

**Testimony
By
Chris L. Caviezel**

**Chairman, Board of Commissioners
King and Kittitas Counties Fire District #51**

Before

**The Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
Committee on Natural Resources
U.S. House of Representatives**

**Room 1334 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C.
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10:00 a.m.**

My name is Chris Caviezel, I am the Chairman of the Board of Commissioners for King and Kittitas Counties Fire District #51, a volunteer fire department serving the recreational community of Snoqualmie Pass.

This un-incorporated area has 350 full-time residents. In addition, we have a winter-time ski area which sees an estimated 20,000 people a day during the peak of the season. The Washington State Department of Transportation estimates that up to 60,000 vehicles will travel through our fire district on a busy day.

Snoqualmie Pass has an enormous amount of snowfall with an average of 32 feet of snow each year for the last ten years. This results in avalanches and rock slides on both sides of the pass and additionally adds to the appeal of the area by many visitors.

These unique demographics challenge local resources to the limits. Our Fire Department averages over 300 calls a year and is seeing a 10 percent annual increase in call volumes.

Snoqualmie Pass is completely surrounded by Forest Service land. To the North and South of us are the Cascade Mountains and along the Interstate-90 corridor, Forest Service Land extends to the east and west of us, well beyond our 7-1/2 mile response area in each direction.

While our primary mission is to fight fires and provide emergency medical services in our local residential setting and nearby inter-state highway – the impacts of the surrounding Forest Service Land definitely affect our mission. The

Forest Service has the primary responsibility for putting fires out on their land, however, the nearest Forest Service resources are 30 minutes away – in good weather – in the town of North Bend. And though Snoqualmie Pass's all volunteer fire station is not obligated to respond to any fires on Forest Service Land, we gladly do so. We are usually the ones in the position to get to the fire first, giving us a better chance at containing the fire before it can get out of hand and present a much larger problem.

It is also important to note that our all-volunteer fire department must respond quickly to prevent fire from spreading on to Forest Service Land. The nearest career department is 30 minutes away, weather co-operating, and during a recent fire we have had support come to us from over an hour away.

Despite our very limited resources, there is a tremendous need for a new fire station. The current station was originally built in the 1930's as a maintenance shed for the Department of Transportation, the existing building has numerous electrical, structural and operational deficiencies. One problem of note is that the roof sheds snow in front of the apparatus bays, especially when the fire station siren sounds when we get a call. This can leave up to a four foot ridge of snow and ice in front of our rigs preventing a response until the path is cleared.

Last year our Fire Department was contacted by the Forest Service to ask if we would be interested in purchasing the land where our Fire Station is currently located. We have long recognized the pressing need to build a new fire station, so for many years our department has been looking at alternative locations. Unfortunately, each and every time it always came down to the lack of money for us to proceed.

Through a series of discussions with the Forest Service, we also learned that there is a different parcel of land that they would be willing to consider. This other parcel would allow us to build a new station with less impact to current operations and the new location, due to its location and accessibility, would definitely serve us better. Also, it should be noted, that the land that we desire is a rarely used parking lot.

Monies received through fire department levied property taxes this year will equate to around \$163,000. This money is barely enough to sustain current operations. And since Snoqualmie Pass is surrounded by Forest Service land (and because we can not levy a tax against the U.S. Forest Service) we are severely prohibited from expanding our tax base and must rely upon outside assistance for continued operation. And unlike almost all of the other fire departments in the State of Washington, most of our customers, about 84%, are non-taxing paying residents. Rather they are people that are driving through the area, visiting the Ski Area, or visiting U.S. Forest Service Land.

We recognize that the process to convey land, without cost, is not done very often. However, we believe our unique circumstances more than justify this to be done.

My constituents recognize the importance of a top quality fire department and they are supportive of the Fire Department. A conveyance of this land would ease the burden of building a new fire station. Funding sources for building the fire station are being sought through State Representative Bill Hinkle and others. Additionally, Fire Chief Matt Cowan and myself will be attending a workshop at the end of this month for the purpose of Fire Station Design and Alternative Funding Sources to fund the cost of building a new fire station.