonds’ needs. A contract keeps the City in the driver’s seat; and there has to be cheaper options. Also, it should help Edmonds keep track of revenue due us. During this RFA process, citizens discovered that Edmonds has yet to receive all of the money owed us from fees received for emergency transport.

Our contract says transport fees or ground emergency medical transport (GEMT) are pass-through to the City from RFA. Records reflect that the City is owed about \$8M from fees collected but not sent to Edmonds. The \$8.0 million would certainly help the budget shortfall immensely. Why is Council not pursuing this option? Simply put: it’s easy for Rosen and the Council to “offload” this expensive contract and make it easier on the City’s budget.

Yes, Rosen has yet to provide citizens with a Plan B option should the annexation not happen. A Plan B will be a public safety levy. What is the difference? The tax implications from a levy are VERY different with levy expiry and control of terms.

So, in our “community of truth” and transparency, the Council should want to retain control of the fire/EMS service and retain control over levy measures. A win-win for the public but a lot more work for policymakers. And, since the 2023 audit has yet to be finished (remember my article “Where is the missing \$3.5M?”), the City Council should not push annexation at all until financial facts and audit exceptions are known.

As Paul Harvey coined “now you know the rest of the story”: Shouldn’t taxpayers be afforded a full range of options regarding our fire/EMS services? Without options or costs analyses, we have no barometer. A contract provides this control and protect Edmonds citizens.

Footnote: To be clear, my NO vote does not mean I don’t have a huge respect for all members of our fire leadership and squadrons as I have known each Fire Chief since Tom Tomberg and many firefighters.