

Report

Date	October 4, 2023	File:
To	Council	
From	Ted Swabey, Chief Administrative Officer	Endorsed:
Subject	Communications and Leadership North Cowichan Fire Department	

PURPOSE

To provide Council with staff's advice on implementing the recommendations by Tim Pley and Associates regarding the Communications and Leadership within the North Cowichan Fire Department.

BACKGROUND

On September 12, 2023, at a special closed meeting, Council received a report and presentation prepared by Tim Pley and Associates (the Consultant) regarding a review of the state of leadership and communications within the Fire Department. At that meeting, Council directed that the "Review of Communications and Leadership within the North Cowichan Fire Department" report prepared by Tim Pley & Associates Ltd. be brought forward to an open meeting, including a report from staff on how the recommendations could be implemented, including the resourcing/staffing implications and timelines.

An estimated 84 people participated in group meetings or individually as part of the consultant's review. Some people who took part in a group session also engaged in one-on-one consultation. This level of engagement was extremely appreciated and speaks highly of the desire to improve the fire service's culture.

It is very important for transparency purposes that the complete report submitted by the Consultant be made available to the entire Fire Services as soon as possible following its submission to Council. The Consultant will present his findings to the Fire Services Leadership Team (FDLT). Subsequently, the report findings will be communicated to the entire fire service by FDLT, overseen by the Interim Fire Chief, Ron French.

The Consultant made several recommendations, which are outlined below and include staff's recommendations with respect to how to action each item. These recommendations are largely meant to reengage fire services staff and rebuild trust; however, the Consultant has also recognized operational limitations based on the need for increasing the administrative staffing requirements, which has also contributed to the challenges of managing the large change management issues in the department.

DISCUSSION

In the Consultant's words, "The report includes several recommendations for change that, if implemented, will support the development of effective communication processes and enable the Municipality to provide an effective, centralized fire administration. At the same time, it will help the Municipality and the Department appreciate and address the change management issues which have negatively affected the relationship between the Municipality and their firefighters".

The following section extracts the recommendations contained within the report. The more expansive discussion in the report contains details regarding each of these recommendations.

Consultant Recommendation #1

The Terms of Reference for the Fire Department Leadership Team should be revised. The FDLT should act as a round table Department leadership forum chaired by the Fire Chief. Output communications from the FDLT should be written and form the basis of the communication from Station Chiefs to Department members after each meeting.

- *Staff Comment:* Staff agree and see value in revising the terms of reference. This is in process, and the Interim Fire Chief has initiated discussions with FDLT to formalize revised Terms of Reference.

Consultant Recommendation #2

A process should be established to enable Department members (the "Employees") and the Municipality (the "Employer") to communicate on non-operational matters.

- *Staff Comment:* Staff agree with this recommendation, and the Interim Fire Chief will continue to discuss with FDLT to formalize how we can facilitate this important interaction.

Consultant Recommendation #3

The Fire Chief should report regularly (quarterly) to Council. The written report could include a summary of calls for service, response metrics, training status, promotions, recruitment and retention matters, progress on capital and strategic initiatives, and seasonal fire safety matters.

- *Staff Comment:* Staff agree with this recommendation, and the Interim Fire Chief will begin reporting to Council quarterly as with the RCMP.

Consultant Recommendation #4

The Department should explore opportunities for the Mayor and Council, as well as senior municipal staff, to interact with Department members at Department functions such as open houses and ceremonies. Given the Community of Communities nature of North Cowichan, such interactions might occur on a station-by-station basis, with a goal of transitioning to a department-wide basis.

- *Staff Comment:* The Interim Fire Chief has already initiated discussions with FDLT and will formalize how we can facilitate this important interaction between the Mayor, Council, and the fire service.

Consultant Recommendation #5

A functional read-only, online platform should be established where Department members can access Department documents, information, and regular updates.

- *Staff Comment:* Staff are working with the Information Technology team to implement the best solution to meet the needs of the Department.

Consultant Recommendation #6

The Department should review and update its Operational Guidelines. Gaps in the existing Operational Guidelines should be addressed. New OGs should continue to be reviewed by the FDLT before being signed by the Fire Chief, and the Station Chiefs should review newly approved OGs with the members before implementation.

- *Staff Comment:* The development of departmental OG's is well underway and a priority for the Interim Fire Chief and FDLT to complete.

Consultant Recommendation #7

The Department should make Operational Guidelines readily available to all members in hardcopy and electronic form.

- *Staff Comment:* The fire department leadership team will ensure all employee orientations and training include a review of these documents and receive ongoing training, as required, to be informed of changes to these documents as they occur. The online platform from Recommendation #5 could also be used as the electronic repository of these OGs.

Consultant Recommendation #8

The Department should develop and implement a process for formally reviewing and updating its OGs.

