

City Council Workshop Minutes

FRIDAY, MAY 29, 2026 – 4:00 PM
COLUMBIA CITY, CITY HALL – 1840 SECOND STREET
CITY OF COLUMBIA CITY, COLUMBIA COUNTY, OREGON

AGENDA ITEM 1

CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL:

CONVENED:

Mayor Alex Reed called the Workshop Meeting to order at 4:00 pm.

COUNCIL MEMBERS PRESENT:

Mayor Alex Reed
Council President Rob Forman
Councilor Gordon Thistle
Councilor Connie Quick
Councilor Lyle Bluhm

COUNCIL MEMBERS ABSENT:

None

ALSO PRESENT:

Kim Karber, City Administrator/Recorder
Eric Smythe, Fire Chief
Simon Ebert, Columbia City Resident & Architect Student

ATTORNEY PRESENT:

None

AGENDA ITEM 2

NEW BUSINESS:

2.1 Firehouse: Simon Ebert, Columbia City resident & Portland Community College architect design and drafting student, did a presentation on a possible design that he put together for a fire station in Bundy Park. Simon had met with the Fire Chief to get input on what the needs of a fire station are, how the facility is used on a daily basis, the number of people it would need to accommodate, and the size of equipment. He also considered for future growth and sustainability to incorporate the things needed for a building that will last for a long time, have it fit in with the residential community, and remove as few trees as possible.

Eric Smythe, Fire Chief, answered questions and discussed why they are looking at building another fire station – county is growing, St. Helens fire station is 100 yrs old, response time can be affected by train traffic. The ask of Columbia City is for land and the ask of ODOT is for direct access to HWY 30. Then they can start looking for grants to fund the fire station. If they need to go out for a bond it would be to their entire taxing district, not just Columbia City. The Q&As provided in writing are attached to these minutes.

AGENDA ITEM 3

OTHER BUSINESS:

None

AGENDA ITEM 4

ADJOURNMENT:

4.1 There being no further business to come before the Council, the meeting adjourned at 5:35 pm.

1. Call Volume & Geographic Distribution

Understanding where calls originate is central to evaluating whether this location makes operational sense for both the district and our city.

1. Can you provide a breakdown of the district's total calls over the past three to five years, organized by originating jurisdiction or city?

Please refer to the attached document for a detailed breakdown of incidents from the past five years. Historically, Columbia City accounts for approximately 5% of all CRFR incident responses. In recent years, there has been an increase in calls from the Deer Island area; however, this rise is largely due to a few residents calling 911 multiple times per week, which has artificially inflated the response numbers for Deer Island (RG 74). On average, Columbia City experiences between 280 and 350 calls for service annually. As of 2026, we have already responded to over 100 incidents since January 1.

2. Based on that data, what percentage of calls currently originate within our city limits versus other communities in the district?

Please see the attached report specifically built to answer this question. The City of Columbia City represents 5% of all the incidents that CRFR responds to on an annual basis.

3. For the proposed station specifically, what is the projected service area, and of the calls expected to route to this station, what share would you estimate fall within our jurisdiction?

A fire station located in Columbia City would provide coverage for the entire city, as well as portions of Deer Island and Tide Creek Road. We estimate that about 50% of the responses from this station would occur within Columbia City's limits.

4. The district's own budget documents note that call volume has more than doubled over the last decade, while neighboring districts saw only 10–15% growth over the same period. Can you help us understand the drivers behind that growth and how this station addresses it?

Population growth and changing demographics are key factors behind the increase in emergency responses. The communities served by CRFR have experienced significant growth in recent years, resulting in greater demand for emergency services. Demographic trends show an aging population, while many younger residents are moving away from the area. As our population ages, the need for emergency services rises. Compounding this challenge, the absence of a local hospital means residents often lack access to higher-level medical care within Columbia County.

2. Staffing Capacity & Sustainability

We have deep respect for the firefighters and staff who serve this district, and our questions here come from a genuine concern about setting this station up for success rather than stretching already-strained resources.

5. Your FY 2024–25 budget letter acknowledged significant career firefighter departures to other districts and a reduction from 36 to 27 full-time firefighter FTEs, with a target of rebuilding to 30. Where does current staffing stand today, and what is the timeline for reaching full operational capacity?

As of July 1, 2026, the District has increased staffing to 30 career firefighters and 8 Division 9 EMS personnel. We have actively recruited new team members to replace those retiring, ensuring that our staffing levels meet the current and future needs of our communities.

6. How would the proposed station be staffed — through new hires, redeployment of existing personnel, or volunteers? If new hires, what is the realistic timeline and what does your current recruitment pipeline look like?

Staffing discussions are somewhat premature at this stage. The first step is to secure a location that optimizes our emergency response times. The second step is construction, which may take a year or more to complete and often involves working with ODOT for highway access if the site is along Highway 30. The third step is transitioning staff and adding new members to ensure adequate response capabilities. We need to create a station that can accommodate career staff, volunteers, and intern's firefighters to meet the needs of Columbia City. Overall, the process can take up to three years before a station is fully ready for emergency operations.

7. What is the minimum staffing threshold needed to keep this station operational, and at what point would the station be placed on "standby" or non-operational status?

