



City of Bellingham-Whatcom County Fire District 8 Regional Fire Authority Planning Committee



Agenda-Meeting #2

Date: Monday June 8, 2026

Time: 2:00 P.M. – 4:00 P.M.

Location: Bellingham City Hall - Mayor's Boardroom

- 1. Welcome and introductions (5 minutes)**
- 2. Minutes Review (5 minutes)**
- 3. Chapter 1 follow up, Background and Needs statements, review of edits (10 minutes)**
- 4. Chapter 4 follow up, Jurisdictional Boundaries, review of map (5 minutes)**
- 5. Chapter 5 introduction, Governance (20 minutes)**
- 6. Chapter 8 introduction, Operations and Services (20 minutes)**
- 7. Public comment (15 minutes)**
 - Up to 3 minutes per speaker
 - Total time: 15 minutes (or as determined by chair)
- 8. Next meeting (5 minutes)**
 - Confirm date, time, and location including ongoing meeting schedule
 - Identify/confirm agenda topics for meeting #3
- 9. Adjournment**



City of Bellingham - Whatcom County Fire District #8 Regional Fire Authority Planning Committee Issue Paper

Prepared by: Staff

Date: June 2, 2026

Title: Background and Needs

Purpose:

Chapter 1 of the Regional Fire Authority Plan is titled *Background and Needs*. This chapter establishes the foundation for the entire plan by outlining why this effort is underway and the specific challenges it aims to address. Its purpose is to clearly describe current conditions, the operational and financial pressures we face, and the factors leading us to explore the formation of a Regional Fire Authority.

Statutory References:

There is no direct RCW requirement for a “Background and Needs” section; however, RCW 52.26.040 requires that “the planning committee must adopt a regional service plan that describes governance, design, financing, and development of fire and emergency services,” and that “the plan must include opportunities for public input.” Including background and needs statements supports the statutory purpose of transparency, public participation, and clear planning rationale by describing the conditions and challenges that justify considering a new service model.

Background/ Problem Statement:

The previous planning committee developed the following six statements. They are provided here for context and comparison. They may offer a useful starting point but will need to be reviewed and updated by the current committee. Staff has prepared updated language below those original statements to reflect current conditions, modern service demands, and the operational realities facing our agencies today.



PREVIOUS STATEMENTS OF NEED

1. Bellingham and the surrounding areas have grown faster than our ability to meet adopted levels of service requirements for fire protection and emergency services. This growth is expected to continue to add increasing pressure on where fire protection and emergency services are provided into the future.
2. The creation of a Regional Fire Authority will allow for an increased level of service to meet these growing demands and the needs of the community and provide a stable and consistent funding source for fire and emergency services.
3. Communities are best served by a fire protection and emergency services system that has a collaborative partnership and responsibility shared among local and regional governments, the private sector, and the community. n
4. Stable funding options for regional fire protection and emergency services allow for the timely development and implementation of significant fire and emergency services initiatives.
5. The City of Bellingham and Whatcom County Fire District 8 have a cooperative partnership and provide a high level of fire and emergency services to our community within the confines of available resources. Cooperation and the partnership between the City Bellingham and Whatcom County Fire District 8 began in 1997.
6. The City of Bellingham and Whatcom County Fire District 8 will be asking its citizens to vote to combine functions and services provided by the two jurisdictions into a single entity, called a Regional Fire Authority.

UPDATES FOR 2027 PROCESS

1. Bellingham and the surrounding areas have experienced significant growth, outpacing our ability to meet adopted levels of service for fire protection and emergency medical services. Calls for service increased by 35% between 2015–2025—an additional 9,000 calls per year, or roughly 25 more calls each day. This growth is expected to continue, adding substantial pressure on where and how services are delivered in the future.

2. Despite rising demand, core fire response resources have remained largely unchanged within the City while they have decreased within Fire District 8. The City currently operates with the same number of primary fire response units that were available in 1976. Due to declining volunteers, Fire District 8 has reduced firefighting capacity by closing two volunteer fire stations and moved toward a full-time staffing model. For both organizations, like many peer organizations across the State, staffing and station capacity have not kept pace with service needs, resulting in a system that must continually do more with less. The growth noted combined with resource allocation limitations have eroded the ability for both



organizations to maintain adopted City and County response time performance measures leading to increasing response times.

