

SB 5520: Establishing a Single City Regional Fire Authority

Background

The 2004 Legislature created the ability for contiguous fire departments to merge into Regional Fire Authorities (RFAs) for the provision of fire protection and emergency services. Refinement of the RFA statute occurred in 2006 which facilitated the formation of the first RFA in January 2007. The experience of early RFAs led to more fine-tuning in 2011 as issues and impediments were identified.

Now, as more municipalities seek to shed the responsibility of providing fire protection services, and as fire departments seek to improve the efficient and economical delivery of those services, RFAs have emerged as a model that more and more local governments are exploring. In multiple instances, this stand-alone unit of local government designed specifically for providing fire and life-safety services has proven to be desirable to local leaders and voters.

The creation of a RFA also allows for a funding mechanism called a fire benefit charge (FBC). A FBC allows for charges proportional to the response force required by a particular occupancy and also reduces the property tax levy by \$0.50 per thousand dollars of assessed value. It can incentivize positive actions, such as installing sprinkler systems or fire alarms, by providing discounts. This system can improve the fairness associated with costs for fire and EMS responses.

While there have been several successful mergers of multiple adjacent jurisdictions into one regional fire authority, this approach isn't feasible for every adjacent jurisdiction. Issues such as dissimilar taxing rates, different levels of service, and varied staffing models make it difficult for agencies to merge. Another barrier to consolidation is the difference in funding models between city fire departments and fire protection districts.

What this bill does

This bill allows a single city to establish a RFA as opposed to current law that requires two or more adjacent jurisdictions to form a RFA. This allows a city to isolate the budget of the fire department and provide consistent funding for this core service.

This is not a hostile takeover. RFAs can only be created by a planning committee created by cities that choose to do so. The planning committee determines what elected officials will make up the governing body of the RFA and can include elected officials from the city and/or independently elected fire commissioners.

It is not a duplication of taxing authority. The taxing authority formerly allowed in the city transfers to the new RFA. Because RFAs and Fire Protection Districts are more closely related in structure than cities and Fire Protection Districts, future attempts to merge will be streamlined.

This bill creates the opportunity to assess a FBC. While FBC rates vary widely between jurisdictions that use them, they lower the tax rate.