



# Lane Professional Firefighters Association IAFF Local #851

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **Fire Union Responds to Cities' Decision to Split Eugene Springfield Fire**

*Statement from IAFF Local 851 on the conclusion of IGE governance talks*

EUGENE/SPRINGFIELD, Ore. – Today is a disappointing day for fire and EMS services in the Eugene and Springfield area. After six months of closed-door conversations, the two cities tasked with fixing a fire governance structure long past its design feasibility have decided to reverse decades of work, disregard multiple feasibility studies that cost taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars, and instead move to split the department apart.

Our union started down this path early last year, publicly pushing for a fire district – the end goal listed in the cities' own merger plans. After months of talks, both cities identified a more politically viable path: the creation of an Intergovernmental Entity (IGE), similar to the wastewater model Eugene and Springfield already share. That governance model was recommended by the latest feasibility study and had backing from upper leadership in both cities. While it did not meet every goal of a truly independent fire department, it contained enough wins to earn investment and buy-in from both cities. IAFF Local 851 chose to support that path, and the cities went to work on this next step forward for fire and EMS services in our communities. Today, they reported those talks have failed. Both cities will feel the effects of this decision, but one will bear the brunt of it, and that is Springfield.

Let's take a minute to understand how we got here.

Eugene Fire Department and Springfield Fire and Life Safety began merger talks after the 2008 financial crisis. Talks had been on and off since at least the 1980s, but the extreme financial challenges of the crash – and the resetting of property taxes, whose effects persist today – made the next step a necessity. With the goal of keeping stations open, keeping resources rolling out the door, and preventing layoffs, the departments entered a three-phase consolidation. The math was simple: spread the cost of an essential service among more people, consolidate duplicated administration and infrastructure, and the result is lower costs with services maintained. Phase one aligned operations. Phase two – where we are today – has





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us working as a single department while the two cities retain control. Phase three was supposed to be a fully merged department.

Both cities have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on feasibility studies, and every one of them has reached the same conclusion: Eugene and Springfield fire and EMS resources need to move to a fully merged department, independent of the cities.

That is why IAFF Local 851, representing the firefighters and EMS professionals of Eugene Springfield Fire, pushed the cities to complete the transition to phase three. Every day we see the direct effects of underinvestment in fire and EMS. The department routinely runs out of resources. Delayed responses have cost at least one family their home. Every day our paramedics meet patients frustrated by how long they waited for help. Fire engines are routinely shut down to staff ambulances. Both cities face very real challenges covering their own calls. And if you want to change any of it, the question has to travel a convoluted political pathway through two city managers, two mayors, and two city councils. It is an incredibly inefficient system – an initial savings for taxpayers, but an anchor on the growth of services, and only ever an intermediate step toward the long-term merged department that appropriately covers Springfield and Eugene.

It has become clear in public conversations that only one city plans to address this under-resourced and underfunded essential service, and that is the City of Eugene. More of those conversations are forthcoming – but the real loser in this split is the Springfield resident. Between budget cuts that threatened partial closure of Station 14 on Main Street, Station 3 on 28th Street that relies entirely on a levy (thank you, Springfield voters), known and future challenges in funding ambulances, infrastructure issues affecting fire stations, and an undetermined cost of rebuilding a fire department, we question how Springfield is in a strong enough financial position to run its own fire department again. The math does not work. Springfield residents will bear the brunt of this decision – either by paying more and hoping to keep the services they have, or by expecting less service for their money. Eugene residents will not escape unscathed, but city leaders there have noted a real desire to make new investments in fire and EMS services, which are now more important than ever.

Our job is to run calls, save lives, and provide a foundation of safety for our community. It is the service you pay for, and it is the service you should expect. But we are only given so many tools, and we have gotten very good at making things work. That cannot hold forever. City leaders have chosen a path we all walked away from years ago because it could not deliver the service level you pay for. We asked city leaders to do their job. They balked. Residents will pay the price.





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We are well aware of the funding challenges both cities face – state tax law inhibits much of this discussion. But when most fire departments in Oregon face these same challenges, they merge with a neighboring department, spreading the cost among more people to save everyone money. If establishing another independent layer of government is not the best use of public funds, why invest in redundant fire administration and infrastructure? Why couldn't Springfield at least seek a fire service contract with Eugene, which has the administrative, training, and logistical infrastructure in place that helped make Eugene Springfield Fire the superior agency it is today? It is a transparent option that continues to provide a high level of local control – and while not the truly merged department our communities deserve, at a minimum it maintains the proven regional capabilities of ESF. Concluding that a split department is the more viable and financially feasible path is incredibly short-sighted on the part of our cities' leadership.

We leave residents with two questions for their elected officials: How is your city better positioned today than it was nearly twenty years ago to afford its own fire department? And how much more will it cost you?

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We track ESF resource depletions through our website:

<http://helpeugenespringfieldfire.com/alerts>

City of Eugene provides an explainer on the merger:

<https://www.eugene-or.gov/331/Eugene-Springfield-Merger>

**About IAFF Local 851:** The Lane Professional Firefighters Association, IAFF Local 851, represents the professional firefighters and EMS personnel of Eugene Springfield Fire, Lane Fire Authority, South Lane County Fire & Rescue, Western Lane Fire and EMS Authority, Pleasant Hill Goshen Fire & Rescue, and Oakridge Fire and EMS, serving the majority of residents throughout Lane County.

