

As Austin grows, funding for county fire departments dries up

By [Patrick George](#)

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The Circuit of the Americas racetrack is being constructed practically in Travis County Fire Rescue Chief Ken Bailey's backyard, but the jury is out on whether his fire department will see any benefit from it.

As one of the county's 13 emergency services districts, or ESDs, Bailey's southeastern Travis County fire department gets its funding almost exclusively from sales and property tax money in the area. Sales taxes from the scheduled Formula One race nearby, and property taxes from the track itself, could represent a huge boost to its budget.

But the department can't count on that money. The City of Austin is expected to annex the track, although it has not said when that could happen. If Austin does annex it, the firefighters won't see any financial benefit from the track, even though it is a stone's throw from their station.

The issue goes well beyond the racetrack. Across the county in areas such as Westlake, Manor and Oak Hill, fire departments — many of which were on the front lines fighting last year's devastating wildfires — are struggling with what to do as Austin grows and annexes into their territories, taking over the money they receive from property and sales taxes.

"As the city annexes more and more, we have less money for equipment," said Travis County Fire Rescue Lt. Gerry Kammer. They also will have less for training and staffing.

Fire chiefs and emergency officials across the county have begun examining new ways in which their departments can survive, including possibly integrating into a large, county-run fire service, entering into agreements with the Austin Fire Department, merging with one another or somehow raising taxes.

Each idea has its drawbacks, officials say, and they might not solve the problem of declining ESD revenue as Austin continues to grow.

"If we were to blow things up and start all over, we wouldn't use the model we have now," said Jim Linardos, chief of Lake Travis Fire Rescue, a district covering a large part of the area immediately west of Austin.

He said that when Austin annexes into the River Place area near Lake Travis in 2017, his department will lose a half-million dollars in revenue.

"If the ESDs keep shrinking, we can't provide quality fire protection," Linardos said.

While many of the fire departments across the county, including the Austin Fire Department, have aid agreements with one another, they run the risk of being stretched thin on days when fires are widespread.

Although the Austin Fire Department is required to provide fire protection in areas that get annexed into the city, new firefighting resources do not pop up overnight. The city's ability to build new fire stations is dependent on budgets and bond elections, officials say. In addition, the city does not automatically take over the fire stations in areas it annexes, said Danny Hobby, Travis County's head of emergency services.

In addition, Linardos said, the city usually annexes into areas that generate a great deal of tax revenue, such as subdivisions. As the ESDs lose money from those areas, they also lose funding to provide for the remaining areas in their districts. Some chiefs fear layoffs of firefighters in those districts, many of whom have been serving for years.

Travis County officials recognize this problem as well. The county's emergency services department is currently developing a long-term plan that could unify many of the ESDs into a single county fire department.

"They all recognize we have to do something different," Hobby said. "But how we do it is the key here."

Bailey said it's hard to tell which option would be best.

"I don't know if I have that answer," he said. "I don't know what people will be willing to do."

A 'patchwork system'

At issue is the system of how the various ESDs across Texas are funded, Bailey said. He describes it as a "patchwork system" designed in the 1940s to help volunteer fire departments outside cities. The districts are political subdivisions created by the state Legislature funded by property taxes of no more than 10 cents per \$100 of assessed value, as well as whatever sales tax revenue may be available.

Each is independent and run by boards appointed by Travis County commissioners. They each have their own pay scales, insurance, equipment, retirement packages and other logistical requirements. About 1 million people live in Travis County, according to the 2010 census. Of those, county officials said, about 240,000 get fire services from an ESD.

The system isn't well known or understood outside of public safety circles. Bailey said he's met many residents in the county who think his crew are Austin Fire Department firefighters.

But the system is not an equitable one, critics say. An ESD's equipment, response times, training budget and ability to hire new firefighters is only as good as its size and the strength of its tax base, they say. Less well-off areas of Travis County might not have the same quality of fire protection as districts in wealthier, more populated and more developed areas.

For example, Lake Travis Fire Rescue and the Pflugerville Fire Department are the most prosperous departments in terms of income from property and sales taxes. In 2010, they pulled in \$9.4 million and \$8.7 million in revenue, respectively, according to county figures.

Lake Travis served about 50,000 people in 2010; the Pflugerville department served nearly 100,000.

However, Bailey's ESD in Del Valle only brought in \$1.7 million that year; less than \$700,000 came from property taxes. Some, such as North Lake Travis Fire Rescue in the far northwestern part of the county, earned no sales tax income. About 20,000 people lived in that area in 2010.

The Pflugerville Fire Department has 72 firefighters, four stations and five fire engines, five brush trucks, plus specialized equipment such as a ladder truck and a truck used to carry water.

Contrast that with the ESD in Del Valle, which has 30 firefighters, three stations, three engines, four brush trucks and none of the other special equipment, Bailey said.

Although a less-populated area of the county might not need as big a fire department as one that has a large population, every department has to be at least at a level where they can effectively fight fires in their areas, Linardos said.

