

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5172

As of January 27, 2025

Title: An act relating to authorizing fire protection districts to dissolve existing civil service systems with approval from the civil service employees.

Brief Description: Concerning fire protection district civil service systems.

Sponsors: Senators Christian, Chapman, Boehnke and Nobles.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Local Government: 1/27/25.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Allows a fire protection district to dissolve its civil service system if the board of commissioners adopts a resolution and a majority of the civil service employees vote to dissolve civil service.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Staff: Karen Epps (786-7424)

Background: Fire protection districts (Districts) are created to provide fire prevention, fire suppression, and emergency services within a district's boundaries. A District may be established through voter approval. A District may be financed by imposing regular property taxes, excess voter-approved property tax levies, and benefit charges. A District is governed by a board of commissioners (Board) composed of three, five, or seven members who are registered voters residing in the District.

Districts are authorized to:

- lease, operate, and provide fire and emergency medical apparatus and all other necessary facilities and equipment for the prevention and suppression of fires, provide emergency medical services, and the protection of life and property;

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- lease, own, maintain, and operate real property for housing, repairing, and maintaining their apparatus, facilities, machinery, and equipment;
- contract with other governmental or private entities to consolidate, provide, or cooperate for fire prevention, protection, fire suppression, investigation, and emergency medical purposes;
- encourage uniformity and coordination of District operations;
- enter into contracts for life insurance for fire District personnel;
- perform building and property inspections deemed necessary to provide fire prevention services and prefire planning within the District; and
- determine the origin and cause of fires occurring within the District.

By resolution of the Board, a District with a fully-paid fire department may provide for civil service in its fire department.

Summary of Bill: A District that has adopted civil service in its fire department may dissolve its civil service system if:

- the Board adopts a resolution to dissolve the civil service system; and
- a majority of the civil service employees employed by the District vote to dissolve the civil service within 60 calendar days of the adoption of the resolution by the Board.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Not requested.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony: PRO: Rural fire departments are having a difficult time going through the civil service process. The civil service process takes so long, that by the time the district is ready to hire, the candidate has found another job. Civil service is not adding any value to the operation of the district. This bill will allow fire districts to terminate their participation in civil service when it is no longer beneficial or necessary. The statute was changed in 1949 to allow fire districts to enter into civil service if they so desired, but there is no language to allow fire districts to terminate or dissolve their participation in civil service. This bill provides districts with an option and does not eliminate civil service. Civil service imposes significant challenges on fire districts, particularly smaller districts, that struggle with bureaucratic burden and costs associated with compliance with civil service. Granting a fire district the ability to opt out of civil service would reduce unnecessary administrative costs, allow more funds to be allocated in other areas, and improve hiring flexibility which would allow fire districts to recruit and retain the best qualified personnel in a timely manner. This bill provides a balanced and reasonable process for dissolution and ensures that any decision to dissolve the system is made collaboratively with the board of fire commissioners and the employees.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Senator Leonard Christian, Prime Sponsor; Joe Mann, Spokane Valley Fire Department Civil Service Commissioner ; Frank Soto Jr, Spokane Valley Fire Department; Patrick Burch, Spokane Valley Fire.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: No one.