- *Staff Comment:* Staff agree with this recommendation, and the Interim Chief will implement this requirement for FDLT oversight.

Consultant Recommendation #9

The Municipality should consider the creation of the following staff roles as soon as possible:

- One Assistant or Deputy Fire Chief in charge of training and operations;
- Increasing the ½ FTE Fire and Bylaw Services position to full-time in support of only the Fire Department;
- One full-time Human Resource position designated to support Fire Department recruitment and labour relations;
- A full-time Payroll position; and
- Enhanced Communications Department staffing to support Department fire prevention and community engagement efforts.
- *Staff Comment:* Staff agree with the consultants' recommendations, which are consistent with other departmental reviews and budget discussions with Council. There are costs associated with implementing these recommendations, and while there are priority positions that staff agree with in the consultant recommendations, addressing all the recommended positions requires a more all-inclusive review of all resourcing priorities throughout the organization. These positions are critical to managing the ever-increasing demands operationally, especially to respond to provincially

demanded regulatory changes.

The greatest need is to bolster the admin support to the Fire Service. Staff recommend the immediate hiring of a Bylaw admin support staff person at a cost of approximately \$76,000. Hiring this position will allow the ½ time fire admin staff to increase to 100% full-time fire admin support. The balance of the recommended consultant positions and other positions previously identified in the Fire Services report done in 2018 would be considered part of the Strategic Plan noted in recommendation #12 and in future budget deliberations.

Consultant Recommendation #10

The Municipality should consider separating the reporting relationship between the Fire Chief and Bylaw Services.

- *Staff Comment:* This has been done with the hiring of the Interim Fire Chief. The Manager of Bylaw Services now reports directly to the CAO until a decision is made regarding who the manager will report to permanently (not the Fire Chief). It should be noted that this does reduce our bylaw support by removing the theoretical half-time spent by the former fire chief on bylaw issues. It also increases theoretically the time directly spent supporting the fire services.

Consultant Recommendation #11

The Municipality should explore options to enable the continued use of the paid-on-call model, including mitigating the increase in calls for service in the South End fire hall area and the periodic low turnout of members to emergency calls.

- *Staff Comment:* This is a critical issue that will keep our fire services costs down. This has always been and continues to be a priority. The alternative (i.e., career service) is very expensive and will be driven primarily by call volumes. Any change from a paid-on call to career service is a decision of Council. The Interim Fire Chief and FDLT will continue to explore ways to mitigate calls for service that prolong the paid-on-call service for as long as possible. The interim Chief will update Council on these efforts at the first quarterly update and ongoing as required.

Consultant Recommendation #12

The Municipality should undertake a strategic planning process to develop a road map outlining the Department's path over the next five years, through which undertaking the longer-term needs and goals can be identified, and the members made part of the process. Representatives from all levels of the Department should be included in developing the road map.

- *Staff Comment:* Staff agree with completing a Strategic Plan for the fire service and recommend we retain Tim Pley and Associates to work with the Interim Fire Chief and FDLT to develop a road map to move the department forward, in consultation with all staff in the fire service. A Strategic Plan and its engagement are critical to ensure all staff are apprised of our direction and how their input is valued.

Summary

We have an excellent Fire Service with dedicated staff that we value tremendously. The report presented and its recommendations are meant to reset our direction by acknowledging the incredible work the fire service has achieved, and the areas we can support that would improve trust and clarity of purpose. The staff looks forward to discussing the report's findings with all of the fire service staff and is excited to move forward with the recommendations as set out in the consultant's report.

OPTIONS

1. THAT Council:
 - (1) Give pre-budget approval for a permanent full-time bylaw admin support position beginning as soon as possible;
 - (2) Direct staff to retain Tim Pley and Associates at a cost of \$6,000 to undertake a strategic planning process for the Fire Service and
 - (3) Direct staff to review the balance of the recommendations in the "Review of Communications and Leadership within the North Cowichan Fire Department" report as part of the 2024 budget process.

2. THAT Council refer the Fire Service's staffing matters and Strategic Plan development to the 2024 budget process.

RECOMMENDATION

THAT Council:

- (1) Give pre-budget approval for a permanent full-time bylaw admin support position beginning as soon as possible;
- (2) Direct staff to retain Tim Pley and Associates at a cost of \$60,000 to undertake strategic planning for the Fire Service; and
- (3) Direct staff to review the balance of the recommendations in the "Review of Communications and Leadership within the North Cowichan Fire Department" report as part of the 2024 budget process.

Report prepared by:



Ted Swabey
Chief Administrative Officer

Report reviewed by:

Ron French

Ron French
Interim Fire Chief

Approved to be forwarded to Council:



Ted Swabey
Chief Administrative Officer

Attachment:

(1) North Cowichan Final Report - TPA