3. The long-standing engine–ambulance cross-staffing model, originally adopted to maximize resources, has reached the end of its practical usefulness. When a cross-staffed ambulance transports a patient, the paired engine becomes unavailable. Given that nearly 80% of calls are EMS-related, these gaps are increasingly common and are driving down unit availability and extending response times due to increasing concurrency of requests for emergency services. Assessments show cross-staffed companies operating at 86–90% availability—below the 90–92% expected in a healthy system. While the addition of two BLS units has improved efficiency, it has not fully offset demand.

4. Forming a Regional Fire Authority (RFA) would allow for increased and more reliable levels of service. An RFA provides a voter-approved funding structure that is dedicated, stable, consistent, and voter-approved funding structure that can which will meet both current and future community needs for fire and emergency medical services.

5. Communities are best served by a fire and emergency services system built on partnership, shared responsibility, and coordinated planning among local and regional governments, private-sector partners, and the community. The development of an RFA strengthens these collaborative efforts.

6. Stable regional funding options enable timely development, expansion, and implementation of critical fire and EMS initiatives, ensuring the system can adapt-meet growing service demands and evolving community expectations.

7. The City of Bellingham and Whatcom County Fire District 8 have collaborated to provide a high level of service since 1997. This long-standing partnership has delivered strong outcomes within the limits of available resources, laying the groundwork for more unified regional service delivery.

8. The City of Bellingham and Whatcom County Fire District 8 will be asking their citizens to consider combining their fire and emergency medical service functions into a single Regional Fire Authority. This step would formalize existing collaboration, align service delivery, and create a sustainable system capable of meeting future demands.

In summary, increasing service demand, current operational constraints, and outdated service models are making it progressively more difficult to sustain the level of fire and EMS service expected by the community. Establishing a Regional Fire Authority offers a modern,



stable, and unified framework to address these challenges and ensure that fire and emergency medical services can effectively meet both present and future needs.

Decisions Needed:

This chapter gives us a starting point by outlining our current conditions and challenges. The planning committee should review the draft background and needs, discuss any changes, and decide what updates are needed so this section accurately reflects our reality.

Options and Analysis:

Staff Recommendations:

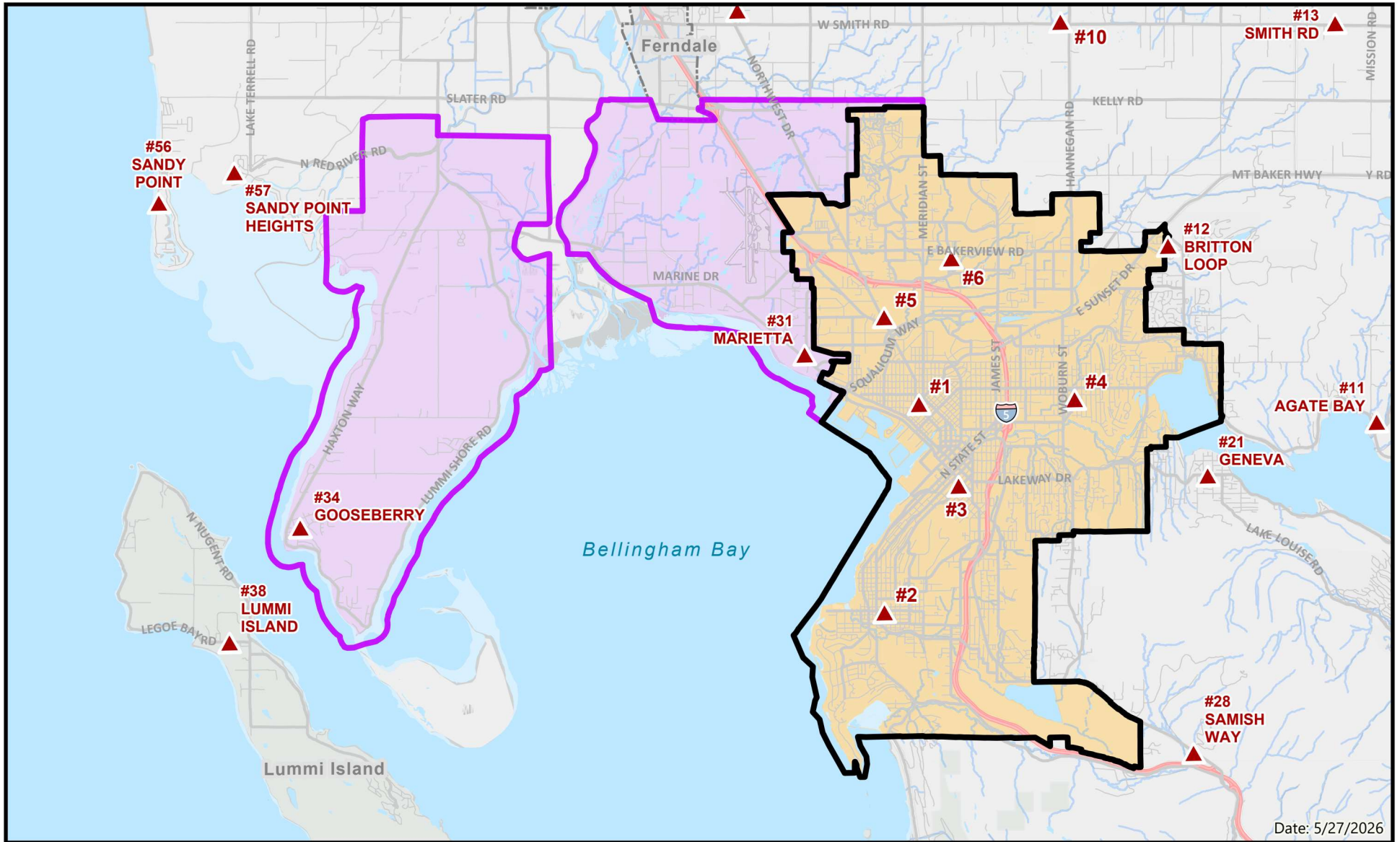
This content has been carried forward from the previous planning process to provide background and a foundational starting point. Edits have been proposed to modernize the material and better align it with current organizational and community needs. Staff recommends a comprehensive review and adoption of the updated Background and Needs statements to ensure they accurately reflect present conditions and support the development of a complete and effective RFA plan.

Committee Recommendations:

Implementation Steps:

Financial/ Administrative Implications:

APPENDIX A- RFA BOUNDARIES



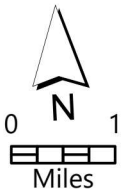
Proposed Regional Fire Authority Boundaries



▲ Fire Stations

■ City of Bellingham

■ Fire District 8





City of Bellingham - Whatcom County Fire District #8 Regional Fire Authority Planning Committee Issue Paper

Prepared by: Assistant Chief Dave Pethick

Date: May 26, 2026

Title: Regional Fire Authority Governance and Board Composition

Purpose:

The purpose of this chapter is to define the governing structure of the Regional Fire Authority, including board composition, election and appointment methods, commissioner districts, terms of office, transitional governance, and board authorities. This chapter provides clear expectations for how the RFA will be governed at formation and how it will transition into its permanent elected form.

Statutory or Key References:

RCW 29A.76.010- Counties, municipal corporations, and special purpose districts

- (1) It is the responsibility of each county, municipal corporation, and special purpose district with a governing body comprised of internal director, council, or commissioner districts not based on statutorily required land ownership criteria to periodically redistrict its governmental unit, based on population information from the most recent federal decennial census as adjusted by RCW [44.05.140](#).
- (2) Within forty-five days after receipt of federal decennial census information applicable to a specific local area, the commission established in RCW [44.05.030](#) shall forward the census information to each municipal corporation, county, and district charged with redistricting under this section.
- (3) Except as otherwise provided in chapter 301, Laws of 2018, no later than November 15th of each year ending in one, the governing body of the municipal corporation, county, or district shall prepare a plan for redistricting its internal or director districts.
- (4) The plan shall be consistent with the following criteria:



- (a) Each internal director, council, or commissioner district shall be as nearly equal in population as possible to each and every other such district comprising the municipal corporation, county, or special purpose district.
- (b) Each district shall be as compact as possible.
- (c) Each district shall consist of geographically contiguous area.
- (d) Population data may not be used for purposes of favoring or disfavoring any racial group or political party.
- (e) To the extent feasible and if not inconsistent with the basic enabling legislation for the municipal corporation, county, or district, the district boundaries shall coincide with existing recognized natural boundaries and shall, to the extent possible, preserve existing communities of related and mutual interest.
- (5) During the adoption of its plan, the municipal corporation, county, or district shall ensure that full and reasonable public notice of its actions is provided. Before adopting the plan, the municipal corporation, county, or district must:
 - (a) Publish the draft plan and hold a meeting, including notice and comment, within ten days of publishing the draft plan and at least one week before adopting the plan; and
 - (b) Amend the draft as necessary after receiving public comments and resubmit any amended draft plan for additional written public comment at least one week before adopting the plan.
- (6)(a) Any registered voter residing in an area affected by the redistricting plan may request review of the adopted local plan by the superior court of the county in which he or she resides, within fifteen days of the plan's adoption. Any request for review must specify the reason or reasons alleged why the local plan is not consistent with the applicable redistricting criteria. The municipal corporation, county, or district may be joined as respondent. The superior court shall thereupon review the challenged plan for compliance with the applicable redistricting criteria set out in subsection (4) of this section.
- (b) If the superior court finds the plan to be consistent with the requirements of this section, the plan shall take effect immediately.
- (c) If the superior court determines the plan does not meet the requirements of this section, in whole or in part, it shall remand the plan for further or corrective action within a specified and reasonable time period.
- (d) If the superior court finds that any request for review is frivolous or has been filed solely for purposes of harassment or delay, it may impose appropriate sanctions on the party requesting review, including payment of attorneys' fees and costs to the respondent municipal corporation, county, or district.

RCW 52.26.080 – Organization and Composition of Governing Board-Commissioner positions, districts.



- (1) The board shall adopt rules for the conduct of business. The board shall adopt bylaws to govern authority affairs, which may include:
- (a) The time and place of regular meetings;
 - (b) Rules for calling special meetings;
 - (c) The method of keeping records of proceedings and official acts;
 - (d) Procedures for the safekeeping and disbursement of funds; and
 - (e) Any other provisions the board finds necessary to include.
- (2) The governing board shall be determined by the plan. However, only elected officials of participating fire protection jurisdictions and elected commissioners of the authority as provided in subsection (3) of this section are eligible to serve on the board.
- (3)(a) A regional fire protection service authority plan may create one or more regional fire protection service authority commissioner positions to serve on a governing board. The following provisions define the qualifications, compensation, terms, and responsibilities of regional fire protection service authority commissioner positions:
- (i) RCW [52.14.010](#) governs the compensation, qualifications, and ability to serve as a volunteer firefighter;
 - (ii) RCW [52.14.030](#) governs the polling places for elections; and
 - (iii) RCW [52.14.050](#) governs commissioner vacancies.
- (b) The terms of office for regional fire protection service authority commissioner positions may be established by the plan, however, no single term may exceed six years and the terms of multiple positions must be staggered.
- (c) Regional fire protection service authority commissioners shall take an oath of office in the manner specified by RCW [52.14.070](#).
- (4)(a) A regional fire protection service authority plan may create commissioner districts. If commissioner districts are created, the population of each commissioner district must be approximately equal. Commissioner districts must be redrawn as provided in chapter [29A.76](#) RCW.
- (b) Commissioner districts shall be used as follows: (i) Only a registered voter who resides in a commissioner district may be a candidate for, or serve as, a commissioner of the commissioner district; and (ii) only voters of a commissioner district may vote at a primary to nominate candidates for a commissioner of the commissioner district. All voters of the proposed authority must be eligible to vote at a general election to elect a commissioner of the commissioner district. If a plan includes elected officials from participating fire protection jurisdictions, the commissioner districts may be based, in part, on the jurisdictional boundaries of the participating jurisdictions.

RCW 52.26.090 – Powers of Governing Board

- Governing Board executes the voter-approved plan.



- May levy taxes and benefit charges; enter agreements; accept grants; contract for services; hire and manage employees; monitor project progress; and enforce fire codes under chapter 19.27 RCW.