Staffing and response models are determined by community demographics, peak demand periods, and specific needs. Each station requires a minimum of two members, who can cross-staff either a paramedic-level ambulance or a fire engine. Ideally, four to six personnel are scheduled daily at each station to enable responses with multiple apparatus including fire engines, brush units, ambulances, and water tenders.

8. The district has acknowledged ongoing competition from larger, higher-paying fire departments in the region. What retention strategies are in place, and how does opening a second location affect your ability to staff your primary stations?

The district is committed to providing a high-quality working environment, modern facilities, and well-maintained apparatus that meet both the needs of our citizens and the safety of our members. We collaborate with our team to address their needs and cultivate a workplace that inspires and retains talented individuals. While we may not retain every employee, we foster a family atmosphere built on respect and professionalism, motivating staff to make CRFR their long-term home.

9. If the new station experiences staffing shortfalls, how would that affect response coverage and times for the rest of the district, including our city?

Like all public safety organizations, the district occasionally experiences staffing shortfalls. Our mission is to consistently recruit new members and highlight the excellent working conditions at CRFR. Our top priority is to maintain adequate staffing across the entire district, which may require reallocation of personnel or equipment to meet service demands. We are proud of our vibrant and dedicated team, who strive to deliver the best possible service to our communities. By closely monitoring staffing levels and maximizing resource deployment, we ensure the needs of the entire CRFR district are met.

3. Lessons from the Prior Station

Our council is aware that a previous station in the district was built but eventually fell dormant due to staffing challenges. We want to understand what safeguards exist to prevent a similar outcome here.

10. Can you walk us through what happened with the prior station and what specific factors led to it becoming non-operational?

I believe you are referring to Deer Island Station 474, which was stationed from the 1970s through the early 2000s. Deer Island Station is located about 2 miles west of Highway 30 and was staffed by 2 personnel during that period. Emergency incident rates in Deer Island have remained consistent for over 30 years, largely due to stable population and demographics in the area. The station transitioned from career to volunteer staffing before my arrival at CRFR. This change enabled increased staffing in the larger St Helens/Columbia City area, which has a larger population and a higher volume of emergency incidents. CRFR did have a lease "station" in Columbia City about 10 years ago. The lease was with Oregon Department of Forestry and allowed 1 member to sleep in a small home with a bay for a small brush fire apparatus. ODF needed the bay and requested that we vacate the station. CRFR has not had an apparatus at the ODF facility for several years.

11. Current district leadership has indicated they would not have built that station in that location. What is different about the criteria and process used to identify this proposed location?

The Deer Island Fire was built in response to a fire that occurred in the late 1960's or early 70s where a family unfortunately were killed. The land was given to the St Helens Rural FPD for a station site. The station is not in the ideal location for the bulk of the Deer Island population, more than 60% of the residence in Deer Island live along Hwy 30. The station would have had a faster response time and access to the highway had it been built near the Deer Island store. It is a benefit for our members to be able to access Hwy 30 quickly, allowing for a faster response than one could accomplish on a two-lane country road. A station should have quick access to the largest amount of the population, a station in Columbia City would have access to the entire population in less than 3-4 minutes, compared to 10-12 as it is currently with a response out of St Helens.

12. What binding performance benchmarks or operational triggers would be written into any agreement with the city? For example, what staffing minimums must be maintained, and what happens if they are not met?

We do not have binding agreements with any municipalities in our fire district, but we are committed to providing the highest level of service and personnel to meet each community's needs. Establishing a station in Columbia City would enable the district to add personnel and house them in a location that offers the shortest possible response times, as it would be embedded within the community we serve. Currently, CRFR has reached the limit of adding personnel to our existing stations, many of which were built over 50 years ago. A new station in Columbia City, the second largest city in our district, would allow us to optimize the staging of equipment and personnel to address the greatest needs of our communities. If necessary, a revert clause could be included in any agreement to address the potential abandonment of the station by the district. As our world evolves, maintaining close collaboration with the communities we serve regarding staffing and resource allocation remains the foundation for building trust and accountability.

Note: We would recommend that any agreement includes a reversion clause ensuring the land returns to the city if the station does not meet operational benchmarks within a defined period.

4. Site Selection & Land Value

Our residents are understandably protective of park assets, and we want to ensure the decision to site a station at this location is based on sound operational reasoning rather than the availability of free land.

13. What is it specifically about this location, compared to other available properties in the area, that makes it operationally superior?

The site identified by the City as a potential location provides the fastest possible response times throughout Columbia City. Its proximity to Highway 30 reduces the need for emergency vehicles to use side streets, improving overall efficiency and safety. Bundy Park will continue to be maintained, and visitors will have the added opportunity to meet local fire and EMS personnel while enjoying the majority of the park.

14. What is the district's plan if this location is not approved? Is there a viable alternative site under consideration?

The district is not aware of any alternative site that would enable faster response times to the majority of Columbia City.

15. What is the timeline for an Egress/Ingress to Highway 30 to be installed and what efforts would need to take place to ensure its approval with ODOT?

If the proposal is approved and all legal documents are finalized, CRFR and the City of Columbia City will work with ODOT to secure access to Highway 30, including the installation of an emergency signal for fire and EMS vehicles. At this time, no specific timeline has been established for this option.

5. Financial Health & Ongoing Litigation

We raise this section with care and without prejudgment. The financial and legal challenges CRFR has navigated in recent years are matters of public record, and as stewards of city property, we have a responsibility to understand how they may affect this proposal.

