Buncombe County Government

Fire Marshal's Office
Kevin Tipton, Fire Marshal
Chris Brown, Deputy Fire Marshal
Justin Honeycutt, Asst. Fire Marshal

Emergency Services
164 Erwin Hills Rd
Asheville NC 28806
(828) 250-6620

TO: Buncombe County Board of Commissioners
FROM: Kevin Tipton, Buncombe County Fire Marshal
DATE: 03/17/2026

RE: Unified Service Tax District for Fire Protection under N.C. General Statute 153A-304

I. **Purpose and Statutory Authority**
This report is prepared in accordance with NC General Statute §153A-304, which authorizes the combination of tax service districts upon finding that:

1. The districts are contiguous or form a continuous boundary.
2. The services provided in each district are substantially the same; and
3. If services provided are lower in one district, there is a need to increase those services to the level enjoyed by other districts.

II. Background
Fire protection services in unincorporated Buncombe County are currently provided by 19 contracted fire departments serving 20 separate fire protection service tax districts. These districts are contiguous and were created by Buncombe County in 2016.

The County proposes consolidating these 20 districts into one Buncombe County Fire Protection Service District with a single tax rate beginning FY27 to ensure fairness and minimum service standards across the County. The relevant service districts recommended to be consolidated into a unified service tax district are:

- Asheville Special
- Asheville Suburban
- Barnardsville
- Broad River
- East Buncombe
- Enka-Candler
- Fairview
- French Broad
- Garren Creek
- Jupiter
- Leicester
- North Buncombe

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- Reems Creek
- Reynolds
- Riceville
- Skyland
- Swannanoa
- Upper Hominy
- West Buncombe
- Woodfin

Appendix 1 is a map of the existing fire protection tax districts in Buncombe County and Appendix 2 is the proposed Buncombe County Fire Protection Service District.

It is my professional, expert opinion as the Buncombe County Fire Marshal and with 34 years' experience in the fire service in Buncombe County that the fire protection services throughout Buncombe County are not consistent with some districts not able to provide the same service levels as those of other districts.

III. Service Level Variation Across Districts
Currently, service levels vary significantly by district, creating inequities in both cost and protection:

- Response Times:

Response times vary significantly across fire protection service districts in Buncombe County. The table below compiled by North Carolina Fire Chiefs Consulting shows the variance in response times across the County.

County staff has worked very closely to assist the Buncombe County Fire Chiefs in addressing the question of what an appropriate basic standard for fire protection in Buncombe County and the Chiefs have adopted the standard of 22 firefighters on scene of a residential structure fire within 10 minutes (suburban departments) and 25 minutes (rural departments) 80% of the time. This is a model of adequate personnel to effectively control a fire and has been modified from NFPA 1710 and 1720 by the fire chiefs serving Buncombe County. Based on data provided by the fire departments, Buncombe County Public Safety Communications, and N.C. Fire Chief's Consulting, currently no one single department is able to meet either standard alone.

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Station First Due	Count	%	TO@80th	Trv@80th	RT@80th
Barnardsville FD GPs	3,540	2.76%	00:02:27	00:08:30	00:10:41
Black Mt FD Dist 1 GPs	12,941	10.08%	00:02:17	00:08:05	00:09:56
Broad River FD GPs	916	0.71%	00:02:00	00:16:30	00:18:29
Enka FD GPs	15,758	12.28%	00:01:59	00:07:56	00:09:29
Fairview FD GPs	7,913	6.16%	00:01:56	00:06:54	00:08:26
French Broad FD GPs	3,148	2.45%	00:02:14	00:09:57	00:11:50
Garren Creek FD GPs	976	0.76%	00:02:42	00:13:03	00:15:02
Jupiter FD GPs	4,174	3.25%	00:02:10	00:09:34	00:11:22
Leicester FD GPs	7,950	6.19%	00:02:22	00:10:01	00:11:53
Reems Creek FD GPs	2,198	1.71%	00:02:06	00:07:27	00:09:16
Reems Creeks Beaverdam FD GPs	683	0.53%	00:02:23	00:12:45	00:14:10
Reynolds FD GPS	4,500	3.51%	00:01:58	00:07:33	00:09:17
Riceville FD GPs	4,434	3.45%	00:02:35	00:08:32	00:10:41
Skyland FD GPs	17,406	13.56%	00:02:19	00:08:30	00:10:19
Swannannoa FD GPs	8,386	6.53%	00:02:37	00:07:41	00:09:49
Upper Hominy FD GPs	3,235	2.52%	00:02:33	00:07:47	00:09:56
Weaverville FD GPs	11,411	8.89%	00:02:03	00:07:39	00:09:14
West Buncombe FD GPs	12,735	9.92%	00:02:13	00:07:46	00:09:27
Woodfin FD GPs	6,057	4.72%	00:02:16	00:07:27	00:09:22
Grand Total	**128,361**	**100.00%**	**00:02:14**	**00:08:13**	**00:10:01**