But even the better-funded ESDs find their resources stretched thin as growth explodes, and some struggle to maintain proper staffing and equipment, their chiefs say.

"We still haven't achieved four-person staffing on all our engines," said Kevin Croegaert, the Pflugerville department's assistant chief, referring to the number of firefighters on an engine. Four firefighters is the standard used by the Austin Fire Department.

Bailey said that if the racetrack is not annexed and it remains in his area, his budget would gain an estimated \$700,000 in sales and property tax money after the first year. That would be enough to put four firefighters on every engine at each of his three stations.

Annexation by Austin has also created unusual boundaries for some of the ESDs. For example, ESD No. 4, Travis County Fire Control, is split into five separate areas west, north and east of Austin. One of them runs between two segments of Bailey's district.

Currently, county government is not in the business of providing fire protection to its residents. The various ESDs receive minimal funding from the county budget, about \$108,000 a year for training and medical supplies, Hobby said.

What the county does fund is law enforcement, in the form of the Travis County sheriff's deputies and constables, and ambulance services through a deal with Austin-Travis County Emergency Medical Services. Under the current agreement, the county reimburses the city about \$12 million per year for EMS services, Hobby said.

Hobby said that the problem facing the county fire departments is fairly unique to Travis County because of the sheer number of departments and the size of the population living outside Austin's city limits.

Few other ESDs in Texas are neighbored by such a large and quickly growing city like Austin, emergency officials said.

"Texas has some issues with their fire districts," Linardos said. "They've got a one-size-fits-all attitude."

Linardos said he and other fire chiefs went before the state Legislature in several recent sessions to seek assistance, including the ability to merge with one another without a voter referendum or an increase on the 10 cent tax cap. They were not successful, he said, in part because the issue is not a statewide one.

"People look at our response times, and they expect Austin. We're not," Linardos said. "My stations are too spread out to be capped at 10 cents. I could run a volunteer fire department on 10 cents," but not a professional one where careers are built and equipment is first-rate, he said.

Regardless of their size or prosperity, all the ESDs in Travis County are threatened by annexation, Hobby said. Those with the smallest tax bases will be affected most, he said.

Moving to unify

In some ways, county first-responders already have made steps toward being more united. The ESDs use the same radio system and are all dispatched by the Austin Fire Department. The county also has its own fire marshal, arson investigators and emergency management offices.

Last year, a study ordered by the Commissioners Court recommended unifying the various emergency service districts outside the city into one county-managed fire and rescue department, and possibly retooling the county's agreement with Austin-Travis County EMS.

The consultants behind the study said creating a unified Travis County Fire Rescue service would help control costs, centralize training standards and promote accountability.

At least at first, a unified fire service would not lump every ESD into the same agency; they would first work to get on the same standards for fire protection — such as training, equipment and response times — while remaining independent districts, Hobby said.

But the ultimate goal would be to have a combined countywide service in place within five years, Hobby said. Such an agency would be united with STAR Flight helicopters, the county fire marshal's office and the emergency management office, and it would be overseen by a county fire coordinator and an oversight board, he said.

Over the next year, Travis County officials will be conducting an analysis of each of the ESDs that will assess their current financial prognosis, strengths and weaknesses, and see what it would take to get every ESD operating at the same level of service.

"We have to get on this now, because we want to provide adequate service," Hobby said. The analysis will also look at whether giving more funding to a department will actually improve fire protection or not, he said.

Unification could also improve the ESDs' ability to handle large-scale emergencies, such as another wildfire, Bailey said. "All the ESDs are very capable, but they would be much stronger as one to coordinate a larger event," he said.

However, unifying might not be necessary for some of the fire departments. The Pflugerville Fire Department may be a county ESD, but its revenue is steady because it exists within Pflugerville's extraterritorial jurisdiction, Croegaert said.

But if the ESDs ultimately merge into a larger county service, where will the money come from to fund it?

Hobby said that he would like to see the fire service run by a single authority on a new tax that does away with the ESDs' taxing model. This authority could include the regional fire departments as well as the Austin Fire Department, he said.

Mike Elliott, the chief of the Westlake Fire Department, said he has his doubts as to whether a county-run fire service would solve the funding issue.

He said similar models have been tried in California and Florida. But with additional burdens on taxpayers for firefighting equipment and personnel during a tough economy, those departments have had trouble paying the bills, Elliott said.

"You'd have to prove you're financially responsible before taking a handout from the county," he said,

Joining with Austin

Another alternative being examined by several county fire departments is entering into a contract for service with the Austin Fire Department.

Harry Evans, the Austin Fire Department chief of staff, said his agency is in discussions with the Westlake, Oak Hill and Lake Travis departments.

If a merger goes into effect, those firefighters would become Austin firefighters, and the ESDs would pay Austin to provide fire protection in those areas.

Evans said that such an agreement might make sense in areas Austin is poised to annex soon and that using existing firefighters and equipment could be easier than putting new ones in recently added areas.

"Why would you build (an Austin Fire Department) station if, by combining, you don't have to?" Evans said. He said Austin was approached by the ESDs last year.

