

SB2211

Good Afternoon, My Name is John Hejl and I am the fire chief in Casselton ND.

Casselton Fire is 100% volunteer. We cover an area of 385 sq miles – 12 townships and the cities of Casselton and Amenia or 5000 ND residents as primary fire. That area almost doubles to 745 for Extrication.

Volunteer and Career departments across the state pull funding from a variety of sources; grants, taxes, general funds of cities and townships, and all too often donations and fundraisers. Those funding sources should mirror their uses. Career or volunteer, metro or rural you will be hard pressed to find two identical departments. At Casselton Fire roughly 1/3 of our call volume comes from Casselton, 1/3 from our rural addresses, and 1/3 from Interstate 94 of which we cover 33 Miles; from Mapleton to Tower City. If we only covered Casselton we would focus spending on Engines and Ladders. If we only covered rural areas we would focus on Grass Rigs and Tankers. The Interstate and the State Highways that run through our area make us also focus on extrication and dealing with hazardous situations and substances that would otherwise not be an issue in our area. Our funding structure follows this call volume and equipment needs matrix in that the city contract is 1/3, our townships and Amenia are 1/3, and our state insurance rebate is 1/3 of our budget.

Once again, 1/3 of Casselton Fire Department's annual budget comes from our state insurance rebate. We have come to rely on the insurance fund money not because we want it, but because we need it. Each Biennium we lobby for a continuing appropriation as we have to decide if we can purchase what we need or if we will have to wait, unsure of the funding we will receive.

As volunteer responders in Casselton we are not asking for insurance rebate funds for a pay increase, but rather to provide current/safe tools, apparatus, and PPE for our firefighters.

To help quantify the things I listed at the beginning of this speech. In 2021 Casselton fire spent 621 hours and 15 minutes on emergency scenes. In 2022 it was 569 hours and 19 minutes. That is only time spent on scene. For each hour spent on scene add an additional 3 hours of "department time"; drive time to and from emergencies, time spent after getting apparatus and tools ready for service, add Classroom and training time, business meetings, public education, building inspections, daycare and school tours, city and township meetings and speaking here today... the list goes on. Our time is limited as firefighters and needs to be spent on these things.

This past summer at the NDFA Convention held in Casselton, Senator Mark Weber asked me if there was anything that he, as a legislator, could do to help the fire service in North Dakota. Immediately I said yes; he could help me/us with funding. Mark then spent the next several months speaking and working with ND fire chiefs, NDFA staff, and the State Fire Marshal's office to draft and introduce legislation to address several issues within the ND fire service.

A wise policy maker once told me that the first question asked of a piece of legislation is this: "What problems does it aim to fix?" Here are the main problems that you can help me fix.

Problem 1:

Our funding through the state insurance rebate is not reliable. As I do not know if or how much I will receive from this rebate (in some years it has been cut by over half) I cannot build an accurate budget, order equipment in a timely manner, or plan repairs. I have this problem every two years. Instead of focusing on the myriad of other issues that present themselves to the fire service (training, retention, recruitment, cancer, health and safety, etc), we are here every two years addressing this issue. The fire insurance premium tax was originally written in 1887 to be a pass through fund, 100% of it going to fire departments. That changed in 1985 and we have been asking for it back ever since. Apparatus costs and build times dictate that we are good stewards of our funds. I don't have room in my budget for frivolous expenses as I need all of the funding I can get to keep an ever aging fleet of trucks, tools, and Gear current to keep my personnel safe. The Fire Insurance Premium Tax is supposed to be set as a Local tax returning to Local emergency services to help reduce ISO numbers – a system the insurance world uses as a multiplier to set insurance rates. As we build better departments, our citizens pay less in premiums. The simple solution to this problem is to make the insurance premium rebate paid to fire departments state-wide a continuing appropriation at 100% of its value.

Problem 2:

The State Fire Marshall's Office needs more staff. There have been times when I have had to wait 8 plus hours for a State Fire Marshall Deputy to arrive on the scene of a structure fire to conduct an investigation. Waiting that long not only compromises scene evidence as it weathers and decomposes over time but also stretches our resources as someone needs to keep watch over any scene. On our volunteer department, that means that someone is likely missing work. Our Fire Marshal's office is short staffed and spread thin over a growing state. Another area that this office assists our departments is with building plan review. As a volunteer fire chief, I do not have the training, resources, or time to pour through the minutiae of a plan review of new or remodeled buildings, much less a \$400MM soy crush plant. I have utilized the expertise of this office multiple times when I needed further explanation of code requirements, help with enforcement, and investigation expertise. They are much needed and

appreciated, especially by the mostly rural fire service in this state who cannot afford to employ their own fire prevention/investigation specialists. They need more FTE's to fulfill their mission.

Problem 3:

As volunteers, we struggle with training. The ND fire service needs a training division and a credentialing agency to make sure that firefighters in the state are trained in order to be safe, efficient, and effective. When people dial 911 they expect perfection. They want 5 brain surgeon decathletes to arrive in 3 minutes and solve all of their problems. And there are a lot of problems and areas of expertise that we are expected to deal with. Fire departments today are expected to be an all hazards agency. Having the expertise on staff to provide training in every area for small rural departments is extremely rare. We need the NDFA's instructors to fill those gaps and deliver that training. Career departments utilize the NDFA in a similar fashion. They are able to use NDFA props and instructors to teach classes in house rather than paying employees to travel out of state and then also paying back fill to replace those employees while they are gone for training. Along with the training, the NDFA is the agency that credentials the ND fire service responders. They set the standards for training so that we can justify our actions and action levels as we respond to people who dial 911. The NDFA needs a secure source of funding from the state.

I know that just throwing money at problems does not make them go away. You as legislators are justified in questioning the validity of our requests in SB 2211. This bill also outlines how each agency reports upward to each other in order for these funding sources to be paid. Fire departments reporting actions and results online through the National Fire Incident Reporting System and filing certificates of existence with the state outlining how funds were used; The Fire Marshal's office and the NDFA reporting to the Insurance Commissioner's office.

I am pleading with you. Please help the fire service in our great state. Please help us fix some of these problems so that we can better serve our citizens.

Thank You

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