



Staff Report to Committee of the Whole

DATE: Monday, February 27, 2023

DEPARTMENT: Fire Rescue

SUBJECT: Fire Department Master Plan

BACKGROUND:

In 2017 the fire department created, and Council approved, a five-year plan called 'Expanding the Stipend Model' which was designed to address the capacity of the fire department to meet the needs of a growing city.

There were four key objectives set out in the plan:

- increase both career and volunteer staffing levels to provide 24/7 coverage at Station 2 to reduce response times in the south end of the city;
- build a dedicated training ground to provide better training for the firefighters;
- renovate Station 2 to accommodate the increased staffing at that station; and
- dedicate personnel to the Langford Emergency Program to better prepare for large scale emergencies.

To fund the five-year plan, the fire department was allocated a 1% taxation increases for five years with the intention of going from a minimum of four firefighters (one career member, three volunteer members) per shift to eight firefighters (four career members, four volunteer members) per shift split between Station 1 (North) and Station 2 (South).

This plan recommended increasing career staffing numbers from eight to twenty career members and volunteer membership from fifty-three members to sixty-three members. It became clear in 2021 that while on target for the career staffing component, the key objective of increasing volunteer staffing levels was not going to be achieved. By the fall of 2022, the number of volunteer firefighters had decreased to thirty, half of what would be required to open Station 2. Several changes to the recruitment process were made to increase the volunteer membership, including accepting volunteers from all areas of Greater Victoria - rather than just Langford - and running two recruitment classes per year (Spring and Fall) instead of the usual single-recruitment in the Spring. Despite these changes, Langford's volunteer retirements continue to outpace volunteer recruitment.

It is important to note that the 2017 plan did not account for several external events that have had a significant impact on the fire department's ability to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters. The global

pandemic caused delays and challenges to the process of recruitment of volunteers. It was a difficult time to get people interested in volunteering, especially in a field that was on the front lines. Selecting new members and providing the required training was extremely difficult with restrictions that limited group sizes and gatherings to a small number of people or outside of established cohorts. While these challenges are largely over with, the pandemic has created a deficit in our volunteer complement that we are still working to recover from.

Despite the fact that the immediate effects of covid have passed, there are other factors which continue to impact Langford's ability to hire new volunteer members. One major factor is the increased cost of living and ongoing inflation that have put a strain on many families. The cost-of-living increases have deterred many people from volunteering as they now need to work multiple jobs to pay additional costs for housing, food, and utilities to meet their basic needs. Despite an interest in volunteering, many simply cannot as the hours they would have traditionally volunteered are now required to be used to earn income for their families.

A result of these pressures on volunteerism, is a change in the motivations for those who do wish to join. Many are joining to use the training and experience gained in Langford Fire Rescue ("LFR") for career opportunities elsewhere with full-time career departments. Many career departments in BC and Alberta have stated that they will be hiring a significant number of new firefighters in the next one to four years. Most career departments are hiring record numbers of firefighters to fill vacancies and increase their staffing levels and they are drawing from volunteer or composite departments such as Langford when hiring. Langford Fire Rescue responds to between 1500-2000 calls per year and is considered a full-service fire department, meaning that it responds to all hazards in the community. This provides an excellent opportunity for volunteer members to gain experience and training that doesn't exist at the same level elsewhere making them a sought after by other career departments. It has become common that LFR is treated as a work experience program that other career departments draw from thus LFR loses many volunteers per year to career positions elsewhere. This has resulted in over 65% of our current volunteer firefighters having less than three years of experience.

Another item of note is the issue of availability and the level of time commitment that is necessary. A challenge arises with respect to their availability and how much time they can commit to the organization and the fire service, which as a whole, is significant. The BC Fire Service Minimum Training Standards Structural Competency and Training Playbook defines the minimum training requirements for structural firefighters to remain safe and to be competent on the fire ground. These requirements were introduced to reduce firefighter deaths and injuries and to have all fire departments in BC provide a level of training based on the type of fire department they declare. LFR is a full-service fire department (all-hazards) and therefore we require our members to achieve the highest level of training before being able to respond as a qualified firefighter. In the past, training could be done concurrent with call response and filling shifts at the station; however, now to meet minimum standards, volunteers have to meet the requirements before they are able to respond and that can take years depending on the availability of the volunteer and the ability for the department to provide the training.

