

Congrats Mukilteo and let's talk lessons learned!

There is good news coming out of Mukilteo. A City choosing to live within its means and voters even approved an EMS levy like what Edmonds' voters had done years ago. Once Edmonds voters approved annexation, those levy funds are now gone.

So, Bravo Mayor Joe Marine and the City Council for your fiscal discipline and thoughtful governance as it is worth recognizing when other City Councils are struggling with their structural imbalanced budgets.

More importantly, citizens should applause as in October 2024, alongside that message of fiscal responsibility, Mayor Marine brought up the possibility of Regional Fire Authority annexation. And just as a reminder, annexation is not just another policy option, it is a structural shift that changes who controls your fire and emergency medical services—and how you pay for them. So, my advice to Mukilteo residents regarding annexation is one thing: educate yourselves. Mukilteo would have more options than Edmonds is which was to annex into South County Fire as there is Snohomish Regional Fire and Rescue or they could contract with Everett Fire Department or form a new regional fire authority with adjoining Cities.

In 2023, Edmonds citizens were forced to decide as South County Fire chose to terminate our cost-plus contract and the City was given a year to find new fire and EMS services going forward.

There were options to explore. Edmonds could renegotiate contracts and explore partnerships with neighboring cities like Mukilteo or Shoreline. Woodway left the joint contract that Edmonds had with South County Fire in 2014 and chose Shoreline Fire instead as they received a cheaper contract. Or Edmonds could have created a regional fire authority with adjoining Cities. Lastly, Edmonds could have restarted its own department, supported by a public safety levy, as the City owned its fire stations.

Members of the community did explore these options. Former councilmembers and financially knowledgeable citizens stepped forward, analyzed alternatives, creating media and a website and even some met with Mukilteo leadership in early 2025 to discuss regional solutions. Those conversations showed promise.

But ultimately, Edmonds leadership chose to put annexation on the 2025 ballot and stopped the exploration of alternatives. Edmonds leadership put an inappropriate amount of reliance on an external consultant (Fitch) that were given a limited scope set by the Council President. Unfortunately, the limited scope supported annexation and moved away from further exploration of other paths and that decision came with expensive consequences to taxpayers and renters.

Under annexation, Edmonds lost their two fire stations (\$7.0 assessed value) as they were given away and general fund money received from our EMS levy. The property tax calculations showed a 97% increase in our tax bills which certainly came true this year. More importantly, the excellent essential service remains the same but now the City has no governance or ability to negotiate a contract and citizens are taxed externally, meaning that tax bills will eventually grow.

And because Edmonds has higher property values—driven by its location and proximity to Puget Sound—its residents now contribute disproportionately within a regional system. In effect, Edmonds subsidize services in areas with lower assessed values such as Lynnwood, Mountlake Terrace and Snohomish County.

Edmonds also lost access to revenue sources such as GEMT (Ground Emergency Medical Transport), a supplemental Medicaid reimbursement program designed in 2016 to offset the cost of transporting patients. This issue remains unresolved and current estimates suggest that South County Fire owes Edmonds approximately \$19 million for these transport fees. This matter is still in mediation. These are not minor details, and a more complete story will be written in the future as Jim Ogonowski has done a thorough forensic audit of this manner which includes looking at the yearly reports that the Fire District supplies to the State Health Authority. It's a complicated matter that City Council needs to pay attention to and not let it ride away along with annexation.

However, none of this is to suggest that Mukilteo should or should not annex and that decision may now be off the table as Mayor Marine sees the impact it has had to Edmonds taxpayers and the new revenue may support the rising costs of the Fire Department.

But this piece is a good reminder that annexation is not simply about service delivery – It is about taxation, control, governance, asset control, and financial transparency.

As an example, today, the South County Fire Regional Authority is preparing to place a \$420 million bond on the November ballot—approximately \$40 million per station for replacement or renovation. Yet the publicly available data supporting (April 2026) that proposal is, at best, limited in detail. I am telling folks to vote no in November as we just passed annexation and let's educate ourselves as Council could vote to un-annex if they felt it was necessary.

Mukilteo has demonstrated fiscal discipline, and fiscal discipline begins with informed citizens who ask questions, examine assumptions, and understand the full implications of their vote. Because once a decision like annexation is made, it is not easily undone and the true cost—financial and structural—often becomes clear only after the fact.

So Mukilteo, as you consider your future, look carefully, ask directly, verify independently and look to other Cities. Because informed voters do more than participate, they decide and taxation decision deserves nothing less than the full story.

And now you know the rest of the story, for Edmonds.