Background/ Problem Statement:

The Planning Committee must determine how the RFA Governing Board will be structured at formation and how it will transition to a fully elected board. The legal framework exists in statute, but key decisions—board size, district boundaries, term lengths, and transitional board composition—must be established in the RFA Plan. These decisions will shape the long-term governance, accountability, and stability of the RFA.

Decisions Needed:

1. Board size.
2. Commissioner district boundaries.
3. Length and staggering of terms.
4. Transitional Board composition (post-vote, pre-election).

Options and Analysis:

Option 1: Use the 2017–18 Governance Framework (Updated to Current Conditions)

This option builds upon the prior planning committee’s structure, which included a five-member Transitional Board composed of existing elected officials from the City and Fire District 8, transitioning over time into a five-member elected Board of Commissioners.

Pros:

- Provides continuity and builds on previously vetted work.
- Familiar governance pathway for both jurisdictions.
- Already aligns with statutory requirements.

Cons:

- Some elements may need updating due to changes since 2018.

Option 2: Develop a New Governance Structure

The committee may choose to create a new model regarding board size, make-up, districting, or term structure.

Pros:

- Full flexibility to reflect today’s needs.



Cons:

- Requires more time, legal review, and development.
- More complex for voters to understand compared to the prior framework.

Staff Recommendations:

Staff recommends Option 1: Using the 2017–18 governance framework as the foundation, updated to reflect current conditions and timelines. This provides a credible, familiar, and statutorily compliant structure while still allowing the Planning Committee to refine specifics.

Proposed Governance Structure (Based on the 2017 Framework)

1. Governing Board

The RFA Governing Board shall be established consistent with RCW 52.26.080 and the terms of this Plan, with authority beginning on the Effective Date.

2. Transitional Board

Upon formation, a five-member Transitional Board will serve until the first RFA commissioner elections:

- Position 1. This position shall be filled by a District Commissioner assigned to Position No. 1 and will expire on December 31, 2027.
- Position 2. This position shall be filled by a District Commissioner assigned to Position No. 2 and will expire on December 31, 2029.
- Position 3. This position shall be filled by an elected city council member or mayor, assigned to No. 3 and will expire on December 31, 2027.
- Position 4. This position shall be filled by an elected city council member or mayor, assigned to Position No. 4 and will expire on December 31, 2029.
- Position 5. This position shall be filled by an elected city council member or mayor, assigned to Position No. 5 and will expire on December 31, 2029.

3. Permanent Governing Board and Commissioner Districts

The RFA will transition to a five-member, directly elected, Board of Commissioners:

- Position 1 shall be filled by a registered voter residing within commissioner district number 1 and shall serve an Initial Term of six (6) years.
- Position 2 shall be filled by a registered voter residing within commissioner district number 2 and shall serve an Initial Term of six (6) years.



- Position 3 shall be filled by a registered voter residing within commissioner district number 3 and shall serve an Initial Term of four (4) years.
- Position 4 shall be filled by a registered voter residing within commissioner district number 4 and shall serve an Initial Term of six (6) years.
- Position 5 shall be filled by a registered voter residing within commissioner district number 5 and shall serve an Initial Term of six (6) years.

After the initial elections, all commissioner terms shall be six years.

4. Commissioner Eligibility and Voting Rules:

- Primary Election: Only voters residing within the commissioner's district participate in the primary election.

General Election: All voters within the Regional Fire Authority (RFA) participate in the general election.

- Office Compatibility: Commissioners may not hold any public office or employment that is incompatible with their duties, including employment with the RFA.

Commissioner District Boundaries:

- Boundaries will appear in Appendix B.
- District populations must be approximately equal.
- Boundaries must be drawn consistent with RCW 29A.76.

5. Governing Rules

The Governing Board will develop bylaws and governance policies consistent with RCW 52.26.080.

6. Authority

The Governing Board will exercise all powers provided by Washington State law, including authority over all RFA operations and matters related to Title 52 RCW.

7. Compensation

Commissioner compensation will follow the same provisions applicable to fire district commissioners under Title 52 RCW.

