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Committee Chair Meek, Vice Chair Boquist, and committee members, I am providing written testimony in support of SB 1068.

Under current laws and statutes, a property owner can choose not to be in a Rural Fire Protection District. Property owners do not have a choice on educational taxes, city or county taxes, or public safety law enforcement taxes, yet they can choose if they support essential public safety fire and emergency services. For the many reasons outlined here, and more, these rules need to be updated and aligned with other taxing entity regulations to stabilize District funding and operational logistics because these dollars are vital to support the amount of fire and emergency service infrastructure available to protect and support the area.

Logistically, property owners within the fire district boundaries but not incorporated into the district overly complicates emergency response to these areas. You may have a group of houses or subdivision where three or four are incorporated into the district and the other two or three are not. How do you distinguish if someone is in or out during an emergency? Minutes count and lives are at stake. Yes, it would be nice to simply say we just don't respond to those people, but who wants to take the liability if a wrong address was given, or no address is given and just an area. How is this equitable taxation when one property owner is in the fire district and their neighbor is not. Districts have a fiduciary obligation to tax paying members to ensure their safety. How can we do this fairly? In addition, the mental health impact on emergency first responders who knowingly do not or cannot respond, in an already emotionally taxing environment can have significant long-standing impacts.

Being that most Rural Fire Protection Districts cover Wildland-Urban Interface lands the issues and inequities are magnified. You have properties that have not supported the infrastructure, yet they get the same response through conflagration as everyone else and what if the additional tax dollars provided to the Rural Fire Protection District were able to improve the infrastructure through equipment, personnel, or training that could have reduced the threat in the first place. We often hear “just bill me if I need you”, well if everyone took that stance then there would not be anyone or any equipment to respond. It should be everyone’s responsibility to support the infrastructure of emergency services.

In addition to fire protection most Rural Fire Protection Districts provide medical first response and being that they are usually rural by nature, the ambulance response times can be quite lengthy. If the District boundaries were closed, and all property owners supported their Rural Fire Protection District by being part of the district, these responders can respond to provide lifesaving medical treatment while waiting for the ambulance.

I respectfully ask that you support SB 1068 and pass it out of committee and support it on the chamber floor. We should all support our emergency responders who are on the front line of fire, medical, and disaster response and help ensure that everyone getting the services of these responders support the infrastructure to ensure they are available when they are needed.

Sincerely

Brian Burke Sr.

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North Douglas County Fire & EMS