

IN OUR VIEW | General Election 2018

Yes on public safety tax issues

The measures, including one to replace the countywide radio system, are vital for public safety.

It's a given that in an emergency — a house fire, a car accident, a heart attack or any of a range of crises — we want to be able to pick up a phone and know that help is minutes away.

But that public service comes at a cost to taxpayers, one for which voters are asked to weigh those costs against the potential erosion or loss of those services.

Snohomish County voters will find several measures on the Nov. 7 General Election ballot that seek their approval for new or increased taxes that will allow first responder agencies to continue to provide those services.

Snohomish County, Proposition 1: The measure seeks voter approval of a 0.1 percent addition to the sales tax in all communities — an additional 10 cents on a \$100 purchase — that would fund replacement of the countywide emergency radio system used by some 50 police, fire and other agencies.

The current system, managed by the Snohomish County Emergency Radio System (SERS), is nearing the end of its 20-year service life. The system supplier, Motorola, has notified SERS that it will stop providing replacement parts within three years, requiring managers to scour sources for replacement parts it can turn to in event of failure.

And those failures are happening with increasing frequency for a system that must reach more than 940 square miles in the county.

More than a dozen failures, such as a loss of communication between dispatch services provided by Snohomish County 911 and first responders, have occurred in the past year, said Brad Steiner, SERS executive director. One such failure cut communication in an area of the county for 20 minutes.

Such failures represent not just a potential loss of response time for someone experiencing an emergency, but also could put first responders in danger if they are not able to communicate with others in the field. And if a failure occurs during a mass casualty response, such as the Oso landslide or the shootings in Marysville or Mukilteo, the potential increases for greater injury and loss of life.

"The radio is a first responder's most-used tool," Steiner said. "And reliability is key."

Replacement of the system, including two or three new broadcast towers and equipment for more than 20 other towers and facilities as well as more than 5,000 individual radios, laptops and other equipment is expected to cost about \$70 million to \$75 million. In addition to replacing the aging analog system's 20-year-old technology, the new digital system will allow better communication among individual agencies and first responders.

The tax is expected to bring in about \$9.4 million in 2019 when it's implemented in April, then about \$16.7 million each year after that.

We'll note that the E911 fee that you see on your phone bill supports the phone system that allows you to contact 911 staff and helps provide your location in an emergency; it provides no funding for the

radio system used by first responders.

No tax is insignificant, especially in regard to a sales tax that everyone pays with nearly every purchase. But this tax is especially significant because of the good it can do and the basic necessity of what it will provide in delivering emergency response when we call for it, not only protecting our lives and property but the lives and safety of every first responder in the county.

The editorial board recommends a yes for Proposition 1.

City of Everett, Proposition 3: The measure seeks to increase the property tax levy in the city for its Medic One emergency medical services, restoring it to 50 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value.

Under state law, local governments are limited to a 1 percent increase in their property tax revenue, but that increase isn't keeping pace with inflation or the growth in Everett, which has steadily increased to about 109,000 since the last time the levy was set at 50 cents in 2010. As the city's total property value increases, the rate decreases; the rate now is just under 40 cents per \$1,000.

With the increase in population, Everett's fire and emergency medical responders — including three paramedic teams and two aid crews in addition to all firefighters who are trained as emergency medical technicians — have seen a 26 percent increase in calls since 2010, when the levy was last set at 50 cents. The department responded to more than 24,000 calls, providing medical aid to more than 17,200 patients, 3,900 of which were taken to hospital emergency rooms.

Because of the decrease in

the levy rate, the fire department now faces a shortfall of about \$1 million, said Fire Chief Dave DeMarco, who was named chief this May following nearly 25 years with the department. The department runs lean, DeMarco said, but it can't continue to operate under that deficit without a loss of service to the city's residents.

And Everett, facing a structural budget deficit and considering deep cuts to staffing and services elsewhere, isn't in a position to absorb that loss for fire and emergency services, the chief said.

Again, taxes matter and they add up. Homeowners and renters have particularly felt the increase in property taxes. If the increase is approved, the owner of the median \$366,000 home in Everett would pay about \$183 a year under the EMS levy, about a \$40 increase over the current rate.

But again, the services that these taxes provide are necessary and vital to the health and safety of the public.

As with the county radio sales tax, the editorial board recommends voters approve the funding increase for Everett's Medic One.

Other public safety ballot issues: The City of Bothell has two measures on its ballot, requesting a lift of its levy lid to \$1.96 per \$1,000 of assessed value and \$35.5 million in bonds to renovate and equip two fire stations.

Fire District 15, Tulalip Bay, is seeking to set its property tax levy to \$1.50 per \$1,000 of assessed value to finance the replacement of apparatus and increase staffing and emergency medical service.

Those requests deserve voters' fair consideration in those communities.