

Report

Date March 5, 2025
Subject Cancellation of Fire Department Staffing Pilot Project

File:

PURPOSE

To advise Council of the cancellation of the proposed firefighter staffing pilot project to reduce response times for emergency calls.

BACKGROUND

As part of the 2025 Business Planning process, Fire Services staff proposed a pilot project to staff a fire engine on 24/7/365 coverage. This plan was to be done on a voluntary sign-up system using the current North Cowichan Fire Department members. Council approved the pilot and funding for a four-month trial period to start in Quarter 4 of 2025 with a budget request of \$400,000.

Staff developed a phased approach to merge the Paid-on-Call (POC) model with a composite model in the South End station. Implementing a composite staffing model with one apparatus would significantly reduce the impact on South End members, as many of the non-emergency duty and emergency calls can be responded to with one engine response staffed with a four-person crew. This approach is intended to delay the need for a full-time fire service in North Cowichan for as long as possible while meeting the expected response times set by the National Fire Protection Association. POC members from the four fire halls would continue to respond to more significant emergencies, such as structure fires. As the shift captain requires, these members would be requested or automatically deployed by 9-1-1 dispatch.

DISCUSSION

Staff identified a concern regarding the POC members being able to staff a four-person engine, as for many, firefighting is a second job, and/or if this could be achieved with the current POC fire department members.

All current members were asked to complete a survey confirming their ability to commit to the proposed sign-up process to determine if proceeding with the full-time engine staffing plan was achievable. The results of the survey did not come back favourably to move forward with the proposed staffing model at this time for the following reasons:

- Regular work commitments would not allow members to sign up for a designated shift.
- Required training levels for new members have not been met.
- Limited number of senior officers having availability.
- Work-life balance did not support the proposed shift patterns.

In previous reports to Council over the last four years, staff have seen steady growth in calls for service in all four North Cowichan communities. However, the South End has had the highest impact on call for service volume. It should be noted that many (est. 90-95%) routine and emergency calls for service can be handled by a single-engine company with four members. Currently, when a call goes out, there is no way of knowing how many members will respond, and North Cowichan must pay one to two hours to each member who responds. This rightsizing of response is critical to ensuring risk management principles and the membership's health and safety.

As Council is aware, North Cowichan is challenged to meet the recommended response times set by the National Fire Protection Association, which sets response times for POC service to not be longer than 10 minutes for 80% of the calls. This 10-minute response time is further supported by the requirements set out by the Province for the BC Building Code for dense housing developments. The potential property damage and risk of fatalities are related, in part, to the Fire Department's ability to respond within these time frames. As development in the South End response area continues and increases, these already concerning response times will become magnified and increase potential liability.

Allowing for additional time to engage in fulsome discussion with the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) may assist in ensuring that all outcomes intended are achieved.

Fire Services staff request to remove the trial staffing pilot project for 2025 and revisit this in the 2026 Business Planning process, with time to consider various staffing plans to reduce the response times to meet the established requirements.

OPTIONS

1. **(Recommended Option)** THAT Council direct staff to delay the fire department staffing pilot project in 2025 and remove the \$400,000 in the 2025 – 2029 Financial Plan, and include the implementation of the fire service engine staffing pilot in the 2026 Business planning process.
2. THAT Council direct staff to delay the fire department staffing pilot project in 2025 and retain the \$400,000 in the 2025 – 2029 Financial Plan to be put towards the fire equipment reserve.
 - This option will assist the fire equipment reserve as it is currently underfunded. Also, implementation of the fire service engine staffing pilot can be prepared in the 2026 Business planning process.
3. THAT Council direct Fire Services staff to develop a scaled down version of a staffing plan for implementation in 2025.

IMPLICATIONS

North Cowichan will not address the response times recommended by the National Fire Protection Association or the recommendations set out in the BC Building Code.

RECOMMENDATION

THAT Council direct staff to delay the fire department staffing pilot project in 2025 and remove the \$400,000 in the 2025 – 2029 Financial Plan, and include the implementation of the fire service engine staffing pilot in the 2026 Business planning process.

Report prepared by:

Ron French

Ron French
Fire Chief

Reviewed and Approved to be forwarded to Council:



Ted Swabey
Chief Administrative Officer