



# 5 YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN

SUMMARY VERSION

Approved January 21, 2025 for 2025-2030

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# OVERVIEW

In November and December of 2024 Highlands Fire District met for two Strategic Planning sessions. Participants included Todd Miller, Clay Ahrendt, Faith Aguirre, Bryan Monreal, Shelby Erickson, Mitch Lopez, Brad Bippus, Carl Nelson, and Jayme Jones. In addition to these two sessions, stakeholder interviews and staff surveys were also completed by Lancaster Leadership.

**Stakeholders:** Staff, their families, citizens, regional fire districts, Flagstaff Fire, County Emergency Management, County Public Works, Politicians- incoming district 3 rep, Guardian and NAH

## About Highlands Fire District (HFD)

Highlands Fire District serves a population of roughly 7,000 residents, and responds to an average of 780 calls each year. HFD employs 28 dedicated personnel and maintains two state-of-the-art fire stations to deliver fire suppression, emergency medical services, wildland fire response, fuels reduction, fire prevention, and public education in the heart of Northern Arizona. Located six miles south of Flagstaff Arizona, the HFD covers the communities of Kachina Village, Mountainaire, Forest Highlands, Pine Del and Lower Lake Mary. We live and work within the nation's largest contiguous stand of Ponderosa pine forest where wildfire is an inherent risk. Recognizing that wildfire is the single greatest threat to our community, HFD has invested heavily in wildfire suppression and mitigation.

HFD has taken a leadership role in the formation of partnerships in Northern Arizona and supports the concept of functional regionalization to effectively improve emergency services in the greater Flagstaff Area. Through Intergovernmental Agreements, HFD also provides emergency services for Flagstaff Ranch Fire District and Fort Tuthill Recreational Area.



# OUR MISSION, VALUES, VISION & ETHOS STATEMENT



**Mission Statement** We are dedicated to serving our communities and region through preparedness, prevention and emergency response.



## **Values**

**PREPAREDNESS:** We value preparedness through education, training, physical and mental readiness, and the health and safety of members. We are committed to personal and team development through education and training. We constantly improve our physical and mental preparedness to better execute our mission.

**RESPECT:** We value respect—demonstrating sound character, integrity, honesty, and accountability. We exhibit honesty and integrity in all that we do. We hold ourselves and others accountable. We take pride and ownership in the organization and in the service we deliver.

**INITIATIVE:** We value initiative through leadership, expertise, and personal courage. Good leaders know when to lead, when to follow, and when to be part of the team. We value expertise and leadership of all members of the organization.

**DUTY:** We value duty obtained through service before self, commitment, and loyalty to teamwork. The needs of our customers and teammates always come before our own. We are loyal to our customers and the organization.

**EMPATHY:** We value empathy by performing in a considerate and compassionate manner. We are compassionate and considerate to our customers and teammates.



**Vision** The Highlands Fire District will be recognized for the highest standards, levels of trust, innovation, and accountability while exceeding community expectations. We will succeed by developing and maintaining strategic partnerships, hiring and promoting quality people, and positioning the District for fiscal sustainability, both now and in the future.





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**Ethos Statement** I am a Professional Firefighter with Highlands Fire District.

I am prepared for whatever the day may bring because I am mentally and physically fit for duty. I continually develop myself through training and education while developing those around me through mentorship. I lean on my past experiences when making decisions and pass those learned lessons onto my peers for their future success. I will earn my position every day.

I honor those who came before me and their sacrifice to my profession. I respect those whom I serve with and welcome their opinions, even if they differ from my own. I will be quick to listen and remain approachable to my peers. My responsibility is to leave this organization better than I found it for those who serve after me. I empathetically serve the citizens of the District, no matter the degree of their need.

I live my commitment to duty through selfless service. The needs of the community and the team come before my own, however, I must take care of myself in order to care for others. Loyalty to my customers and the organization is reflected through the decisions and actions I take. I am proud to be a member of my community and will continually strive to make it better.