Background from public records:

- In 2023, former Fire Chief Joel Medina filed a \$20 million federal lawsuit against the district, several board members, and union officials alleging wrongful termination, First and Fourteenth Amendment violations, retaliation, and defamation. The suit alleges Medina was fired after he reported financial irregularities to the District Attorney's office and Oregon PERS.

This case remains ongoing; however, to the district's knowledge, no action has been taken by the Columbia County District Attorney's Office, the Oregon State Police, or any federal agencies. We are unable to comment on the legal actions of a former employee or the status of the case.

- A forensic audit commissioned by the board found "severely lacking" internal financial controls and identified questionable transactions involving former and current employees.

The district has addressed the internal financial controls identified by a third-party audit firm. CRFR utilizes a third-party CPA firm to monitor all financial transactions. CRFR complies with all state budgeting requirements set forth by ORS and OARs. All state budget documents have been completed and are up to date. No action has been taken or is expected from the Columbia County District Attorney, Oregon State Police, or federal agencies.

- A separate lawsuit was filed by three former female employees alleging sexual harassment, retaliation, and a hostile work environment.

This case is closed.

- The district's primary insurer, Special Districts Insurance Services, declined to cover new employment-related claims after December 2023, citing the "significant increase in the frequency and severity" of claims.

The district's primary insurer is Special District Insurance Services.

- These lawsuits at one point threatened the district's ability to access its line of credit, raising short-term payroll concerns that the district resolved through other means.

The district has addressed previous issues and strengthened our financial position by ensuring budget accountability, implementing third-party review and monitoring of all finances, and promoting fiscal transparency. Audits for the past three years have been completed and submitted to the State of Oregon as required. As a result, the district's finances have improved significantly, and we now have sufficient funds to operate without relying on a line of credit.

With that context, we would respectfully ask:

16. What is the current status of the Medina lawsuit and the former employees' lawsuit? Have these matters been resolved, or are they still active? We understand it may not be possible to speak on active matters of litigation.

No Comment

17. What is the district's current employment practices insurance status? Has replacement coverage been secured, and at what cost to the district budget?

The district's primary insurer is Special District Insurance Services.

18. Have the internal financial controls identified as deficient in the forensic audit been remediated? Can you share what specific corrective actions were taken?

The district has addressed previous issues and strengthened our financial position by ensuring budget accountability, implementing third-party review and monitoring of all finances, and promoting fiscal transparency. Audits for the past three years have been completed and submitted to the State of Oregon as required. The district reduced administrative staffing and increased "boots on the street" for emergency response, this change in focus allows the district to provide better service to the community by streamlining the way we operate.

19. Do any of these legal matters create contingent financial liabilities that could affect the district's ability to fund, build out, or staff this proposed station?

The district operates with a vision of forward progress; legal matters and our insurance provider are working to minimize any financial impact on the district.

20. Has the board received a legal opinion on whether donating land from a partner city, or any IGA stemming from this proposal, would intersect in any way with the pending litigation?

We have not yet consulted our legal department. If the project moves forward, we will ensure that any intergovernmental agreement or donation is thoroughly reviewed by both our attorney and the attorney for the City of Columbia City.

Note: These questions are not intended as criticism of current leadership, who inherited many of these challenges. They are questions our council has a fiduciary obligation to ask before committing a public asset.

6. Partnership Structure & Protections for the City

If the partnership moves forward, the structure of the agreement matters as much as the concept. We want to ensure our residents are protected and that the city retains meaningful oversight.

21. Would our city have any priority or guaranteed response time commitments under the IGA, given we are contributing the land?

This project is a multi-year collaborative effort with several stages, beginning with the identification, approval, and allocation of land to the fire district for a future station. Preliminary plans have been developed that may be suitable for the designated area, but the entire process will take several years before the station is completed and fully staffed. The fire district's goal is to partner closely with the City of Columbia City Administration to ensure the fastest and most efficient emergency response for residents. Once the station is operational and staffed, we will provide regular reports to the council on utilization and future planning.

22. What is the anticipated timeline from agreement to groundbreaking to operational status?

The district is exploring grants and potential bond measures to fund infrastructure upgrades and the construction of a new fire station. We are in the early stages of developing bond proposals and are working with SDAO (Special Districts Association of Oregon) to place a ballot measure in next year's election cycle. The construction of a new station is a top priority within the proposed bond. Once funding is secured, we will be able to establish a realistic timeline for groundbreaking, construction, staffing, and operational readiness.

23. Would our city have any ongoing role in oversight or performance review of the station?

The fire district will provide reports on responses, resources, and general information to the City Council on a regular basis. We work with our communities to address needs and answer questions to ensure we are meeting the needs of our citizens. Our mission is to serve all the citizens of CRFR, and we are committed to working closely with the City of Columbia City Council to ensure the community's needs are met.