Committee Recommendations:



Implementation Steps:

1. Define commissioner district boundaries.
2. Draft enabling resolutions to appoint transitional board members after voter approval — both adopt resolutions
3. Establish election sequencing and timelines.

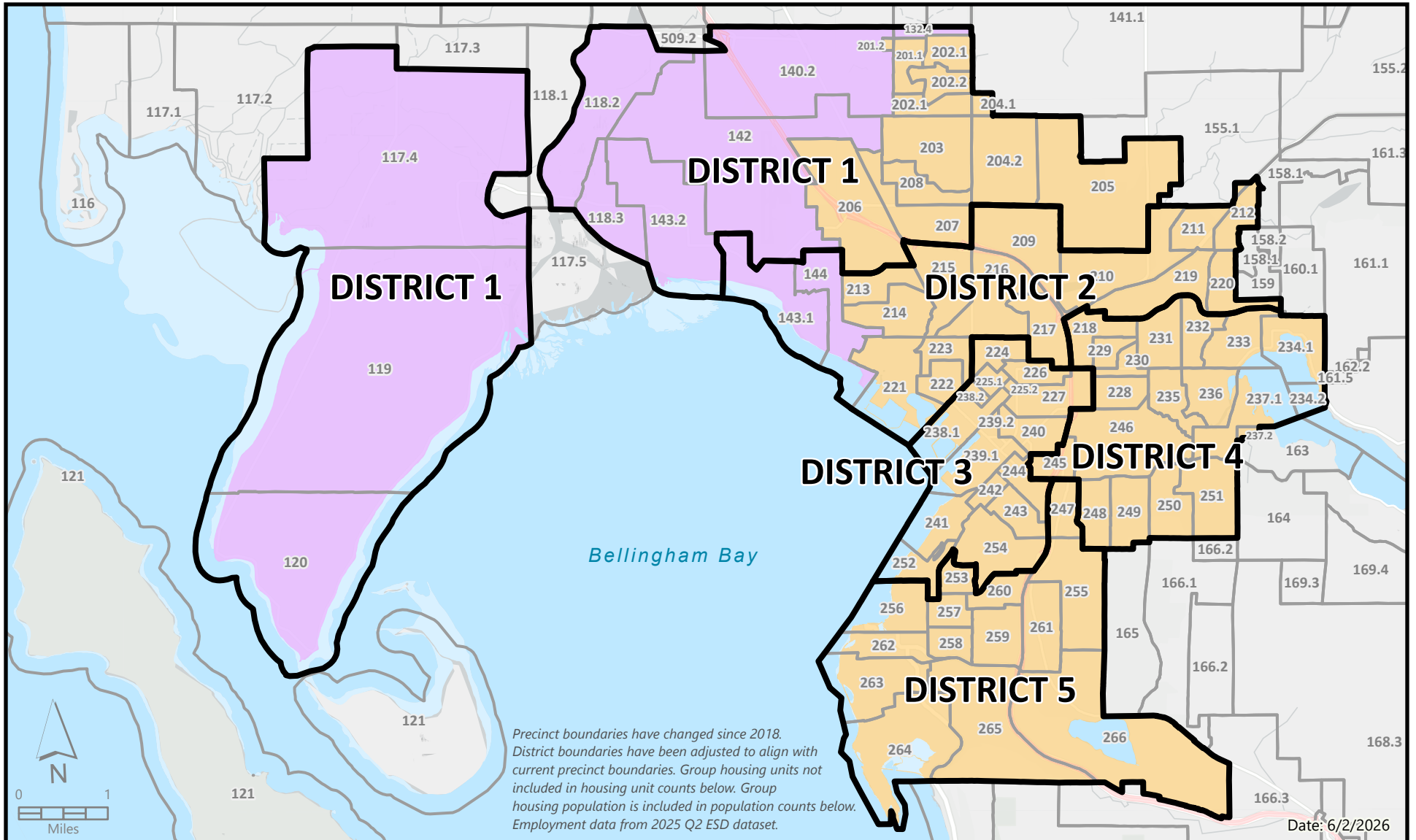
Financial/ Administrative Implications:

Election costs, commissioner stipends, administrative and onboarding support.