I understand that often the highest service that I can perform is that of empathy. I am compassionate and considerate to my customers and my teammates.

My character is unwavering as I hold myself to the highest standards of integrity, honesty, and accountability on and off duty. I will not make excuses. I take ownership, find solutions, and take action through initiative. I value the leadership of others, understanding that the greatest achievements are accomplished through teamwork. I am willing to complete difficult tasks while holding myself and those around me accountable. My credentials are my fellow Firefighters, my character, and my commitment to duty. I will make mistakes and I may fail, however I will learn from those lessons. I will not stop, I will not quit, and I will continually improve myself, my team and my organization.

I stand ready to serve my neighbors, communities and region at all times.



# STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN THEMES & INITIATIVES

The group agreed to focus on four themes and initiatives over the next 5 years. The four themes and initiatives are:

- **Theme:** Improve External Engagement
  - **Initiative #1:** We want to bring together regional partners and community members to address issues, improve problem solving and enhance information sharing.
- **Theme:** Explore Consolidations
  - **Initiative #2:** Explore consolidation options to lessen financial burden, improve services and efficiency, and improve growth opportunities.
- **Theme:** Alternative Revenue Sources
  - **Initiative #3:** Explore new revenue sources for both the short term and long term
- **Theme:** Employee Success & Development
  - **Initiative #4:** Increase retention, development, engagement and overall success of staff.

Below you will find a chart for each theme, initiative and the high level goals and objectives to complete these initiatives.

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## Definitions

**Initiative:** Strategic, big-picture statement/idea to guide the plan. (Complete sentence). Goals and objectives are smaller, action oriented & connect to this initiative.

**North Star Statement:** *(Optional)* How the initiative is delivered and perceived. It includes key attributes and behaviors. High level, fleshing out the initiative. What would success look like? How might we... (A paragraph with some description).

**Sponsor(s):** Who will facilitate the forward action. Only one of the “doers.”

**Author(s):** The people creating/writing the plan.

**Key Performance Indicator (KPI):** A quantifiable measure used to evaluate the success.



## Theme: Improve External Engagement

**Initiative #1:** We want to bring together regional partners and community members to address issues, improve problem solving and enhance information sharing.

**Sponsors:** Labor, PIO, Admin Office

**Authors:** Clay Ahrendt, Mitch Lopez, Carl Nelson, Faith Aguirre, Todd Miller

**KPIs:** 1 CPR class/year, 1 stop the bleed class/year, track and record the number of ride-alongs, host 2 public education events/year, Evaluate effectiveness of Next Door app participation on FY 26'

### High-Level Goals & Detailed Objectives (Actions)

**Goal #1:** Increase support for HFD representation at entry level CCC fire science classes

**Goal #2:** Increase House of Jacks exposure

**Goal #3:** Short term rental fire restriction education

**Goal #4:** Events

## Theme: Explore Consolidations

**Initiative #2:** Explore consolidation options to lessen financial burden, improve services and efficiency, and improve growth opportunities.

**North Star Statement:** We aim to explore consolidation options with no pre-determined outcomes, collaborating with partners to assess impacts on fiscal constraints and growth limitations. This process will identify both opportunities and challenges to ensure all considerations are thoroughly evaluated.

**Sponsors:** Fire Chief/Board Chair

**Authors:** Brad Bippus, Shelby Erickson, Mitch Lopez, Todd Miller

**KPIs:** Identify partners and have discussions at the chief level February 2025. Those who are interested, have discussion with Board Chairs of each agency March 2025. Explore Fire Board approval of buy-in for a feasibility study April 2025. Select consultant to run study and support data collection needs June 2025. Evaluate results of the study and what path forward makes sense June 2026.