24. What happens to the land donation if the district undergoes future consolidation, merger, or dissolution?

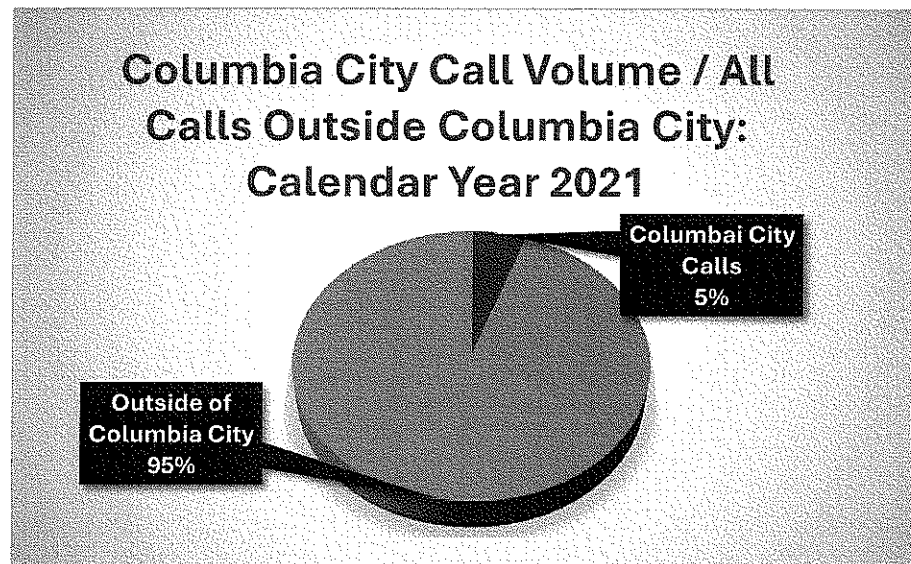
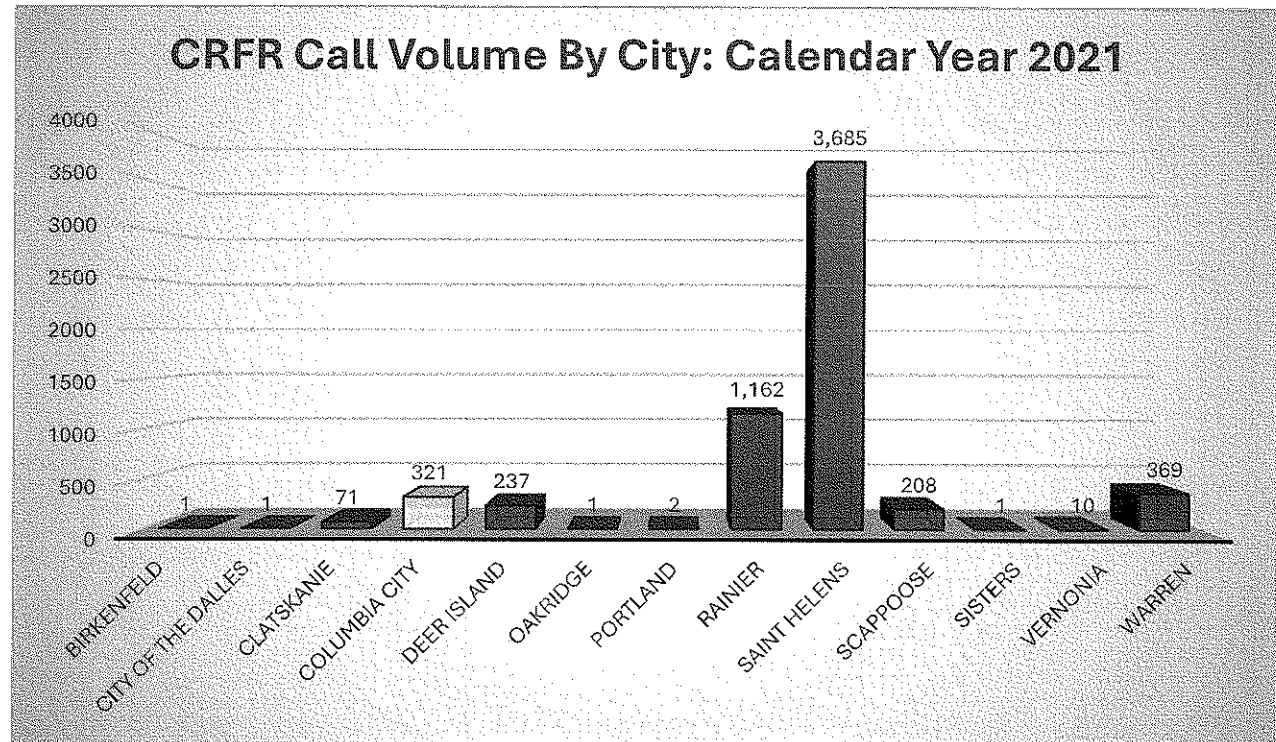
We do not foresee any changes to the fire district and if those occur, we will consult and address any concerns with the City Council. The City of Columbia City and its residents deserve rapid, professional, and efficient fire and EMS response. Establishing a fire station within Columbia City will strengthen emergency services for the community and surrounding areas, both now and in the future. The fire district continually reallocates units throughout the district to address emergency calls, provide coverage, and support the needs of our neighboring fire districts. Through collaboration, we ensure that all citizens of Columbia County have access to emergency personnel at any hour.