While these external factors were difficult to predict, the 2017 plan also did not account for the increase in densification in the core of Langford. At the time the plan was created, the predominant housing types being constructed were townhouses and six-story residential buildings and that was a trend that had been occurring for years. By 2020 and into 2021, the city started to discuss the construction of residential towers that were eighteen-stories and above. This alone would have strained the capacity of the fire service even if the 2017 Plan's goals were achieved.

Considering all these factors, it was recommended that a Fire Department Master Plan be done in 2022. The Plan was approved in the 2022-2027 Budget to hire a third-party to complete an objective and comprehensive review of the current capacity of the fire department and to plan for the future needs of the organization.

COMMENTARY:

Emergency Management Group Inc (EMG) out of Barrie, Ontario was awarded the contract to conduct the Fire Department Master Plan through an RFP process. EMG is a professional consulting and training firm dedicated solely to emergency services and emergency management. They have completed Fire Department Master Plans for many other Canadian and U.S. fire departments both larger and smaller than LFR. This depth of experience was a key aspect in selecting EMG to complete the LFR Master Plan.

The overall objective of the LFR Master Plan is to ensure the most efficient use of fire service resources in order to meet the demands of the community while planning for growth in the population over the next 10-20 years. The plan is designed to prepare the fire department to be able to manage the impact of future growth throughout the City of Langford and the best way to deliver fire protection and fire prevention services to all residents. EMG used their experience and understanding of municipal fire services and worked with internal stakeholders to conduct a comprehensive review of the fire department's operations. The in-depth assessment included reviewing the fire and emergency services in detail, an analysis of each division/department, a gap analysis and development of recommendations to optimize service excellence.

EMG spent eight months researching the challenges and opportunities facing LFR. In addition to the above, the scope of the LFR Master Plan reviewed the following requirements:

- Existing legal, operational, and administrative structure, including the fire department's mandate of services.
- The LFR service capacity in the context of anticipated development and growth.
- Ability to meet statutory and regulatory obligations under or as defined by codes and standards.
- Response times, including dispatch, turnout, and travel time by incident types.
- Budget process.
- Staffing levels and needs.
- Recruitment and retention of volunteers
- Occupational health and safety issues.
- Comparative analysis of similar sized departments.

- Emergency Program activities.
- Fleet and apparatus.
- Fire Prevention Programs.
- Health and wellness.
- Training Programs.
- Fire station locations.
- Regional efficiency and operability.

Based on this in-depth analysis of the department, internal and external documentation and reference to industry standards and best practices, EMG made seventy-two recommendations for consideration. The recommendations were defined as immediate, short-term (1-3 years), mid-term (4-6 years), long-term (7-10 years) and future planning (10+ years).

Some of the significant highlights of the recommendations are as follows:

- Complete a new governance bylaw to ensure that the services offered by LFR align with Council's vision and expectations.
- Increase suppression staffing from four to ten per platoon to bring staffing per apparatus in line with industry standards and enhance the operational capabilities of LFR.
- Implement strategies to retain volunteer members for longer periods.
- Implement a stipend (pay per shift) for volunteers that is in line with other neighboring fire departments to help attract more volunteer members.
- Expand the current initiative in fire prevention inspections and public education by training all firefighters to NFPA 1031 (Fire Inspections) and NFPA 1035 (Fire and Life Safety Educator).
- Assess the feasibility of improving the staffing model to implement a stand-alone Fire Prevention Division.
- Implement a dedicated full-time Training Officer to develop, deliver, manage, and measure the delivery of training within the department.
- Develop and implement a formal succession planning program.
- Pivot to using NFPA 1710 as a performance measure over the BC Building Code for response time benchmarks.
- Work collaboratively with Colwood and View Royal to implement tri-municipal agreements for emergency response.
- Begin the process to secure funding to enter into a design phase for a new Fire Station 1 to consolidate Fire Station 1 and Fire Station 3.
- Assess the feasibility of replacing the current aerial ladder truck with a used aerial device that has 10 years or less service time.
- Update the City of Langford Emergency Program Response Plan.

While all seventy-two recommendations will bring value to the organization, staff will need to prioritize them and bring forward a plan to Council for implementation. The timing of the implementation will be determined by which has the most impact and the best value for the City to enhance fire protection

services overall. For example, completing a new governance bylaw to ensure the services provided by the fire department meets Council's and resident's expectations is needed to provide guidance and direction now and for the future of the organization whereas designing a new Station 1 is a recommendation that can be a plan objective for future years.