Call Volume and Staffing:

- Enka-Candler handles 8.66 incidents daily, compared to Broad River, which handles less than one incident per day, yet Enka-Candler has an 80th percentile response time of 9 minutes 29 seconds compared to Broad River's response time of 18 minutes and 29 seconds.
- Larger districts often have multiple staffed stations, while smaller districts rely heavily on volunteers and part-time staff. A responding fire engine in certain districts will come with three firefighters while a fire engine in other districts will come with one firefighter.

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Peak requests for fire service response in Buncombe County:

Alarm H	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Grand Total
00	481	426	436	390	434	455	520	3,142
01	443	389	380	355	341	373	440	2,721
02	427	346	338	326	339	320	428	2,524
03	333	298	309	279	319	329	347	2,214
04	336	314	318	297	272	296	333	2,166
05	354	363	390	336	346	318	346	2,453
06	394	503	450	478	449	472	412	3,158
07	631	806	809	736	779	802	623	5,186
08	736	1,009	989	969	996	1,023	808	6,530
09	896	1,170	1,072	1,148	1,086	1,105	975	7,452
10	1,011	1,244	1,273	1,305	1,221	1,234	1,042	8,330
11	1,043	1,252	1,228	1,232	1,277	1,330	1,195	8,557
12	1,110	1,236	1,292	1,276	1,254	1,312	1,208	8,688
13	1,181	1,298	1,343	1,195	1,294	1,332	1,243	8,886
14	1,124	1,167	1,309	1,276	1,328	1,288	1,259	8,751
15	1,094	1,319	1,353	1,361	1,321	1,398	1,199	9,045
16	1,046	1,376	1,354	1,317	1,383	1,431	1,222	9,129
17	1,130	1,264	1,277	1,341	1,408	1,318	1,282	9,020
18	1,142	1,179	1,157	1,240	1,358	1,373	1,188	8,637
19	1,002	1,053	1,053	1,088	1,188	1,166	1,159	7,709
20	955	975	1,012	967	1,042	1,028	1,111	7,090
21	782	754	811	858	816	946	965	5,932
22	669	644	647	650	698	738	805	4,851
23	530	508	496	548	573	601	677	3,933
Grand Total	18,850	20,893	21,096	20,968	21,522	21,988	20,787	146,104

*Provided by N.C. Fire Chief's Consulting and Buncombe County Public Safety Communications

The peak time for call volume occurs between the hours of 9:00 am and 8:00 pm when a volunteer firefighting force would be reduced the most due to volunteer firefighters working their full-time jobs and possibly outside of the fire district, increasing response times and limiting staffing availability.

Recruitment and retention remain a significant challenge for the fire service with a decline of 20% of volunteer firefighters in the United States since 2008 according to NFPA.

Another area of concern with the existing fire district model is the ability to ensure that fire departments have fire apparatus in appropriate condition. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) Standard 1901 and 1911 and the industry's best practices recommend that all fire apparatus be replaced at an age of 25 years and be moved from primary service to reserve status at 15 years. Currently, the fire districts have 40 vehicles older than 20 years with a projected replacement cost of $63.1 million. The vast majority of those aging apparatus

are in districts with higher tax rates and the inability to increase their tax revenues to accommodate the full replacement costs.

