

Joint fire chief possible for Limerick, Wollaston, Madoc

By Jim Eadie

Worry over the potential cost of training rural volunteer firefighters up to new provincial standards is reaching all the way to include the fire chief's office.

Proposed changes include new standards and certification for the chiefs of departments. Small rural fire services are trying to figure out what it means to them in terms of budget, and legal and civil liability.

Heads of three municipal councils, along with some councillors and staff, met March 5 in Madoc Township to continue discussing the possibility of hiring a full-time fire chief for their departments. Limerick, Wollaston and Madoc townships are currently in discussion. Also affected would be Tudor and Cashel Township which doesn't have a fire department but purchases service from Limerick.

'A volunteer chief is not sustainable today,' said current Limerick fire chief Jason Post. He's also interim chief for Wollaston. 'That is why we are here.'

'There is a lot of new regulation coming down now. Who has the time to read all of that? follow the regulations and fill out all the forms and reports. I am very interested in a joint service and I am willing to look down that road,' said Limerick Reeve Sharon Carson.

Wollaston Reeve Graham Blair agreed, 'Budget is a major consideration for us.'

'We are here to talk and see what we can learn,' said Madoc Reeve Tom Bruce.

The three municipalities have similar sized departments. The salary range for a qualified chief was described as being between \$65,000 and \$85,000 per year.

There was the question on how to split the costs between the municipalities: by assessment, population, households, or land mass?

'Each municipality is responsible for their own fire station and its budget,' said Post. 'The joint chief would be the joint cost to be shared, which would include salary, office space, a computer and a car.'

'Before any major effort goes into this, we need to have some idea of the cost in general,' said Blair.

Staff members were instructed meet and prepare a draft job description, list of expectations and a realistic budget. This material will be presented to the three councils at their next meeting. They were asked to bring a resolution from their councils in support of committing to the process.

'We need a decision, we need a timeline,' said Carson.

'All this is futile if we don't get our ducks in a row,' said Wollaston Councillor Bob Ireland. 'There is an election coming up and there might be all new people.'

'Somebody has to talk to our volunteers,' said Carson. 'We need to explain the challenges we face [and] here is what we are talking about. Some people will have aspirations ? some people will say there is too much regulation now.'

'You need buy in from the team,' said Wollaston Township clerk Jennifer Cohen. 'If they don't understand why? there is going to be some push back.'

The group will meet again on May 9 after each of the councils have met.