What is a Regional Fire Authority (RFA)?

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Those attending or listening to City Council meetings may hear the term “RFA” and references to the Mukilteo Fire Department. Here is some basic information on what an RFA is so you will be more informed.

In August 2017, the voters in Lynnwood and Snohomish County Fire District 1 voted to form a new Regional Fire Authority (RFA) called South Snohomish County Fire & Rescue Regional Fire Authority, also known as South County Fire. Since this RFA shares a boundary with Mukilteo, this opens the opportunity for the Mukilteo City Council to discuss joining the RFA.

A Regional Fire Authority (RFA) is a special purpose district established by voters in a specific area to provide funding for fire and emergency medical services. State law provides the framework for forming an RFA and for a city to join an existing RFA. The RFA allows consolidation of operations into a single department while retaining local control.

The City Council, should it decide to support joining the RFA, will put the question on a future ballot. The voters will have the final say concerning becoming a part of the RFA. To pass, a simple majority of Mukilteo voters is required for Mukilteo to join the RFA.

RFA’s are not uncommon in our state. There are eleven RFA’s in the state, among them are South County Fire, Kent Fire Department RFA, Renton RFA, and North County RFA in Snohomish County.

Mukilteo is experiencing growing demand for public safety services. Population and calls for service have grown faster than firefighter staffing levels. This is expected to continue in the coming years. Mukilteo provides many services—including police, roads, parks, etc. and the Fire Department competes for funding with these other City services. The RFA would consolidate resources, create efficiencies and provide dedicated funding at more sustainable levels to maintain and enhance fire and emergency services in the entire area.

There are four key reasons a City might look to join an RFA.

* Savings through elimination of duplication achieved as two departments merge to become a single fire service provider.
	+ Administrative staff: allows for a sharing of resources and eliminates duplication of staff.
	+ Training: removes the need for duplicate training, equipment, purchases, curriculum and a redundant training site.
	+ Other opportunities: blending processes such as purchasing, labor agreements, dispatch and response protocols, and data collection provide further opportunities to eliminate duplication and improve efficiency.
* Improved use of resources provides more effective emergency service delivery, including paramedic response. As service demands shift, fire resources can be redeployed in real time to where they are most likely needed.
* Additional services not currently available in Mukilteo, including full-time battalion chief supervision, emergency medical service command staff including a medical director and full-time medical services officer response, a fire prevention division with fire inspectors and public educators, a training division with dedicated fire and emergency medical training staff, and community paramedics to focus on prevention and assist those with chronic health needs.
* Provides a sustainable and stable funding source. Currently the Mukilteo Fire Department funding is subject to competition with other City departmental budgets. The RFA will provide dedicated funding for fire service throughout the entire RFA territory and will reduce the burden on City revenues to meet diverse service needs.

Before Mukilteo Fire could join South County Fire, the RFA plan would need to be amended to incorporate the additional responsibility. This would require action on the part of the RFA Board of Commissioners. The amended plan would specify:

* When the merger is effective. Note that the merger must be effective before August 1 in any given year for the RFA to begin collecting property tax funds from Mukilteo the following year.
* The transfer of fire fighters and other staff from the Mukilteo Fire Department to the RFA.
* The transfer of all equipment (fire engines, ambulances, furniture, etc.) as well as the fire stations at no cost. There are no plans to close any fire stations.
* Any adjustments in the governance, including redrawing the RFA commissioner districts to include Mukilteo.

Should the voters approve Mukilteo Fire Department joining the RFA before August 1, 2019, the funding for the RFA comes from a fire property tax levy of $1.50 per $1,000 of assessed value and an EMS levy of $.50 per $1,000 of assessed value beginning in 2020. The current City EMS levy of $.50 per $1,000 will sunset when the RFA begins collecting their EMS levy. Joining the RFA would not automatically impact the City property tax levy of $1.04, unless the City Council decided to reduce it. If Mukilteo is a part of the RFA, the costs currently paid by the City for fire-related inter-local agreements, dispatch, and the emergency radio system would also transfer from the City to the RFA.

In summary, an RFA allows cities and fire districts to form an RFA to gain service efficiencies through consolidation while retaining local control. Mukilteo would receive additional services not currently provided by the fire department. The City Council is currently weighing this option and voters will want to stay informed as the discussions progress.

Have questions or comments about the RFA proposal? Please email me at calexander@mukilteowa.gov.