### High-Level Goals & Detailed Objectives (Actions)

**Goal #1:** Chiefs discussions

**Goal #2:** Explore Fire Board approval of buy-in for a feasibility study

**Goal #3:** Select and Conduct feasibility study

**Goal #4:** Reassess feasibility in three years

## Theme: Alternative Revenue Sources

**Initiative #3:** Explore new revenue sources for both the short term and long term

**North Star Statement:** Identifying alternative funding sources is essential for addressing future district needs, as traditional funding options often lack the financial flexibility to support additional programs.

**Sponsors:** Chief, BC, Labor Management

**KPIs:** Identifying groups that we can engage in for potential funding sources. Maintain active involvement in AFCA and AFDA to stay informed about new funding opportunities available for the fire district. Identify 4 politicians or organizations to advocate for our cause as a fire district.

### High-Level Goals & Detailed Objectives (Actions)

**Goal #1:** Engage with current and new people and organizations for funding opportunities

**Goal #2:** Find new funding sources

**Goal #3:** Grant Funding

**Goal #4:** Continue effective funding sources

## Theme: Employee Success/Development

**Initiative #4:** Increase retention, development, engagement and overall success of staff.

**Sponsors:** Line Staff, Admin, Captains, Recruitment Committee

**Authors:** Faith Aguirre, Clay Ahrendt, Carl Nelson, Jayme Jones, Bryan Monreal

**KPIs:** Retention - Improve current turn over rate, quarterly captain meeting report on engagement check ins, annual retention interviews, 1 actor per rank per shift.

### High-Level Goals & Detailed Objectives (Actions)

**Goal #1:** Retention

**Goal #2:** Engagement

**Goal #3:** Development

**Goal #4:** Succession Planning

**Goal #5:** Additional Staffing

**Goal #6:** Reassess Values



# CULTURE ASSESSMENT

During the Strategic Plan sessions Lancaster Leadership gathered the below statements from the group during an exercise to reflect on the past and look forward to the future state of Highlands Fire Department. The statements below represent individual thoughts and comments from the group.

## Our Recent History

### Our Successes

Passing go bond (used capital for apparatus) and deferring the cost had a big impact, passed at 80% (public support), staffing- **fully staffed** with a good group + **rover position** and morale, great response to our incidents through the trainings and experience of our personnel, staff- focus on training with staff development, everyone through probationary year now let's see what you got, lateral hiring procedure

### Our Challenges

Staffing recruitment and retention- had been awhile since we've been fully staffed, **mil rate** (matter of when it will be raised), **complacent staff** include off-duty participation, staying within budget while keeping mil rate low to keep constituents happy, financial limitations, leadership gap, balance individual need with organizational need (recognize that work life balance is different than it was in the past)





# OUR QUESTIONS & SYNTHESIS

## Staff Survey

Staff surveys were sent and completed electronically. 24 employees completed the survey.

### Staff Survey Questions & Synthesis

1-100 scale: 1 needs improvement; 100 is excellent

**1. Communication.** *On a scale of 1-10 how would you rate communication for our organization? What additional channels for feedback or involvement would you find helpful for improving engagement and communication throughout the department?*

**Range:** 20-95    **Average:** 66    **Most frequent:** 80    *Values clustered between 50 and 80*

Prioritize communication based on urgency with clear guidelines for urgent, important, and non-urgent messages. Communicate in a timely and consistent manner. Ensure bi-annual get-togethers and regularly scheduled battalion and captains' meetings. Implement a virtual whiteboard. Reduce volume of program work and risk of being forced into additional shifts. Ensure work provides stability as opposed to anxiety.

**2. Pay.** *On a scale of 1-10 how would you rate the pay and benefits? In your opinion, how does the department's pay and benefits package compare to similar fire departments in the region? What improvements could be made to remain competitive?*

**Range:** 24-90    **Average:** 61    *Values were concentrated around 70*

The department's pay and benefits package is competitive but could be improved, particularly considering Flagstaff's high cost of living. A firefighter should be able to buy a home without working multiple jobs or counting on overtime. Pay has increased but benefits need to be updated. Improve vacation and sick leave accruals, along with buyback and payout options, and family-friendly policies like parental leave. The current multi-step pay scale could be streamlined to allow for quicker pay progression. The department's culture and manageable call volume are valuable, often overlooked benefits.

