

Subject: A clear-eyed update on emergency preparedness on Decatur

Hello neighbors and friends,

This note is being shared with 494 of our neighbors as a direct and personal communication. You may notice a change in tone and format from past DEB updates. That is intentional.

This message is not part of DEB's periodic operational updates, which are typically shared only a few times a year. Instead, it is intended to provide broader context and clarity about where DEB stands today and why these issues matter.

Over the remainder of the month, DEB will publish an updated set of Frequently Asked Questions on our website (www.deb.team) to consolidate factual information and address common areas of confusion. That update will be accompanied by a follow-up email sharing a straightforward strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis, intended to establish a shared factual baseline.

This message is offered to provide clarity and shared context around DEB's role and operating realities. For an organization built on volunteer effort and community trust, transparency and documentation are essential to maintaining credibility over time.

What follows is not reassurance. It is a clear-eyed assessment of DEB's purpose and operating realities - factual, grounded, and offered in respect for the community we share.

DEB is deeply grateful for, and proud of, the more than 140 neighbors who have participated in wildland fire training and supported the organization over the years. We have consistently found that there is no one too young or too old to contribute meaningfully. Some of our most committed and inspiring participants have been senior women on the island who lead by example.

From its inception, DEB's mission has been simple: to help fill a critical gap in emergency preparedness for a small, remote outer-island population. That mission has always rested on two foundations - trust and volunteerism. Without both, no organization like DEB can function, and no emergency response model can succeed here.

DEB was formed with a clear understanding of the broader context across San Juan County. More than 120 outer islands lack a fire district, and past efforts have met with mixed outcomes. Stuart Island's former Fire District #6 failed more than a decade ago

and later re-emerged as an outer-island brigade model, now incorporated with Fire District #3. Such failures carry broader implications for the county, which is then left to navigate renegotiation, annexation, and legislative remedies that cannot address the underlying systemic challenges - because those challenges are fundamentally about volunteer capacity and community trust, not governance structure. Shaw Island, Fire District #5, has consistently identified volunteer availability as its primary challenge - despite a larger population and ferry access that Decatur does not have.

These examples are not offered as excuses, but as realities. Emergency preparedness on outer islands is shaped by population, geography, availability, and trust. Volunteer brigades are a deliberate and widely adopted model in rural and remote regions, valued for their flexibility, local accountability, and ability to function without the overhead that often limits formal districts. In many cases, they are the most effective solution available - not a temporary substitute.

This leads to an important point that has become increasingly blurred in recent discussions: DEB and any future fire district - whether regional, an outer-island-collective, or limited to Decatur alone - are not mutually exclusive. A functioning, trusted volunteer brigade is not an obstacle to such a district; it is the proving ground for one. Without demonstrated volunteer engagement, shared trust, and sustained participation, no fire district model can succeed here, regardless of funding or governance structure.

It is also important to be clear about what has - and has not - limited DEB's effectiveness. Funding has never been the primary constraint. Volunteer availability and sustained participation have always been the determining factors.

While a fire district structure could introduce a modest and more predictable funding mechanism, those resources would remain limited by scale. They would not approach the levels required to support a municipal-style department, nor would they eliminate the reliance on volunteer responders or the challenges of staffing, training, and availability inherent to a small, remote island. Structural changes do not remove these realities; they operate within them.

Unfortunately, some recent discourse - driven by a small number of voices and presented as if it reflects a single, unified position for the island - has framed the situation as a binary choice: either DEB or a fire district. That framing is inaccurate and counterproductive. It overlooks the fact that volunteer culture, trust, and participation cannot be legislated into existence. They must be built, tested, and sustained over time.

It is also necessary to acknowledge a harder truth. Efforts to undermine DEB, particularly when they are not accompanied by meaningful participation, volunteer engagement, or the development of a viable alternative that accounts for these

realities, do not advance emergency preparedness on Decatur. They erode it. Trust is not built through opposition alone, and preparedness cannot grow in an environment of division and suspicion.

Emergency response on Decatur has always depended on a small number of people carrying a large and often unsustainable load. That reality cannot continue indefinitely, regardless of structure. The question before us is not whether DEB is perfect - it is whether the community is willing to engage constructively in strengthening emergency preparedness rather than weakening the only functioning volunteer framework that currently exists.

DEB continues to invite the entire community to participate in building a more credible, sustainable future for emergency preparedness on Decatur. That participation can take many forms, but it must include a willingness to contribute time, effort, and trust—not just opinions.

The forthcoming FAQ and SWOT analysis are offered in that same spirit: to place shared facts on the table and establish a clear, common baseline for understanding. What happens next depends, in a very real way, on whether more of us choose participation over commentary, and trust-building over suspicion.

Thank you for taking the time to read and consider this carefully.

— The Board of Directors
Decatur Emergency Brigade (DEB)