Columbia City Call Volume Report

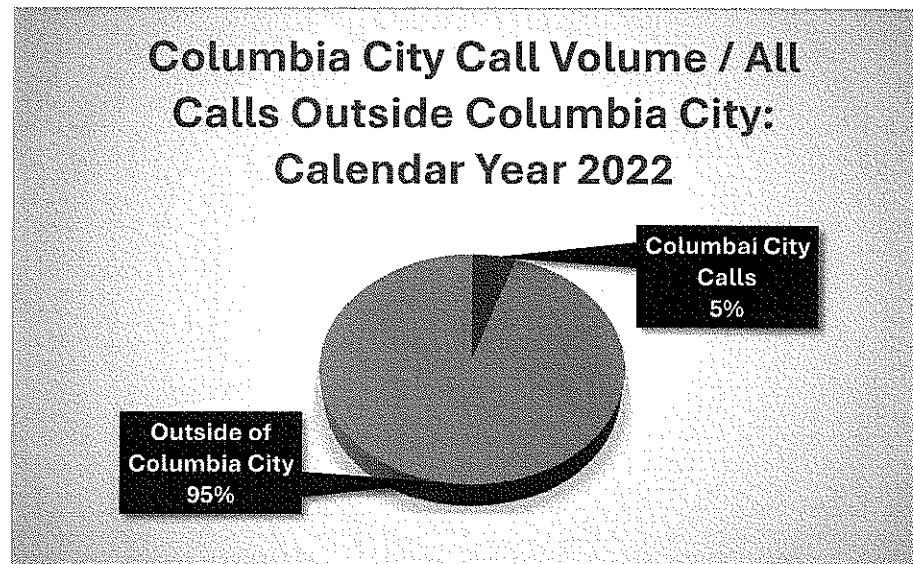
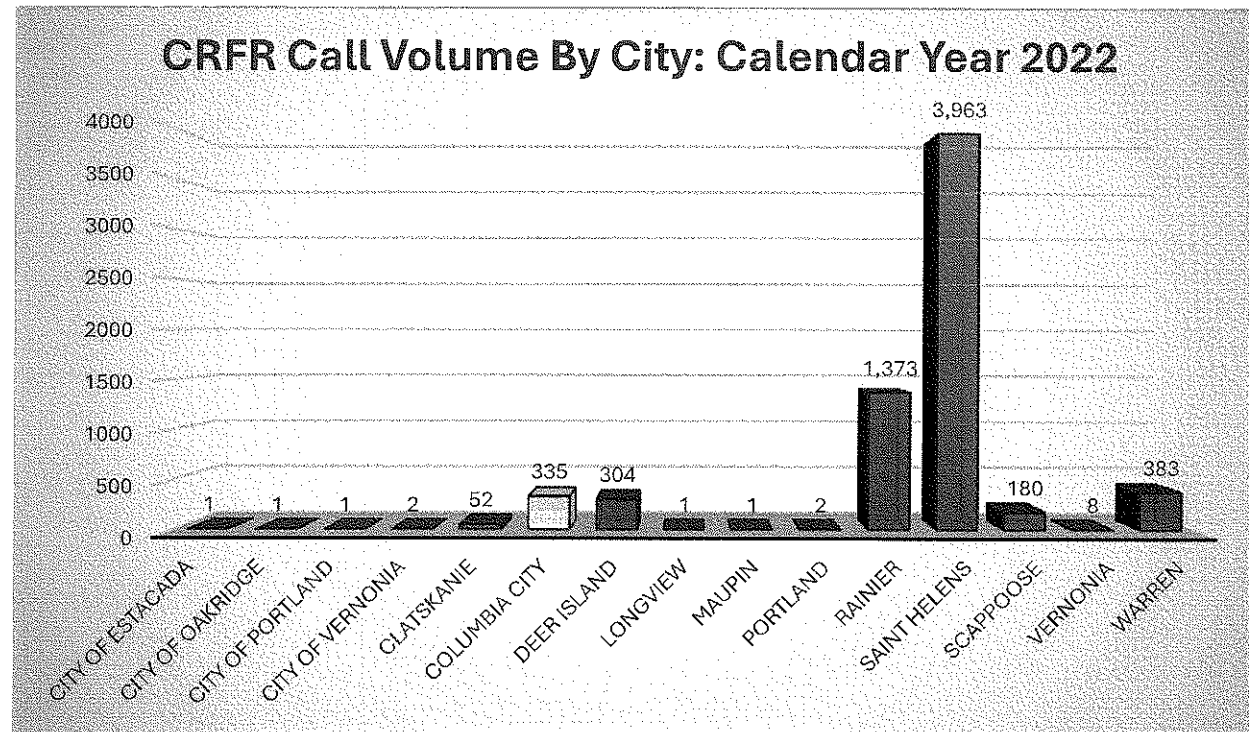


