

# **Frequently Asked Questions-- First Due Fire Area Fee**

## **Why a First Due Fire Fee?**

- WV State Code 8-13-13 specifies the ability of municipalities to “**provide by ordinance for the installation, continuance, maintenance, or improvement of the (fire protection) service, to make reasonable regulations of the service, and to impose by ordinance upon the users of the service reasonable rates, fees, and charges to be collected in the manner specified in the ordinance.**” Residents and businesses within the first due area as determined by the State Fire Marshal’s office are considered users of this service and can be charged a user fee.

## **Is a First Due Fire Fee fair? Where is my representation?**

- Tax payers and users of Weston have covered the cost of the full paid administrative staff of the Fire Department, the utilities, portions of insurance costs, worker’s compensation, and some of the major equipment financing of the department. Since the service is administered by the Weston City Council, all those affected are welcome to address the Council for any issues with said service at their regular meetings or call the City Building with day to day questions.

## **Where will the Money go?**

- Funds collected as a fire fee by law are to be spent directly on the administration and operation of the fire protection service. Funds will be collected and managed by the City of Weston Finance Department that is overseen by the Weston City Council. Each year the Council will assess the need level of fees and adjust accordingly.

## **What is the First Due Area? Will I Be Charged?**

- The First Due Area is the area designated as the first response area of the Weston Fire Department and is approximately 224 sq. miles. This area is determined with the WV State Fire Marshal and is recorded with the Lewis-Gilmer E-911 Center who can answer questions of the area you are assigned. Not all county residents will be charged, only if your physical property is within this area will you be charged.

## **Will this Affect my Insurance?**

- Insurance rates take into account many different aspects. One benefit for users who are within certain proximity of the paid fire station is a lower insurance rate. These rates have been available to those outside of the city limits over the years. With the First Due Fee, the Weston Fire Department will look at the possibility of expanding the station coverage with a substation to increase response times and affect insurance rates.

## **Don’t my Tax Dollars Already Pay for this?**

- Historically, City of Weston users have subsidized the fire service with taxes as the fire fees have only covered about 25% of the fire service operation. The service outside of the City is paid for by state appropriations, the county fire fee (not property taxes), accident billing and fundraising. No county taxes are currently contributed to the annual operation of the fire service.

#### **What will happen if the Fees are Not Increased?**

- Service reductions in and loss of general tax revenues for other critical services. One of the greatest costs of any service is the human labor required. In this age of increased inflation there is heavy pressure on wages and health insurance which make it difficult to sustain manpower levels without increased funding. Departments will also have to make due with substandard equipment that most likely will not be certified or quickly going out of certification. As Weston's taxes have contributed to funding of the Fire Dept, this has reduced the funding available for other critical services.

#### **How Much Will Be Collected?**

- The amount collected depends on the overall collection rate. It's been estimated from other communities that the City could anticipate around a 60% collection rate at the enactment of this fee. It is hoped that collection rates will be closer to regular norms of approximately 90 percent over time. It is anticipated that the funds will generate another \$500-700k in fire fee revenues annually.

#### **Does my County Fire Fee not cover this? What will happen to it?**

- The county fire fees cover very little of the cost to operate the Weston Fire Department. County fire fees are collected and dispersed in six equal increments for each department i.e. each department receives the same amount of funding regardless of call volume. The fire fee only covers about 20% of the cost of the county calls of the Weston Fire Dept. The county fee's fate is determined by the County Commission.

#### **Are City Residents Paying Less?**

- City residents are paying differently to take into account the property taxes and other forms of payments that they already contribute to the funding of the fire protection service. The current municipal fee also includes police and street fees that are NOT passed along to residents of the first due area. Residential charges in the first due area are higher due to the increased travel times and associated costs for those services in the expanded region.

#### **Is the Weston Fire Department Taking Money from Other Departments?**

- The Weston Fire Department is charging its users for the cost of the service. The previous county fire fee scheme, if it were to be removed, would only take from the other fire departments in as much as they received a large amount of fee revenue from the area that was not primarily their

responsibility. The Weston Fire Department is looking to have its users pay directly for the service they are being provided.

#### **Will the Weston Fire Department Change Its Service Levels?**

- It is anticipated that the Fire Service will take at least 2-3 years to ramp up with trained and qualified paid employees and to pay off some of the equipment that has been financed. It is the current intention to see more paid staff running critical calls within the first due area and to ensure that 2 firefighters (paid or unpaid) respond to each call. The City has applied for grants to help onboard paid firefighters sooner if so awarded.

#### **Will my auxiliary or other structures be charged?**

- The City of Weston, in the implementation of its services fees, has not and does not intend to charge auxiliary structures such as barns, sheds, and garages which are auxiliary to a primary structure already being assessed a fee. However, when a similar building is a primary structure itself, such as storage units, warehouses, etc., these structures will be charged as primary structures. Garage apartments are treated as non-owner occupied residential units, and are not considered auxiliary to the primary structure. Each case and use will be subject to the interpretation of the Weston Finance Manager and appealable to the Weston Municipal Fees Appeals Board for final determination.

Have others? Call 304-269-6141 to speak with the City Finance Manager or the City Manager.