

Hard-to-reach Tollgate Canyon, caught in the middle of the North Summit suspension, loses its local first responders

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Tollgate Canyon resident and first responder Chris Moore shuts a bay door on a garage used to store emergency response equipment. Moore is one of about 10 Tollgate first responders who were suspended along with the rest of the North Summit Fire District roster earlier this month. With emergency responders no longer coming from within the remote, mountainous neighborhood, they worry response times will increase dramatically.

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Tollgate Canyon residents say, for years, a group of neighbors responded to emergencies in the mountainous, hard-to-reach neighborhood. After the North Summit Fire District recently suspended all of its firefighters, those responders learned they were suspended, too. Residents worry that's left help farther away.

Tollgate Canyon is different. The two main roads are mostly plowed in the winter, but getting back to the hundreds of houses can be an adventure.

The mountain, as some residents refer to their home, rises to 8,400 feet and gets about as much snow as the ski resorts. It's north of Interstate 80 between Silver Creek and Wanship, across from Promontory.

Tollgate started as a cabin community; the roads are narrow, steep and rutted. Traffic means pulling over to let an oncoming four-wheel-drive continue its climb. There's more traffic now, residents say, with more people living there full-time and many others visiting.

Emergency response is a challenge. Firetrucks and ambulances must travel those same roads, plus they're coming from Coalville or a Park City fire station — the nearest is behind Home Depot.

Former North Summit Chief Ken Smith said neither are particularly close.

"Tollgate takes a long time to get an ambulance, from either Park City or North Summit," he said.

Around 2014, Smith said, a group of Tollgate residents worked to start a local first responder crew that now

when she joined in 2019, she had to clear her EMT credentials with the North Summit Fire District and fill out a formal application.

When the crew gets emergency notifications from Summit County dispatchers, Moore said the volunteers determine among themselves who will respond. Some may head directly to the scene, others to vehicles stored on the mountain. Moore said the crew's response time averages about 10 minutes. They "package the patient up" to get them ready to be treated by medical personnel arriving by ambulance.

"Our group is scattered around the mountain. So, Stephanie's over on the Forest Meadow side, we call it. So if the call were to originate on the Pine Meadow side, where I'm at, not only am I closer to the rig, but I'm also potentially closer to that neighbor that is calling," Moore

At least, that's how it was until earlier this month.

On Friday, Feb. 4, the North Summit Fire District announced it would suspend all of its firefighters after one did not respond to a call. Moore said she received an email two days later notifying her of the suspension.

The Tollgate crew, though technically part of the North Summit Fire District, hoped the suspension had been an oversight and that they'd soon be reinstated. But in a subsequent public meeting, Summit County officials said the suspension would stand.

Summit County Manager Tom Fisher said, though the intent is noble, the system could present legal liability, especially because of the private medical information included in dispatches sent to the volunteers.

He also said the fire district was not necessarily the right

“North Summit Fire District does not have EMS capability. They are not licensed to do that. They are not — that's not their mission,” Fisher said.

North Summit has an emergency medical responder designation, which is the lowest Utah offers. It allows firefighters to provide basic care like CPR and some bleeding control before ambulances arrive, but it's Summit County EMS that provides ambulance service in North Summit. That system is operated by the Park City Fire District and responds from Coalville.

Without the Tollgate crew in place, residents are left to rely on those ambulances driving all the way to the scene, rather than neighbors responding with vehicles stored in a mid-mountain equipment shed. On a recent tour, it took about 20 minutes to drive to the mid-mountain location from the mouth of the canyon.

Officials have said starting pay for North Summit ambulance workers is \$13 to \$14 per hour. It is often a first job for people fresh out of the academy, many commuting from the Salt Lake Valley and unfamiliar with the area.

GPS programs will often take the wrong route to addresses in Tollgate, or advise roads that are impassable in winter.

Responder Stephanie Proffitt said it isn't just that the Tollgate crew has access to equipment closer to a potential scene — they also know whose house is whose and how to navigate the area.

“We know that in an emergency I can't go Arapaho to that side of the mountain, I have to go this way. And we just know that stuff,” Proffitt said. “...Time is life.”

Mariana Mavor says Tollgate Canyon is a great place for her family. Neighbors pitch in together to carpool and have weekly bike rides and fishing meetups.

Mavor said she worries the lack of local responders makes Tollgate less safe. She estimated it could take ambulances 45 minutes in the winter to make it just to the mid-station — 20 minutes from Coalville or Park City to a chain-up spot near the bottom of the canyon, and then 20 minutes after the chains go on.

That's not to mention fire season, with some residents already struggling to find or renew home insurance because of the distance from a fire station and the heavily forested locale.

There's been talk of building a proper station for years — residents say they were promised one when they annexed into the North Summit district in 2014. But that sort of

improvement seems far away, with no clear path even to resuming the local first responder crew.

Proffitt hopes the privacy concerns won't stand in the way of there being local emergency response in Tollgate.

“My question back is, how is that any different than the firefighters that live there in Coalville responding to their neighbors? Or the firefighters/EMTs that live in Henefer responding to their neighbors?” she said. “It's the same.”

Summit County officials are scheduled to discuss the future of the North Summit Fire District in a public meeting Thursday night.

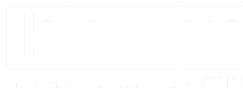
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Alexander joined KPCW in 2021 after two years reporting on Summit County for The Park Record. While there, he won many awards for covering issues ranging from school curriculum to East Side legacy agriculture operations to land-use disputes. He arrived in Utah by way of Madison, Wisconsin, and western Massachusetts, with stints living in other areas across the country and world. When not attending a public meeting or trying to figure out what a PID is, Alexander enjoys skiing, reading and watching the Celtics.

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