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Municipalities may face another ?iron in the fire?

By Jim Eadie

Ontario has announced new proposed regulation changes to the Fire Protection and Prevention Act, and allowed only a little over a month for public input.

The Town of Bancroft first got wind of the proposed changes on Jan. 22 when the town delegation to the Rural Ontario Municipalities Association spoke to Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services Minister Marie-France Lalonde.

Among other things in the proposed legislation, it calls for full certification of volunteer firefighters to a new provincially approved standard based on requirements set out by the National Fire Protection Association.

?In the town's opinion, the proposed regulation for mandatory training and certification will increase the cost of training, decrease the ability of community members to join a volunteer service and decrease the retention of volunteers,? Bancroft deputy clerk Lianne Sauter wrote in a correspondence with Wollaston Township.

On Jan. 29, Wollaston received a bulletin from the office of the Ontario Fire Marshal and Emergency Management announcing the proposed changes, although by then staff had heard about it through the grapevine. The announcement by the province included a period of public consultation on the proposed changes, ending on March 11, a total of 40 days.

The biggest item of concern expressed by the municipal and fire service representatives is the cost and time of training to the new standard, which includes many skills not required by the expectations of small rural fire services.

?Wollaston Township has developed and begun to implement a new training program jointly with Limerick and Faraday,? said Wollaston Township clerk Jennifer Cohen. ?This program employs certified fire professionals to teach the NFPA curriculum to our firefighters at our own facilities.?

According to Cohen this offers advantages to volunteers and municipalities. Convenience for volunteers; training with the department's own personnel and equipment; saves the municipality expenses of mileage, lodging, and possible financial compensation for lost wages, and avoids the serious problem of accessing training spots at Ontario fire colleges.

?The curriculum offered our firefighters is a modified NFPA program. The decision was made to teach only the skills needed by our rural firefighters,? she said. This means that some modules which are not necessary to do their job well and safely are not being taught; modules like forcible entry, high pressure fire hydrant supply, of fire cause determination.?

Fire chief Jason Post noted that most small rural fire departments are only expected by their councils to do exterior attack fire suppression. Municipalities set the level of service depending on financial and equipment resources available, and what is the level of commitment of the volunteers.

?[Wollaston Township] has a fire department that uses an exterior fire attack defensive model only,? said consultant Dan Koroscil, retired after 40 years in the fire service half of which was with the Ontario Fire Marshal's Office. ?That model does not require compliant turnout gear and uses a reduced level of training to the NFPA standard for Firefighter 1 to meet the Ministry of Labour requirement for trained employees. If the full NFPA standard is imposed, your costs will rise substantially, and the local volunteers may not be willing to commit time to that level of training ? thus you will have difficulties staffing your departments.?

In his letter to Minister of Community Safety and Correctional Services Marie-France Lalonde, Post offered some suggestions:

?The fire chiefs and government of British Columbia have recognized the same challenges in the rural and small-town sector of their fire services,? he said. ?They have developed a playbook, providing a compromise that allows for a three-tiered level of capability and training for exterior attack.?

He noted that if circumstances change with a department, they would train up to the next level, and then progress to the full Firefighter 1 certification. The new shared Wollaston Training program was inspired by the British Columbia model.

?We believe the B.C. playbook model could work well in rural small-town Ontario as well,? he concluded.

Public input into their proposals ends March 11. It can be addressed to Lalonde.