

BENTON COUNTY FIRE DISTRICT #1

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Benton One: Improving Communication with Taxpayers

KENNEWICK, WASH.— Benton County Fire District #1 has spent the past year improving how it communicates with its taxpayers and local residents. The fire district serves approximately 17,800 people over 320 square miles. The one thing that unites the communities of Finley, Badger Canyon, Rancho Reata, Triple Vista, and Tri-City Heights is the fire district.

“We serve a large area and want people to know we’re here to help when they need us,” said Fire Chief Lonnie Click. “Our service area brings several unique communities together and we’re proud to be the common link.”

Benton One has started mailing a newsletter three times per year, updated its web site (bentonone.org), involves the news media in breaking stories, and regularly shares information through Facebook ([/bcfire1](https://www.facebook.com/bcfire1)) and Twitter ([@BentonFire1PIO](https://twitter.com/BentonFire1PIO)). The agency says that social media is critical to sharing information about emergency services.

“Social media is one of the best ways to reach people we serve,” said Public Information Officer Tracy Baker. “We are always looking for new ways to get the word out about programs and services that we offer.”

In fact, 81 percent of rural and urban residents use Facebook, according to a study by Sprout Social (<https://sproutsocial.com/insights/new-social-media-demographics/#facebook>). Social media, in fact, has been able to bridge the rural-urban divide that plagues most of Washington. Benton One has almost 2,500 “likes” for its Facebook page and that number continues to grow.

Benton One has six fire stations over the 320 square miles. It is currently able to staff five with volunteer, part-time and full-time firefighters. However, Chief Lonnie Click says that response times are not where he would like to see them for EMS calls, which account for 53% of emergencies to date.

“We do a good job of providing emergency medical service on site to those who need it, but 90 percent of patients require transportation to area hospitals,” said Chief Click. “We don’t own ambulances to do this, and that can delay care.”

Benton One relies on neighboring fire agencies to transport patients by ambulance because it cannot fund this service out of existing revenue. This is considered “mutual aid” and can take longer to reach people in an emergency. It also impacts the resources neighboring agencies have to serve their communities. As a result, Benton One is considering asking voters to approve an EMS levy sometime in 2018.

“The fire district has grown – call volumes continue to increase. We need to provide a higher level of service for local residents and pull our weight in the region,” said Chief Click.

The fire district anticipates that it can reduce ambulance response times by almost seven minutes with its own community EMS program.

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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.