



## **SB 728A: Local firefighting deserves a comprehensive examination**

Joint Committee on Tax Expenditures | 4/14/2023 | Bennett Minton

Co-Chairs Meek and Nathanson, members of the committee:

I'm Bennett Minton, with Tax Fairness Oregon. We are volunteers who advocate a tax code that is rational and equitable.

And we are with the volunteer firefighters who serve their neighbors.

This bill, well intentioned, is emblematic of many in your jurisdiction: a tax credit that advocates hope will encourage people to take a job or move somewhere. The theory is a thousand dollars, or five, will move their needle.

Upon passage, sponsors will issue press releases. When the solution fails, voters will grow even more cynical about government, and those who want you to solve problems will shake our heads.

This was the [first point](#) I made before the Senate Veterans Committee on January 26.

I acknowledged the shortage of volunteer firefighters. I noted that the hearing record does not identify which departments lack volunteers, to what extent, or why. Advocates assert that a nonrefundable tax credit, to be received only at tax season, would help recruit and retain.

The bill feels good but solves nothing. Current firefighters would happily accept the thousand dollars. But how will it inspire anyone to absorb \$6500 in PPE and training time and expense?

I proposed a pilot program, administered by the state fire marshal, to provide the free training and equipment in several counties like that every jurisdiction should have. Learn what moves the needle.

After the hearing, Chair Manning asked me to help develop an amendment. Legislative Counsel Kate Tosswill explained that the relating clause barred my proposal. Instead, following other suggestions I had offered, she wrote the -1 amendment, which would make the credit refundable and tie it to the existing \$250 credit for rural EMTs. That's another provision for which the Tax Expenditure Report identifies no purpose, but the amendment would equalize treatment for volunteer fighters and EMTs.

Chair Manning asked me to present the amendment on February 9. When I arrived, he told me that Senator Girod had no interest, so the committee wouldn't consider it, but he allowed me five minutes.

***We read the bills and follow the money***

I urged the committee to explore the shortage. I noted a [survey LPRO](#) had conducted into recruiting and retention. The survey indicated that people volunteer to:

1. serve their communities
2. start a path to becoming professional firefighters

The primary reasons they leave:

1. Work/life balance was too challenging
2. The work didn't match their expectations
3. They became professional firefighters
4. Training schedules are inflexible

Financial compensation was down the list.

[SB 762](#), passed in 2021, directed the fire marshal to dispense grants to fight wildfires. A new pilot could target counties facing the worst volunteer funding shortfalls and the greatest need.

I asked Representative Cate, who wrote the bill last year and this, for a meeting. Her aide declined, he said, because her identical bill, introduced by Senator Girod, was in the Senate.

[HB 2294](#), approved this session by the Business and Labor Committee, would charge BOLI with administering grants to train professional firefighters. A similar approach could be applied to volunteers.

Instead of exploring the problem, which is funding, training and equipping fire departments, the Veterans Committee passed this bill on to you. So you too get to pass the buck. Or be the bad guy, which is often part of your job.

Your real job is ensuring Oregonians have the revenue base required to serve their needs. As we all know, the base has eroded thanks to Measures 5 and 50, which essentially froze property taxes, and elimination of the harvest tax, at the behest of nonresident corporations like Weyerhaeuser. We lack a sales tax, generally a source for localities in other states. That tax would be borne by the tourists Rep. Cate notes are using government services and paying nothing for the privilege (except the lodging tax, which finances a slush fund run by Travel Oregon and its partners).

We have a statewide problem. Anyone who thought otherwise was disabused on Labor Day 2020.

We are desperate for solutions. A yes vote is easy. But this bill is legislative and political malpractice.

I hope you will ask questions.