**3. Engagement.** *On a scale of 1-10 how likely are you to stay here for your whole career? What changes or improvements would make you feel more engaged and motivated to stay with the department for the duration of your career?*

**Range:** 1-100    **Average:** 76    *More than half the responses were 90-100*

The district should focus on competitive pay, promotion opportunities, and support for career goals. Ensure the right people are promoted and that everyone is held accountable to perform at the required level. The Chief has transformed the culture, and the district needs to continue to bridge the gap between leadership and operational staff, as well as reduce bureaucracy and administrative tasks. Move towards becoming a fire authority.

**4. Growth.** On a scale of 1-10 do you feel you have opportunities for growth? Do you feel that you have access to the resources and mentorship needed to develop professionally? If not, what kind of support would be most helpful?

**Range:** 25-95    **Average:** 69    Values concentrated between 70-89

Everyone should be trained to act as a mentor, and mentors should be assigned to roles where individuals are actively working on task books. Additionally, acting captains should sit in on captains' meetings. There is a need to encourage professional and personal growth, not just promotions. Regarding promotions, there were concerns that their career will be stagnant, that growth opportunities feel limited to operational roles, and that management promotions are unappealing due to low pay, the extensive program work, and additional responsibilities. Keep an education fund for firefighters to attend classes and create more accessible rank promotion.

**5. Culture.** On a scale of 1-10 how would you rate the overall culture of the department? What are the strengths? What are areas for improvement?

**Range:** 23-100    **Average:** 70

The culture has improved under current leadership and will require buy-in across different groups to get to the next level. Culture varies significantly from shift to shift which creates inconsistent commitment to the mission. There's a noticeable lack of camaraderie between structure and wildland firefighters, with some feeling that the wildland program is undervalued. Continued education, promotion opportunities, and the goal of becoming a fire authority are critical for growth.



## Stakeholder Interviews

Interviews were held on November 21, 2024, with 12 stakeholders including staff family members, citizens, regional fire districts, Flagstaff Fire, County Emergency Management, County Public Works and District 3 representatives.

## Stakeholder Interview Questions & Synthesis

*1. What do you believe are the most critical challenges currently facing our fire district, and how do you think we can address them in our strategic planning?*

Stakeholders perceive Highlands' most critical challenge is staffing, recruitment, retention, and development. Additional challenges include wildfire threat and forest health; public education and homeowner property management, including vacation rentals; and funding.

*2. How can we improve our fire district's communication and collaboration with the community, local government, and other emergency services to enhance overall effectiveness?*

Overall, stakeholders appreciate the effectiveness of Highlands' current communication and collaboration. Suggestions to make it stronger include: hosting community events and trainings to engage the community with the firehouse; attending community events such as HOA meetings, social organizations, and business networks to enhance Highlands presence; engaging in social media for public education including Facebook, Nextdoor, and newsletters; leveraging community champions by encouraging residents that are busy-bodies and want to be helpers to get involved and take a lead on initiatives that serve their interests; regional resource sharing or creating a rural fire authority to increase efficiency; joint training and grant funding opportunities for forest health and wildfire mitigation projects.

*3. In your opinion, what are the most important areas for investment and growth within the fire district over the next 5 years (e.g., equipment, training, personnel, technology)?*

Stakeholders agreed that personnel is the most important area to invest in, with one respondent saying, "They've done a great job building capital resources, they have a plan for apparatus, now it's time to invest in people." Over the next five years, the fire district should prioritize personnel by investing in competitive salaries, robust retention strategies, mental health support, and focus on career development with accessible, incentivized trainings. The district must respond to regional growth, increasing demand, and increasing medical calls by increasing staffing levels, ensuring 3-4 personnel per truck, and preparedness for increasing medical calls. While personnel is the foundation, maintaining updated equipment, leveraging technology and regional resources, and planning for regional growth will support overall effectiveness. Highlands will need to think outside the box, with ideas like using the tax credit to solarize the facilities and free up funding for other initiatives like hazard tree mitigation.