Calendar Year 2021 to Present

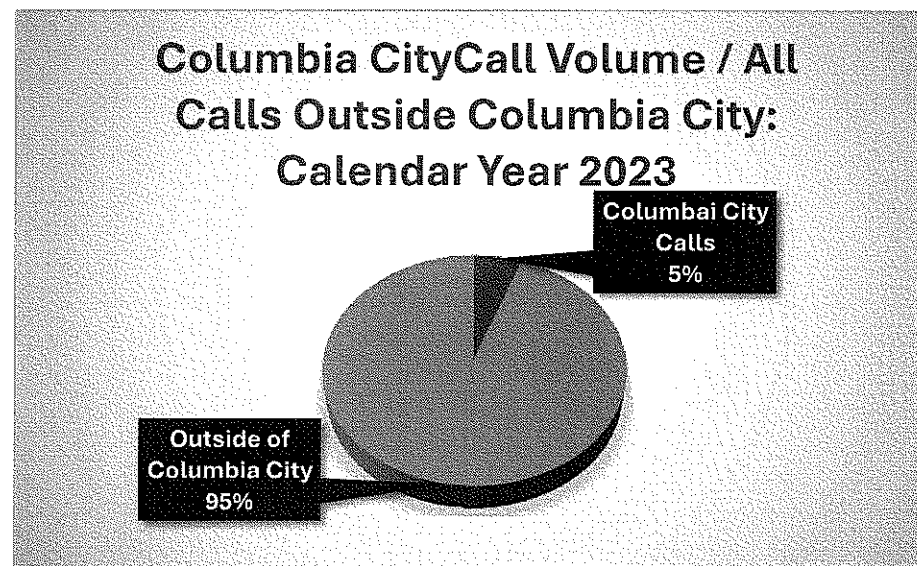
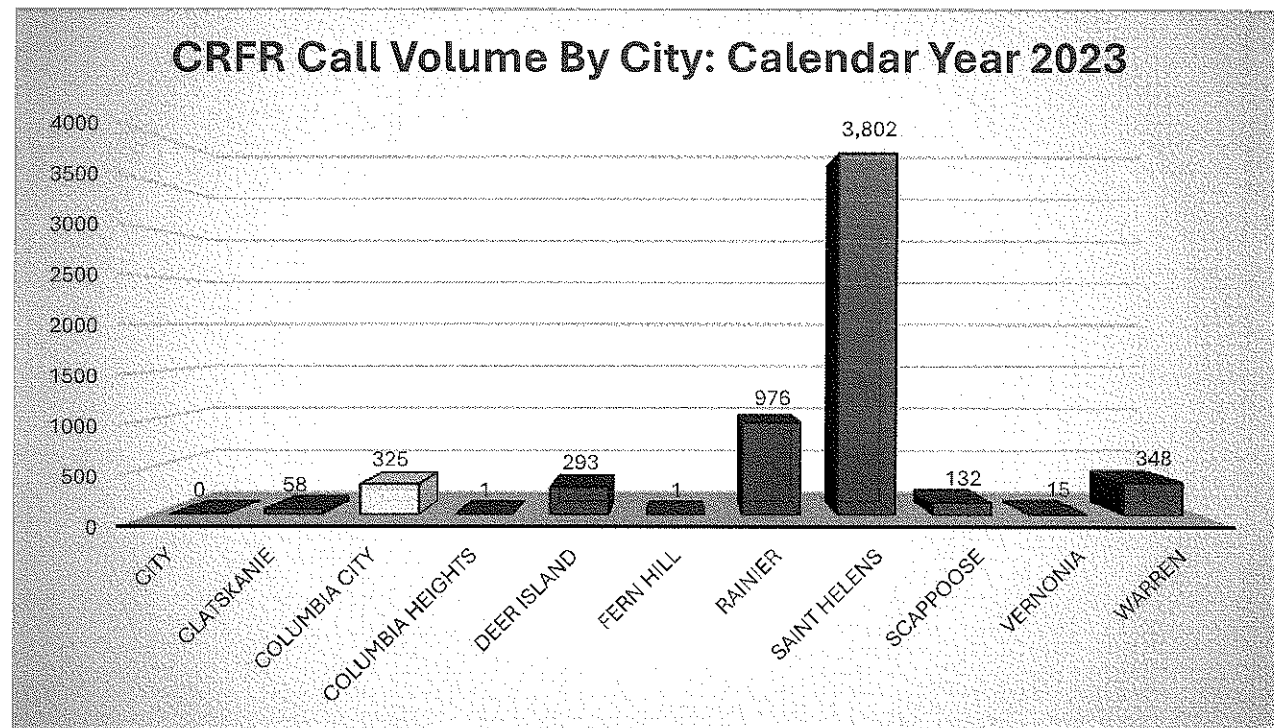
City	Calls
Birkenfeld	1
City of The Dalles	1
CLATSKANIE	71
Columbia City	321
DEER ISLAND	237
Oakridge	1
PORTLAND	2
Rainier	1,162
Saint Helens	3,685
Scappoose	208
Sisters	1
VERNONIA	10
WARREN	369
Total	6069