Staff believe the most significant concern identified in the master plan must be dealt with in 2023. A platoon is a set of firefighters that respond as a group to emergencies. Currently our minimum staffing level is four firefighters at Station 1 with little capacity to deal with sick or vacation relief. Station 2 and Station 3 are both volunteer stations (volunteers respond from home to the station via a pager) and do not have a guaranteed response as it is dependant on volunteer availability. Staffing Station 2 was a component of the 2017 Plan that was not achieved; however, the need to have a dedicated and guaranteed response from that station has continued to increase. Moving to a model with ten firefighters per platoon would provide a minimum of eight firefighters on duty at all times, with four at Station 1 and four at Station 2, supplemented with our volunteer members. This number would also account for sick and vacation relief.

In recognition of the need to ensure a guaranteed emergency response to both the north and south ends of the City and to help address the increase in density with residential towers, it is recommended that Council consider a plan to hire additional firefighters to meet the ten per platoon system over a three year period. This would create a total of twenty-four additional suppression firefighter positions.

As well, it is recommended that three additional firefighters be hired, two to specifically focus on Fire Prevention and Life Safety Education and a dedicated Training Officer to ensure all firefighters continue to be trained to industry standards and expectations. These members would be hired within the same three-year time frame noted above.

Many of the other recommendations of the LFR Master Plan would be addressed with the additional staff. Meeting our staffing needs not only assists with emergency response capabilities, but it will also allow the department to dedicate personnel to addressing the other objectives of the LFR Master Plan.

The mission statement for the department is "LFR is a highly competent and progressive organization, committed to serving the community with courage and pride in the preservation of life and property to the best of our ability." The staff and volunteers that make up Langford Fire Rescue are providing an incredible service to the community and are dedicated to serving the residents with pride. By using the LFR Master Plan as a framework and following the recommendations, Council can continue to support the membership by providing them with the resources and staffing they need to accomplish the mandate of saving lives and protecting property to the best of their ability now and well into the future.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

Staff will need to prioritise the recommendations of the LFR Master Plan and determine annually which items to bring forward to Council as part of the budgeting process. The cost of the recommendation of

hiring additional firefighting staff would be approximately \$950,000 per year for a total of approximately \$2,850,000 after three years.

For reference, for 2023 a 1% property tax increase is approximately \$380,000.

Therefore, should Council support the staff recommendation of providing the necessary staffing for the LFR over the next three years, the tax implications in each year would be 2.5%.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS:

While a municipality is not required to provide fire suppression services, because the City of Langford has made the decision to provide the services of a full service fire department, the City is obligated to meet the expectations that have been set by that decision.

There are also Worksafe BC requirements which dictate the minimum number of firefighters that must be present for entry into a structure. As well, the BC Building Code imposes building requirements that are subject to a fire department's response time and capabilities.

OPTIONS:

Option 1

THAT Committee of the Whole directs staff to include nine additional firefighting positions in the budget and five-year financial plan in each of the next three years;

AND

That Council receives the LFR Master Plan, as prepared by Emergency Management Group and directs staff to prioritize the remaining recommendations as part of the annual budgeting process.

OR Option 2

THAT Committee of the Whole directs staff to include nine additional firefighting positions in the 2023 Budget and 2023 – 2027 Five Year Financial Plan for consideration;

AND

That Council receives the LFR Master Plan, as prepared by Emergency Management Group and directs staff to prioritize the remaining recommendations as part of the annual budgeting process.

OR Option 3

THAT Committee of the Whole directs staff to include _____ additional firefighting positions in the 2023 Budget and 2023 – 2027 Five Year Financial Plan for consideration;

AND

That Council receives the LFR Master Plan, as prepared by Emergency Management Group and directs staff to prioritize the remaining recommendations as part of the annual budgeting process.

OR Option 4

THAT Committee of the Whole recommends to Council that Council receive the LFR Master Plan but take no action at this time.

SUBMITTED BY: Chris Aubrey, Fire Chief

Concurrence: Donna Petrie, Senior Manager of Business Development and Events

Concurrence: Yari Nielsen, Director of Parks, Recreation and Facilities

Concurrence: Matthew Baldwin, MCIP, RPP, Director of Planning and Subdivision

Concurrence: Katelyn Balzer, P.Eng., Director of Engineering and Public Works

Concurrence: Michael Dillabaugh, CPA, CA, Director of Finance

Concurrence: Marie Watmough, Deputy Director of Corporate Services

Concurrence: Braden Hutchins, Director of Corporate Services

Concurrence: Darren Kiedyk, Chief Administrative Officer