In addition to aging fire apparatus, fire departments in Buncombe County are facing aging Self Contained Breathing Apparatus (SCBA) and Personal Protective Equipment (Turn Out Gear) that must be worn on any fire scene. The County has 114 SCBAs that were manufactured prior to 2013 which means they do not meet existing standards established by the Standard 1981 and industry best practices. The estimated cost to replace those SCBAs is projected to exceed $1,000,000.00 The majority of the older units are in districts with higher tax rates.

NFPA Standard 1851 recommends that turnout gear be retired at no more than 10 years of use, from the date of manufacture. Buncombe County contracted departments have at least 80 sets of this PPE that exceed this standard and the industry's best practices.

- Tax Rate Disparity:

A core challenge with the fire service in Buncombe is variation of fire tax rates ranging from $0.0836 per $100 valuation (Asheville Special) to $0.22.7 in French Broad (Alexander), yet higher-tax districts often have lower service levels than districts with lower tax rates. Consider a case-by-case compassion of Skyland Fire District (lowest non municipal tax rate) and French Broad Fire District (Highest Tax Rate). Skyland can sustain the highest staffing levels of non-municipal fire departments in Buncombe County.

A 2025 analysis of the Buncombe County Fire System conducted by NC Fire Chief's Consulting found that "many of the fire departments in the system struggle financially with the resources that they are currently working with" (page 5). Buncombe County has been working closely with the fire departments over the last five years to attempt to achieve financial sustainability through improved budgeting and financial planning, but the current tax district model does not allow for a fire service that is financially sustainable.

This fragmented system means that where you live determines the level of fire protection you receive, which is inconsistent with the County's commitment to equitable public safety. This variance is not a reflection on the skill and abilities of various fire departments but fundamentally a reflection of a financial model where certain districts cannot financially sustain a basic level of service.

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IV. Plan for increasing service levels in districts with lower service levels:

To address these disparities, Buncombe County is proposing the following plan in accordance with NC General Statute §153A-304.

- Development of Basic Service Standards

In partnership with the Buncombe County Fire Chiefs, Buncombe County is proposing the adoption of the following basic fire service standards informed by national standards as recommended by The Center for Public Safety Excellence, industry best practices and the subject matter expertise of our fire chiefs:

Department Type	Standard
Suburban	22 firefighters on scene within 10 minutes, 80% of the time.
Rural	22 firefighters on scene within 25 minutes, 80% of the time.
All Departments	4 firefighters on scene within 8 minutes. Completion of a Community Risk Assessment.

Note: Departments can count mutual aid firefighters toward meeting these standards.

- Consolidation of Service Districts

- *Fire Insurance District* (G.S. 153A-233) - An area outside corporate limits with boundaries approved by the County Board of Commissioners for fire insurance purposes. It is NOT supported by either a referendum type fire tax (G.S. 69.25) or a special service district tax (G.S. 153A-300).
- *Fire Service District* (G.S. 153A-300) - An area outside corporate limits, with boundaries approved by the County Board of Commissioners, in which a fire tax is levied without referendum for fire protection services. Such district or districts may include territory within corporate limits if approved by resolution of the municipal governing body.

*INFORMATION BY N.C. OFFICE OF THE STAE FIRE MARSHAL

The current fire service district (for tax purpose) and the fire insurance district are congruent. As defined above with the modification of the fire service district to be one unified fire service district (for tax purposes) will not affect the current fire insurance district which will remain unchanged and consistent with the existing fire insurance district which will remain consistent with the fire department response district.

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The current individual tax district model is unable to provide the basic consistent service level discussed above. Many districts have no additional capacity within their tax base to generate the revenue necessary to meet those standards.

In summary, a unified fire protection service district will:

- Equalize funding so that all residents receive a baseline level of fire protection.
- Improve firefighters' safety and community safety by ensuring adequate staffing and equipment.
- Reduce the risk of loss of life and property through faster, more consistent response time.
- Increase system resiliency by enabling regional planning and resource sharing.

IX. Conclusion

The proposed consolidation meets all statutory requirements under NCGS §153A-304. It will:

- Eliminate inequities in service levels and tax rates.
- Improve firefighters and community safety.
- Strengthening financial and operational sustainability.

X

Kevin Tipton NC Fire Inspector III, CFI
Buncombe County Fire Marshal