Sample Transitional Board (3-year v2 Proposed) 2026 RFA Planning Process

APPOINTED POSITIONS	ELECTED POSITIONS	TRANSITION NOTES	2027	2028	2029	2030	2031	2032	2033
Position 1. This position will be filled by a District Commissioner and will expire on December 31, 2029.	Regional Fire Authority Commissioner Ward #1	Appointed by D8 board to RFA transitional board.							
Position 2. This position will be filled by a District Commissioner and will expire on December 31, 2027.	Regional Fire Authority Commissioner Ward #2	Appointed by D8 board to RFA transitional board.							
Position 3. This position will be filled by one elected official from the City and will expire on December 31, 2029.	Regional Fire Authority Commissioner Ward #3	Appointed by COB council to RFA transitional board.							
Position 4. This position will be filled by one elected official from the City and will expire on December 31, 2027.	Regional Fire Authority Commissioner Ward #4	Appointed by COB council to RFA transitional board.							
Position 5. This position will be filled by one elected official from the City and will expire on December 31, 2029.	Regional Fire Authority Commissioner Ward #5	Appointed by COB council to RFA transitional board.							

APPENDIX B- COMMISSIONER DISTRICTS



Proposed Regional Fire Authority District Boundaries



- Proposed District Boundaries
- Precincts
- City of Bellingham
- Fire District 8

District	Housing		Population		Employment	
	Housing Units	Percent of Total Housing Units	Population	Percent of Total Population	Employees	Percent of total Employees
DISTRICT 1	9,449	20%	20,265	19%	16,573	26%
DISTRICT 2	9,491	20%	20,860	20%	16,942	27%
DISTRICT 3	9,614	20%	21,875	21%	19,956	32%
DISTRICT 4	9,198	19%	20,489	20%	5,176	8%
DISTRICT 5	9,604	20%	20,513	20%	4,302	7%
Totals	47,356	100%	104,002	100%	62,949	100%



City of Bellingham - Whatcom County Fire District #8 Regional Fire Authority Planning Committee Issue Paper

Prepared by: Assistant Chief Dave Pethick

Date: May 28, 2026

Title: Operations and Services

Purpose:

The purpose of this chapter is to outline how fire protection, emergency medical services, fire prevention, fire investigation, public education, and dispatch services will be delivered by the Regional Fire Authority (RFA) on the Effective Date. It describes how existing services and operational standards transition from the City of Bellingham Fire Department and Whatcom County Fire District 8 to the RFA to ensure seamless, uninterrupted services to the community. The transfer of operational standards should ensure consistent, high-quality emergency services across all jurisdictions, reduce duplication, and improve response times and resource allocation.

The proposed transfer will align our operational standards with the latest regional and state fire service guidelines, ensuring compliance with safety, training, and equipment requirements, while addressing the necessary improvements identified within the *March 2026 City of Bellingham Public Safety Level of Service Needs Assessment*.

Statutory References:

Background/ Problem Statement:

The formation of the RFA requires clear identification of which services transfer to the new entity, how standards of service will be upheld, and how responsibilities will be shared or retained by the City of Bellingham and Whatcom County. Documenting these transitions



ensures transparency and operational stability and helps eliminate ambiguity regarding authority, staffing, and service expectations during and after implementation.

Decisions Needed:

1. Confirm which services are transferred to the RFA on the Effective Date.
2. Establish levels of service within and outside the Urban Growth Area (UGA).
3. Approve the division of responsibilities between the RFA, City of Bellingham, and Whatcom County for prevention, investigation, and emergency management.
4. Approve the transfer of personnel associated with Life Safety and dispatch functions.

Options and Analysis:

Fire Protection and Emergency Medical Services

1. All current operational and service-delivery functions of the City of Bellingham Fire Department and Whatcom County Fire District 8 will be transferred to the RFA on the Effective Date.
2. Current staffing models, standards of coverage, deployment standards, field operations, command staffing, and operational policies and procedures of the City of Bellingham Fire Department and Whatcom County Fire District 8 shall be transferred to the RFA and commence at the current level of service on the Effective Date.
3. The RFA will uphold the actual operational performance level that existed at the time of formation while working toward achieving the adopted levels of service identified in the City and County Comprehensive Plans.

