

# Fire districts explore forming one regional operation

By ARLA SHEPHARD  
MASON COUNTY LIFE

Legend has it that many, many decades ago, the fire chiefs from Belfair and Allyn sat down to a card game and the game did not go well at all.

Whether or not the folklore is true, the animosity between the two districts — the former Mason County Fire District No. 2 in Belfair and the former Mason County Fire District No. 5 in Shelton and Allyn — has persisted for many generations.

Until recently, with news that the two agencies — now North Mason Regional Fire Authority, encompassing Belfair and Tahuya, and Central Mason Fire & EMS — are looking at joining forces in a new regional fire authority that would serve the majority of Mason County.

“Whether the story is true or not, it really goes to show how petty the differences have been between the two districts,” said NMRFA Chief Beau Bakken. “It also kind of shows how the mythology and the lack of truth have built up over the years have been allowed to undermine the relationship between the two districts.”

Bakken and Central Mason Fire & EMS Chief Tim McKern have entered into an exploratory process to look at whether combining the two district might make fiscal



PHOTO BY ARLA SHEPHARD

*The North Mason Regional Fire Authority, pictured here, and Central Mason Fire & EMS have entered into talks to combine the two districts into one regional fire authority. A joint board meeting will be held at 5 p.m., Tuesday, Feb. 10, at the North Mason School District administrative board room to answer the public's questions.*

sense for both the districts and the residents living in them.

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“We’re just at a conceptual level and we’re getting direction from our boards on the 10th as to what are the next exploration steps,” Bakken

said. “There’s a lot we don’t know right now.”

The idea came up in a discussion between NMRFA board chair Kelley McIntosh and Central Mason board chair Tommy Taylor at a joint commissioners meeting last

December, where McIntosh spoke about the success North Mason had in implementing a regional fire authority.

Some of the benefits to forming a larger regional fire authority would be consolidating duplicate

resources and improving the chances for the region to obtain more federal grants, McKern said.

“Many of our grants, whether they’re Homeland Security grants or FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency)

grants, the bottom line is they prioritize regionalization,” McKern said. “If you’re giving them a regionalized approach, the more likely you are to get scored higher.”

Bakken used a recent example with North Mason’s SAFER (Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response) grant from FEMA — while the district has applied for the grant several times, the grant request was only approved once the district came up with a regional approach.

Fire districts, especially small rural districts with limited funds, waste resources by doing the same tasks, Bakken added.

“You look at all of the fire districts in Mason County and we are all doing the same thing,” he said. “What that means is that there are 14 separate fire districts that are turning in separate state financial reports done by 14 different people.”

That level of duplication is “ridiculous” and can lead to mistakes or late filing because small districts might not have the experienced staff to send reports in a timely manner, Bakken added.

“When Tim and I came together, I think we laughed about how much we have in common, and

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