## Stakeholder Interview Questions & Synthesis Cont.

4. *How can our fire district build stronger community relations and partnerships with local organizations, businesses, and government agencies to improve community fire safety and emergency preparedness?*

To strengthen community relations and partnerships, the fire district should expand its engagement through events like pancake breakfasts, seasonal activities such as trunk-or-treat, and public safety or family fun days at visible locations like Raymond Park. Encouraging community members to lead initiatives they are passionate about, with district support, can help rally greater involvement. The district should actively participate in HOA, business, and social group meetings, as well as Board of Supervisors sessions, to share updates and collaborate on initiatives such as evacuation planning, wildfire safety education, and CERT exercises. Utilizing platforms like Facebook and Nextdoor for updates and feedback, partnering with institutions like NAU for internships, and working with agencies like CCSO and NAH for joint efforts can further strengthen connections. Exploring the creation of a fire authority by consolidating smaller districts could also optimize resources and ease the workload on staff.

5. *What else would you like to add in regard to our strategic planning?*

Staffing remains a top priority, with recognition of the district's strong culture and leadership that fosters a positive environment for firefighters. Creating a rural fire authority could optimize resources and improve service delivery. While opinions on Bear Jaw's impact vary, a thorough assessment is needed to determine its alignment with community needs. The district must partner and collaborate with the Board of Supervisors in order to implement a wildland fire defense ordinance, secure grant funding for hazardous fuels mitigation, and update codes for building infrastructure resilience. The district should close gaps identified in after-action reports, follow through on improvement plans, and share that information with the public.





# OUR PESTLE ANALYSIS

(POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGY, LEGAL, ENVIRONMENTAL)

- Changing social dynamic rework life balance spec regarding staff
- Economy- how expensive things are for staff, high cost of living, inflation, recruitment and retention
- Digital platforms and learning the new ways
- Political poss. caps on increasing mill rate
- Changing retirement system
- Self-insured?
- Insurance
- Constant threat of wildfire- decreased home values, insurance issues, other district strained by tunnel and pipeline
- Community risk reduction
- Short term rentals, missing education on campfires etc.
- Incoming county supervisor
- If economy got worse or better, inflation, interests rates factor on the mil rate
- Mental health and behavioral health changes- customers and staff
- What technology is available that we could leverage to advance our quality of service and performance and internal systems internal and external efficiencies.
- Screen saver, live tracking, message board, can disperse info FIRST ALERT

## OUR PLAYING FIELDS

### Where We Are Leading, Thriving and Excelling

Professional development, services, safety and training spec EMS, probationary firefighter, wildland, fiscal responsibility, community support, accessibility to the community, tactics, response times, customer service/service delivery, fee for service/contracts, interagency trainings, Good leadership with open door policies, growth opportunities, support for education, facilities and apparatus/infrastructure/capital, financial, and partnerships

### Where We Are Not Leading, Thriving and Excelling

Retention, effort on merger/consolidation, extra ways to create revenue, training: captains training, engineers training, command level large incident training, member buy in and participation, recruitment, community engagement, and technology.

# SWOT ANALYSIS

<b>STRENGTHS</b>	<b>WEAKNESSES</b>	<b>OPPORTUNITIES</b>	<b>THREATS</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Culture</li><li>• Employee Support</li><li>• Training &amp; Ed</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Complacency</li><li>• Alt Funding</li><li>• Retention</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Mergers &amp; Acquisitions</li><li>• Alt Revenue</li><li>• Volunteers/Auxiliary</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Political/Legislative</li><li>• Economy</li><li>• Wildland Fire</li></ul>