The RFA Governing Board may adjust service levels in the future as appropriate, based on community expectations, operational needs, and available resources.

4. All existing mutual aid, automatic aid, and contractual service agreements currently held by the City or the District will be transferred to the Regional Fire Authority (RFA) upon its formation. These agreements will remain in full force and effect, ensuring uninterrupted regional response capability throughout the transition. The RFA will assume all associated rights, responsibilities, and obligations under each agreement.

Following formation, the RFA Governing Board may review these agreements to determine whether updates or modifications are necessary to best support regional service delivery.



Fire Prevention Services

Fire prevention services include permit review, fire code enforcement and fire origin and cause investigations and fire prevention education. Currently Bellingham Fire Department provides variations of these services across three different Authorities having Jurisdictions (AHJs).

- In the City of Bellingham, Bellingham Fire provides all these prevention services.
- In the unincorporated areas of Fire District 8 that are within the bounds of the Lummi Nation, Bellingham Fire provides permit review and fire prevention education.
- In the unincorporated areas of Fire District 8 outside of the Lummi Nation, Bellingham Fire provides fire prevention education.

Fire Prevention Service Providers on Effective Date:

On the effective date, Fire Prevention Services within the boundaries of the RFA shall be provided throughout the RFA in accordance with applicable RCWs and interlocal agreements with the appropriate AHJs.

Emergency Management Services

Existing Providers

- The City of Bellingham provides emergency management services within city limits.
- Whatcom County provides emergency management services within Fire District 8.

Providers Upon RFA Effective Date

Within the City of Bellingham:

- The City of Bellingham will remain the provider of emergency management services.

Within Unincorporated Whatcom County:

- Whatcom County will continue to be the provider of emergency management services.

Fire and EMS Dispatch (Prospect)

Existing Providers

The City of Bellingham, through the Fire Department, currently provides fire and EMS dispatch (Prospect) services for all of Whatcom County under an inter-local agreement.

Providers Upon RFA Effective Date

- The RFA will assume responsibility for County wide fire and EMS dispatching previously provided by the City.



Transition of Services

To ensure a smooth and uninterrupted transition, the following actions will occur on the Effective Date:

- The RFA will provide Fire Marshal services, including permit review, fire and life safety code enforcement, and fire investigation services as authorized by the applicable RCW's and interlocal agreements with the authorities having jurisdiction.

The City of Bellingham Fire Department staff assigned to the Life Safety Division will be transferred to the RFA ensuring continuity of staffing, operations, and service delivery.

- The RFA Life Safety Division will be organized as provided in Appendix C (Org Chart).
- The City of Bellingham agrees to designate the Fire Chief and Fire Marshal of the RFA as the Fire Chief and Fire Marshal of the City of Bellingham.
- The transfer of authority to the RFA Life Safety Division will be seamless and will initially model the current Life Safety Division of the City of Bellingham Fire Department.
- The RFA will enforce Fire Code within the City of Bellingham. Except as provided in the Interlocal Agreement, the City should provide the necessary prosecution and police support for code enforcement matters.
- The RFA will conduct origin and cause investigations within the City of Bellingham. Except as provided in the Interlocal Agreement, the City should provide the necessary law enforcement support for criminal fire investigation matters.
- The City of Bellingham will retain emergency management authority within its jurisdiction in accordance with Washington State law.
- All fire department dispatch personnel currently assigned to provide county-wide fire and EMS dispatching services will be transferred to the RFA ensuring continuity of staffing, operations, and service delivery.
- Dispatching services will continue without interruption, with the RFA operating under the current dispatch center, systems, and protocols used at the time of formation.

Staff Recommendations:

Staff recommend adopting the proposed transition framework, including the transfer of Life Safety Division staff, dispatch personnel, and associated authorities to the RFA on the Effective Date. This approach maintains continuity, protects current service levels, and minimizes operational disruption for both jurisdictions.

Committee Recommendations:



Implementation Steps:

- Create ILAs outlining fire prevention and dispatching services.
- Coordinate personnel transfers for all staff.
- Ensure all mutual aid and automatic aid agreements are transferred to the RFA.

Financial/ Administrative Implications:

- Administrative coordination between jurisdictions for code enforcement and emergency management.