

# BENTON COUNTY FIRE DISTRICT #1

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## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **Benton 1 plans for the future of emergency services delivery**

*EMS program needs improvement, says Fire Chief*

[KENNEWICK, WASH.] Benton County Fire District 1 is planning for what the future of emergency services will look like for the communities it serves. The fire district serves 17,800 people over 320 square miles, including the communities of South Kennewick, Finley, Rancho Reata and Badger Canyon.

“Benton 1 is the one thing that unites all these different communities,” says Fire Chief Lonnie Click. “We take the responsibility of emergency services planning seriously.”

Benton 1 has seen a steady increase in call volumes – about two percent per year over the last 10 years. In that time, a need has emerged for the fire district to consider expanding its Emergency Medical Service program to improve service to the community.

Currently, 90 percent of all EMS calls received by Benton 1 require patient transportation to area hospitals. Benton 1 relies on neighboring fire agencies to provide this service because it can’t afford to do so out of existing revenue. This is considered “mutual aid” and takes longer to reach people in an emergency. It also reduces the resources that mutual aid partners have to serve their communities.

“We’ve grown to the point of needing to provide better service for our people as well as be a good neighbor to other fire agencies around us,” said Chief Click.

Benton 1 funds emergency services through a fire levy of \$1.50 per \$1,000 of assessed property value, which voters renew every six years. It will consider asking voters to approve an EMS levy sometime in 2018 to improve this program. This discussion is just in its initial phases, and the community will have plenty of opportunity to weigh in before the agency decides to go to ballot for voter-approved funding.

Increasing call volumes also have the fire district looking at facility improvements and apparatus replacement. For example, Benton 1 is researching the feasibility of renovating Station 150 (Badger Canyon, Rancho Reata) to add living quarters for firefighters, which will improve emergency response times.

Benton 1 also has a plan to replace apparatus on a regular schedule. Some facility upgrades, like the one at Station 150, and apparatus can be funded out of the annual operating budget. Others may require additional funding from taxpayers.

One thing that keeps down costs for taxpayers is Benton 1’s unique staffing model. The fire district is considered a “combination department,” which means it relies on full-time, part-time and volunteer firefighters to respond to calls. There are 90 volunteers in total giving back to the community through their service. Relying primarily on volunteers saves taxpayers money and provides revenue for firefighting apparatus and equipment.

“It’s important that we be able to respond quickly and effectively when you need us,” said Chief Click. “This means planning for facility and apparatus needs, as well as improving the emergency services that we provide. We’re in that planning stage right now and want to keep our community informed.”

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*Benton County Fire District 1 responds to an average of 1,300 calls per year for structural and wildland fire suppression, emergency medical service, technical rescue, and hazardous materials response. Emergency personnel also are active and involved in the community and local schools teaching fire and injury prevention. Benton 1 operates under a balanced budget, and has passed all financial and accountability audits with the state.*