Mr. Chairman and Committee Members,

My name is Brian Paulson, I am currently serving as the fire chief of the Jamestown Rural Fire District. I am a 27-year veteran of the fire service and current Vice President of the North Dakota Fire Chiefs Association.

The Jamestown Rural Fire District serves 22 townships in eastern Stutsman County. We cover approximately 828 square miles. We currently have 30 members on our fire department roster, along with 20 directors on our fire district board. Our volunteers represent .19% of our community and we are considered a paid on-call department.

One of the major issues we see our volunteers struggle with is time. Time to participate, time to train and time to respond. We are seeing a growing trend in other things competing for time that were not present 10 years ago. We are also seeing a higher number of responders having to clock out at work to come to a fire, or some just cant leave at all.

We are asking these volunteers to train in first aid/cpr, first responder and emt certifications, hazmat operations, vehicle extrication, structure firefighting, electric vehicle firefighting, rope rescue, grain bin rescue, daycare inspections, commercial plan reviews, and public occupancy inspections. This is supposed to be on their own time. And then, oh by the way we need to do some fundraising besides to get you the proper ppe to do the work you are risking your livelihood at. **Not a great marketing strategy!**

Some of the struggles I have witnessed with fire departments within Stutsman County is that nobody wants the job of being responsible for the administrative work, lack of succession planning or smooth transitions from leadership teams to pass on organizational structure and knowledge. Trying to upgrade equipment on a limited budget can be overwhelming and the lack of progress can be very demoralizing and harmful to an organization. This happens both at the department and district level.

Having a sound and effective organizational structure can help with volunteer recruitment and retention issues. A well organized and run fire department prioritizes the volunteers most precious commodity, their time.

This can come at cost, paying a stipend or a wage to administrative fire department leadership to be responsible for department equipment readiness, training and certification programs, and strategic planning should be something that should be available as tool for departments to be successful. Departments paying members a per call stipend or paid on-call wage is also a useful tool to recruit and retain members.

Unfortunately, century code for ND Fire Districts has been mostly untouched since 1961 when the Legislature passed 18-10. We are still operating under the 5 mill base limit set forth 64 years ago. While operating costs have only skyrocketed, keeping up with the day-to-day operational costs is a struggle for most departments. Adding additional operations costs such as wages or stipends might be out of the question.

Much has changed in 64 years and those days are long gone. Is relying solely and exclusively on unpaid volunteers realistic or sustainable? Is this model set up in 1961 still effective in 2025?

Suggestions for success:

- Support and amend century code to raise fire districts base mill levy limit from 5 mills to 10 mills, keep the voter approval excess mills up to 13. Or bring it up to 15 mills in line with rural ambulance districts.
- Develop leadership materials and guidance for fire district board members. To help guide new members on responsibilities and duties of fire boards, stress importance of strategic planning.
- Encourage and adopt the evolution of the fire service to include compensating fire dept. leadership & volunteers for their time with training, response, and administration of the department organization.
- Allow for some type of tax incentive for employers to allow their staff to respond to fire or ems calls.
- Legislative participation let's keep engaged and keep talking solutions beyond this session.

ND Fire District taxing authority history.

1961 - ND Legislature passed legislation allowing rural fire associations or departments to form fire districts to serve rural townships.

This legislation placed a limit of 5 mills that can be taxed to the property owners within the fire district. This also set limits on the indebtedness of the fire district of ten years of the max annual tax levy.

1975 – ND legislature amended language for the indebtedness of the rural fire district to limit it to 90% of 20 times the annual max mill levy.

