

Rural fire districts receive far less revenue than city

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Although chiefs from the Paducah Fire Department and the county's six fire protection districts agree it's not an "apples-to-apples" comparison, rural fire districts see 3.7 cents in funding for every dollar allocated to the Paducah Fire Department.

McCracken County's fire districts get nearly 95 percent of their funding through real and personal property tax assessments.

The Paducah Fire Department is funded through the city's general fund, which draws on a variety of revenue streams.

Chiefs from the six fire protection districts presented their 2017-18 tax rates at the past two McCracken County fiscal court meetings, with three districts holding flat rates and three others increasing rates between 3.9 and 11.3 percent.

Those rates, ranging from \$43 per \$100,000 in the Melber-New Hope Fire District to \$75 per \$100,000 in the Concord Fire Protection District, are set by independent boards.

The \$1,666,423 total revenue budgeted for the six districts needs to cover the costs of fire station maintenance, insurance and utilities, training, principal and interest payments on fire equipment and new fire stations, and compensation.

Excluding the Melber-New Hope District, which receives revenue of only \$13,019 and contracts with a neighboring Graves County department to provide fire protection service, the remaining five districts average \$330,681 in revenue.

Most of the rural chiefs consider that amount sufficient.

"Departments in McCracken County are in pretty good shape because they're all taxing districts," said Charles Lott, Area 1 coordinator for the State Fire Commission. "Usually, finances figure into quality."

When it comes to revenue, city fire departments across the state fare much better.

For Paducah, the \$8,558,815 budgeted this year for fire protection and suppression, emergency management, inspection and code enforcement takes about 25 percent of the city's total general

fund expenditures. The PFD's budget has increased more than \$1 million in five years, an increase of 14.2 percent since 2013.

As can be seen in the accompanying chart, most of Paducah's peers spend a comparable amount on fire protection and emergency management services. In most cases, fire department expenses take between 20 and 25 percent of a city's general fund.

Although funding is far less than for city fire departments, tax revenues that support rural districts have been predictable for the most part.

"Our district had a pretty good jump in new property," said Bob McGowan, chief of the Concord District. His district enjoyed an 8.5 percent increase in tax revenue last year and budgeted a smaller increase for 2017-18.

The Loan Oak District, which has had flat tax revenues over the past three years, has taken a more proactive approach to raising revenue. Since 2003, Assistant Chief Dave Wright has written 18 grant applications to three agencies and been awarded seven.

Grants totaling \$588,497 have paid for a multi-purpose building, a four-story drill tower, a burn room, air compressor, and recruitment and retention expenses.

The West McCracken District is the lone exception to the pattern of flat or increasing tax revenues. Home to the Department of Energy site, the district received just over \$1 million of its \$1.7 million in tax revenue from the United States Enrichment Corporation (USEC) during the three-year period ending in 2015.

Starting in 2016, it all went away.

Donald Elrod, chief of the West McCracken District, said he's made inquiries to county, state and federal representatives about the drastic decrease, "but I still haven't gotten a real answer."

He said USEC claims that all personal property still located on site now belongs to the DOE and can't be taxed.

The district this month was able to make the final payment on a loan it secured for construction of a new \$1.7 million fire station in 2013. Eleven emergency response vehicles, including a Class A Pumper purchased in 2007 for \$200,000 and a 75-foot ladder truck purchased two years earlier for \$406,000, were also paid off prior to the revenue decline.