The plan is being scrutinized by officials in the city and county, Evans said. How much it would cost has yet to be determined.

Elliott, the Westlake chief, said he is open to the idea but is skeptical that it would be a viable solution. Again, the problem with this model, he said, is that it does not solve the issue of annexation. While the departments' overhead may be lower with Austin running things, they are still dependent on shrinking property tax revenue from their districts to pay the city.

He said ESDs that have a city in their districts are most likely to survive. For his fire department, staying alive might mean becoming a municipal department run by the cities of West Lake Hills and Lago Vista.

"I don't think anyone has a crystal ball to tell what will happen in 20 to 25 years," Elliott said.

See below ESD map with income for each District in 2010.

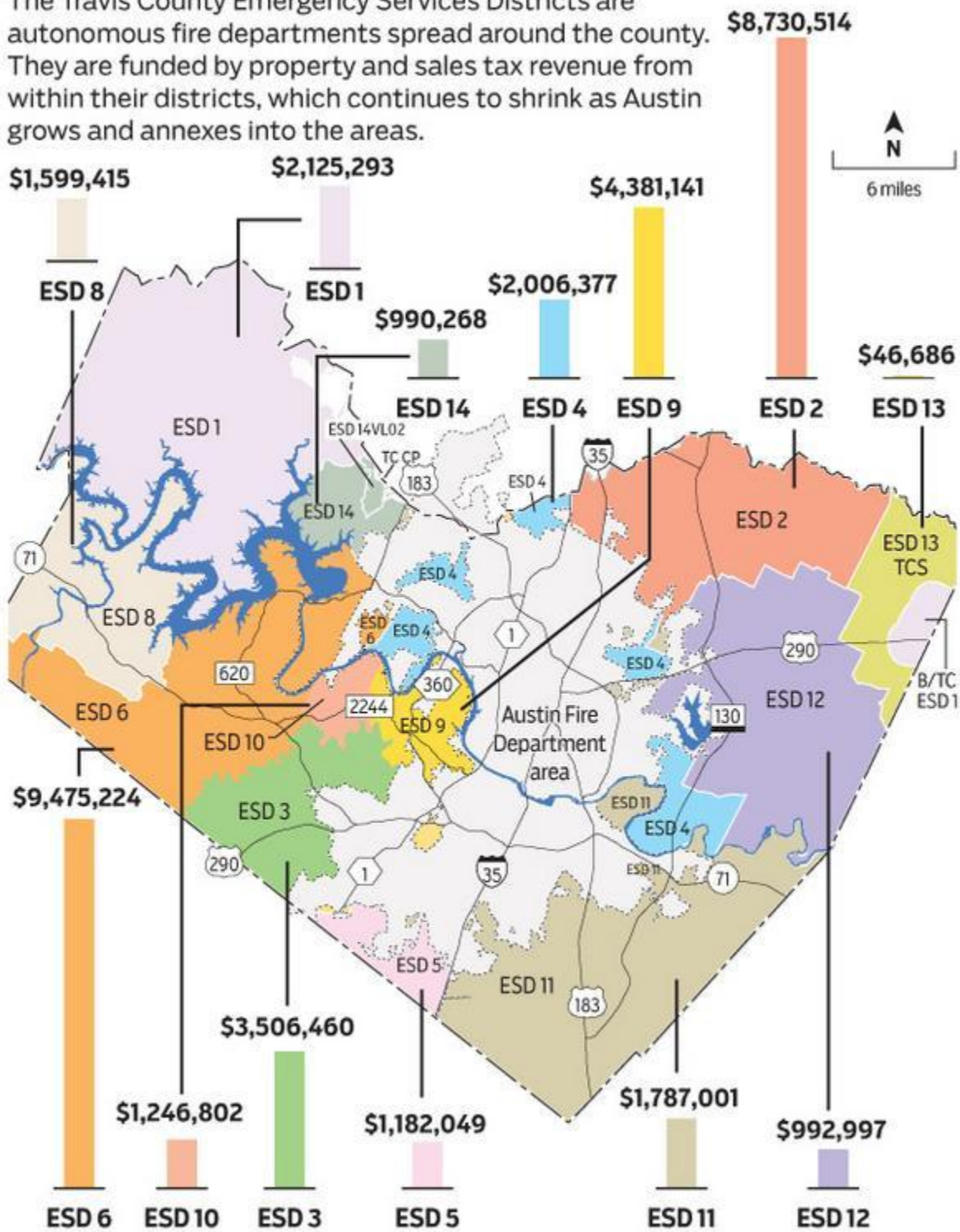
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Find this article at:

<http://www.statesman.com/news/local/as-austin-grows-funding-for-county-fire-departments-2403256.html>

Emergency Services Districts' tax income in 2010

The Travis County Emergency Services Districts are autonomous fire departments spread around the county. They are funded by property and sales tax revenue from within their districts, which continues to shrink as Austin grows and annexes into the areas.



Sources: Austin Fire Department, Travis County

Robert Calzada/American-Statesman