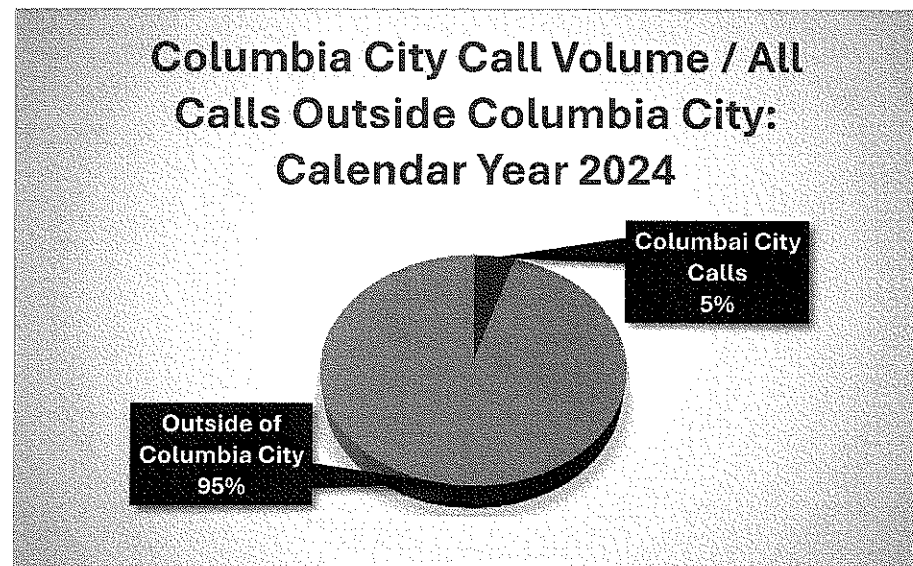
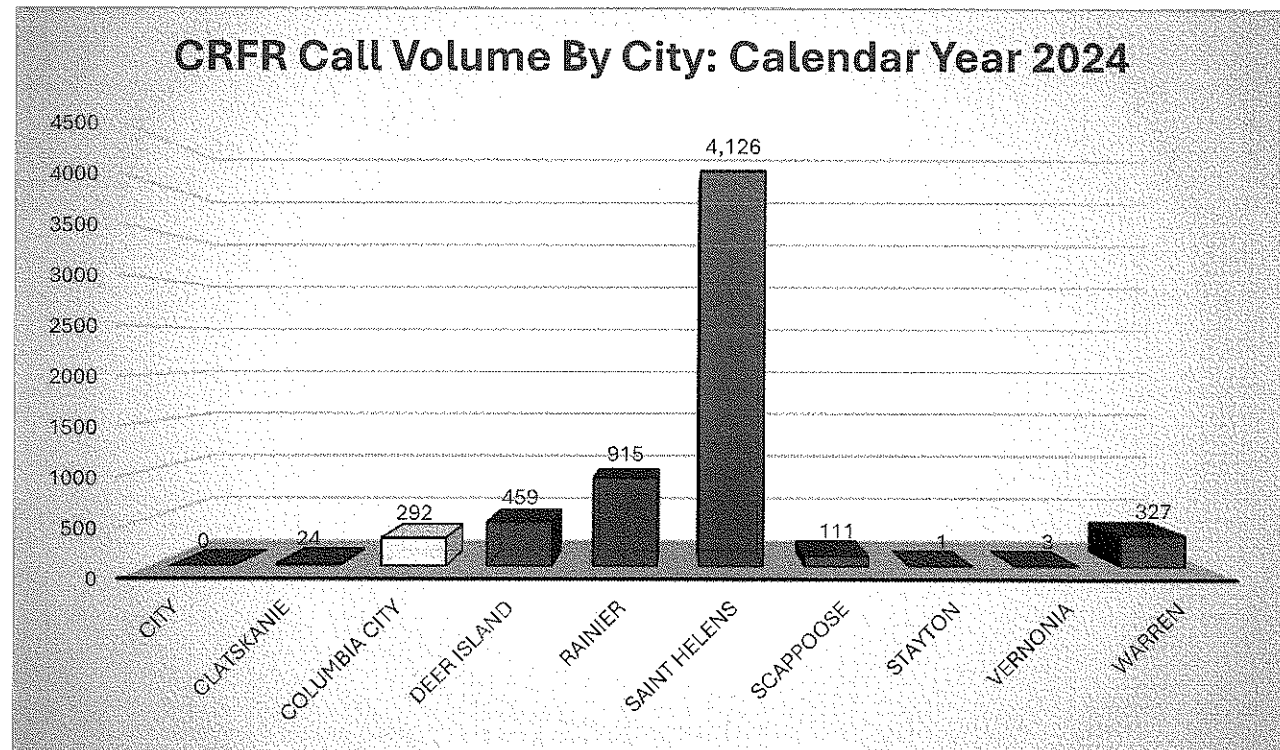
City	Calls
City of Estacada	1
City of Oakridge	1
City of Portland	1
City of Vernonia	2
CLATSKANIE	52
COLUMBIA CITY	335
DEER ISLAND	304
Longview	1
Maupin	1
PORTLAND	2
RAINIER	1,373
Saint Helens	3,963
SCAPPOOSE	180
VERNONIA	8
WARREN	383
Total	6607