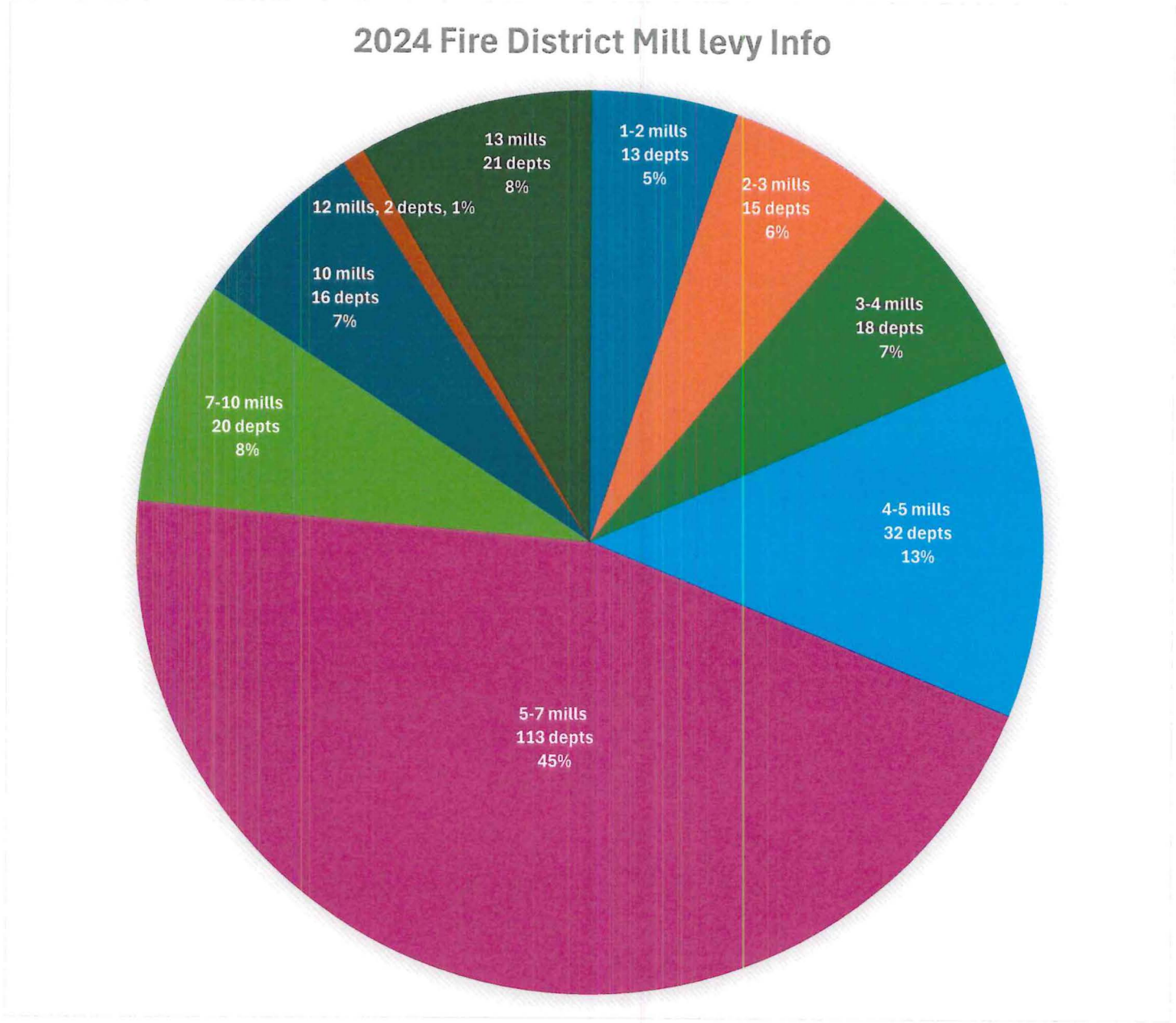
1979 – ND Legislature added the ability for fire districts to bond for capital improvement projects such as trucks and buildings.

1981 – ND Legislature amended language allowing fire districts to raise excess mills, not to exceed 10 mills. This would be allowed through approval by petitioning 20% of the members of the fire district.

2015 *(Current)*– ND Legislature actions removed the petition process and replaced it with special election. There is still a 5 mill limit, but approval to raise mills now requires a majority vote of qualified electors of the fire district, raising mills to no more than 13 mills. Increased levy may not be effective for more than ten taxable years or the period of time necessary for repayment of indebtedness incurred which was intended to be repaid from the increased levy, whichever expires later. NDCC 18-10-07

Thank You
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Mills	# of Depts
1 - 2	13
2 - 3	15
3 - 4	18
4 - 5	32
5 - 7	113
7 - 10	20
10	16
12	2
13	21
Total depts	250



Mills	# of Depts
1 - 10	227
11 - 13	23

