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Regional Fire Services Study Staff Report to Council

Report Number: 2020-32

Department(s): Central York Fire Services

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Meeting Date: May 19, 2020

Recommendations

1. That the report entitled Regional Fire Services Study dated May 19, 2020 be received; and,
2. That the Town of Newmarket support participation in a Regional Fire study; and,
3. That Council's decision be forwarded to York Region; and,
4. That Staff be authorized and directed to do all things necessary to give effect to this resolution.

Purpose

This report outlines some issues related to the undertaking of a study into the consolidation of municipal fire services within York Region.

There have been a number of attempts over the years to move this initiative forward with the optimism of creating a fire service that is more operationally effective and efficient while taking advantage of cost avoidance measures where appropriate.

Background

In 1996 and 2002 there were comprehensive studies undertaken to review the capabilities and statistics of the multiple fire departments within York Region. These studies were in an effort to present a vision for a consolidated fire service which were understood to provide improved levels of fire safety and emergency response to a growing region. More recently, in 2016 there was a study to review the consolidation benefits and challenges of a Richmond Hill Fire Services with Central York Fire Services.

The earlier Regional studies presented a number of options which ranged from a total consolidation of all municipal fire services with variations that included a consolidation with EMS and another that suggested the career fire services within the Region be consolidated while the composite/volunteer departments continued as independent entities.

Currently, there are eight fire services within the Region and all work towards providing the best level of fire safety education and protection to their community. There are four career fire services; Markham, Vaughan, Richmond Hill and Central York. There are three composite departments; East Gwillimbury, Whitchurch–Stouffville and Georgina and one mostly volunteer service in King. The Office of the Fire Marshal outlines three lines of defence for all municipal fire services; a) Public Fire Safety Education, b) Fire Safety Standards and Enforcement, and c) Emergency Response. All fire services regularly collaborate on messaging and approach to undertake these challenges; however, as municipally based organizations, they do so subject to their own level of staffing and funding. Fire services staff regularly discusses with other subject experts and take advantage of successful practices; nevertheless, as independent entities there is no one clear direction, as each department addresses their issues based on their local needs and circumstances.

In 2002, the Newmarket and Aurora Fire Departments were consolidated to create Central York Fire Services. Under the direction and with the support of the Joint Council Committee (JCC), CYFS meets the needs and circumstances of both communities. With the tremendous support from JCC and both municipal councils, the department has been able to undertake fleet upgrades, funding for an additional fire station and hire supplementary staff. While each community only pays a portion of the total cost, this cost sharing approach has resulted in a larger, better equipped and trained fire service.

As a consolidated fire service, CYFS provides a superior level of service to Aurora and Newmarket residents than either community would achieve with the same level of funding for independent fire services.

When there is an emergency in either municipality, CYFS is readily available to respond to meet the demands of the situation. From a fire response perspective, as there is no border between the two communities, CYFS can easily and immediately move resources to where they are needed. For each municipality to provide a similar level of service to their own community, the operating costs would increase considerably to each town.

There may be emergency situations which are beyond the capacity of the local fire service. To address this concern, all fire services in the Province participate in the Mutual Aid Program (MAP). This provincial system is designed to allow neighbouring departments to assist other jurisdictions when they are extended beyond their operational capacity. This is an effective method to address critical incidents, but it is not as timely or as effective as having one larger department with more resources available, trained to the same standard and using the same equipment. Additionally, “Automatic Aid” allows for the closest fire resources to respond to an emergency situation, regardless of municipal

boundaries. This can be an effective alternative if all services are equal in response capability. With Central York surrounded on three sides by composite and volunteer fire services, the response times would not match those of a career department.

Discussion

Opportunities

A regional fire service avoids the duplication of services which in turn will strengthen service delivery and have the potential to reduce operating costs. Fire Prevention programs will be standardized across the whole region with the ability to focus on the specific needs of communities based on their unique circumstances. The operations of the suppression division will be more standardized through training, with one command model and communication system. A consolidation offers increased safety for both residents and firefighters. By amalgamating the fire services, municipal boundaries will be eliminated within York Region. This change alone will result in the closest fire apparatus responding to each incident, resulting in reduced response times and improved outcomes. The fire service has to grow in order to continue to meet the changing needs of the community it protects.

- More effective and timely response to all types of emergencies
- Faster response, better outcomes
- Reduced duplication of dedicated services (e.g. Haz-Mat teams, High Rise response and specialty rescue teams)
- Streamline Fire Administration staff
- Municipal budget pressures reduced
- Facility Optimization
- Centralized Dispatch Centre

Challenges

While cost reduction is a key driver in the creation of a new Regional Fire Service, the immediate focus should be on the operational effectiveness and capabilities of a new fire service. Cost avoidance may be achieved with the elimination of duplicated services and increased buying power; however, there will be some significant issues to overcome in the early stages of a consolidation.

- Development of a revised governance model
- Municipal financial contributions based on level of service provided
- A larger unionized labour force with a harmonized collective agreement
- Appropriately sized management team for the third largest fire service in Ontario
- Large geographic area – span of control – variety of service levels provided
- Undertake a Master Fire Plan to review the current fire station locations

Prior to the consolidation of fire services, the study should investigate how to determine the levels of financial contribution from each participating municipality. To do this a decision on the level of response and type of service to be provided to the different areas within the Region would need to be determined. This would highlight disparities between departments, most notably between career and hybrid departments. Based on the level of service they will receive, a number of municipalities would need to upgrade at their own expense, prior to the amalgamation of fire services, to equalize the contributions. This leveling of the playing field would be necessary prior to realizing the benefits of improved response and costs savings from a regionalized service.

Conclusion

Fire service amalgamations have taken place in Toronto, Hamilton and Ottawa; however, these consolidations were also inclusive of all municipal departments and governance. It is less common to consolidate only the fire service and leave all other municipal services intact. There are lessons that can be learned from these consolidations, as the new “York Regional Fire Service” could become the third largest fire service in the Province.

In comparison, York Regional Police service (YRP) is the result of a 1971 consolidation of 14 municipal police forces. This internationally respected service has grown with the communities within York Region and continues to address the ever changing needs of all citizens regardless of where they live within the Region. YRP is a world class agency and they have shown they can adapt to meet the changing demands of community policing. Had municipally based police services been retained, they would not be as effective or as renowned in the policing world. The former municipal police services would have struggled to rise to the same level of expertise, regardless of the dedication of those in the service. Coordination under one command has enabled YRP to address all levels of community issues across the whole Region.

That is what a consolidated fire service could become.

Business Plan and Strategic Plan Linkages

This report aligns with the Town of Newmarket’s vision of being *Well Beyond the Ordinary*.

Consultation

Previous Fire Studies were consulted

Impact on the Master Fire Plan

A new organization will require a Master Fire Plan to outline the tasks going forward.

Human Resource Considerations

None at the time of this report.

Budget Impact

Unknown at this time.

Attachments

None.

Approval

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