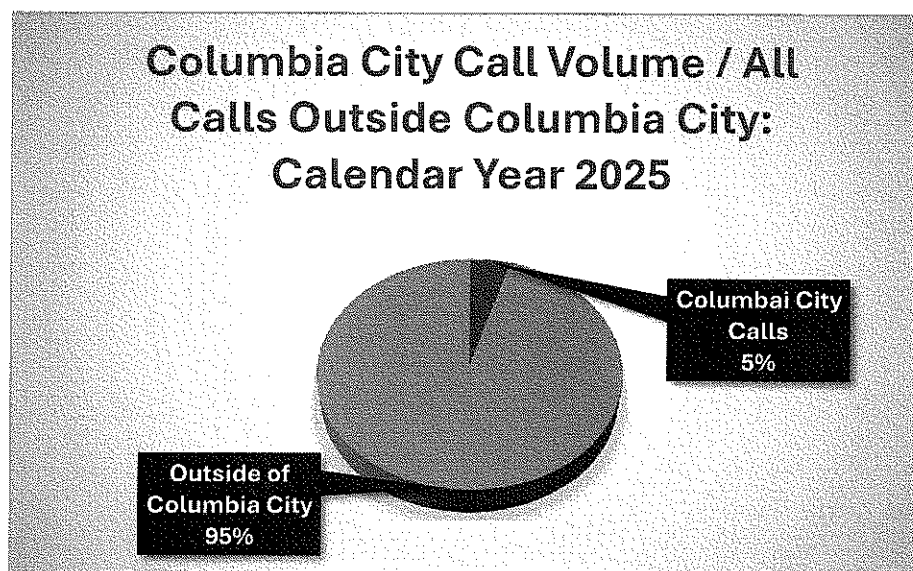
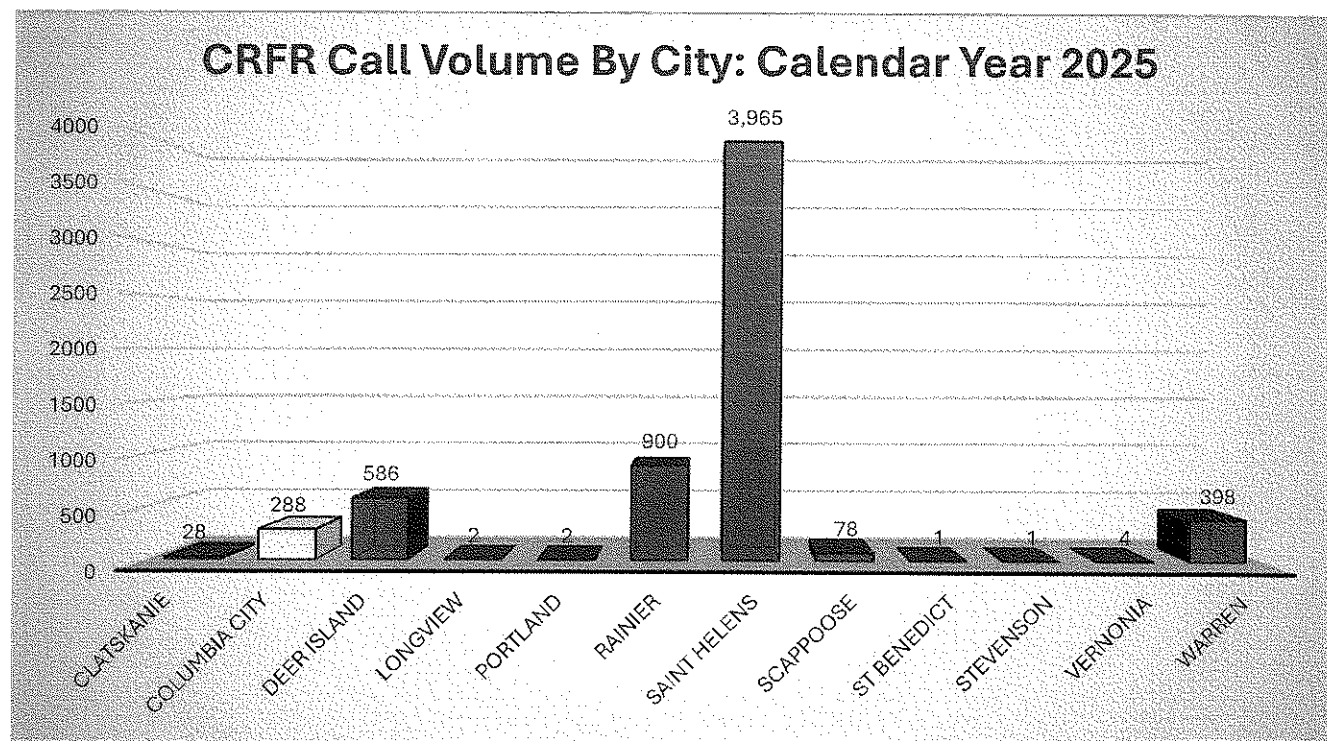
City	Calls
Clatskanie	58
Columbia City	325
Columbia Heights	1
DEER ISLAND	293
Fern Hill	1
RAINIER	976
Saint Helens	3,802
SCAPPOOSE	132
VERNONIA	15
WARREN	348
Total	5951



City	Calls
CLATSKANIE	24
COLUMBIA CITY	292
Deer Island	459
Rainier	915
Saint Helens	4,126
SCAPPOOSE	111
STAYTON	1
VERNONIA	3
WARREN	327
Total	6258



City	Calls
Clatskanie	28
COLUMBIA CITY	288
DEER ISLAND	586
LONGVIEW	2
PORTLAND	2
RAINIER	900
Saint Helens	3,965
SCAPPOOSE	78
ST BENEDICT	1
STEVENSON	1
VERNONIA	4
WARREN	398
Total	6253



City	Calls
No City Identified	10
CLATSKANIE	11
COLUMBIA CITY	103
DEER ISLAND	190
KELSO	1
RAINIER	284
Saint Helens	1,402
SCAPPOOSE	20
St helens	1
VERNONIA	1
WARM SPRINGS	1
WARREN	118
Totals	2142

