

Hastings Highlands Fire Service Review identifies serious safety concerns

By Bill Kilpatrick

When the Emergency Management Group that conducted the Fire Service Review for the municipality of Hastings Highlands completed their report, they stated that "it was quite evident that the Hastings Highlands Fire Department is made up of a group of dedicated, professional personnel who are committed to improving their level of service provision to meet the needs of the community." However, there were a number of issues identified that appear to put not only the firefighter's healthy and safety at risk, but the public's health and safety as well. This situation has been growing worse as municipalities struggle to keep up with rising operating and maintenance costs regarding fire services and equipment, volunteer fire fighter recruitment and retention and adherence to, and the related costs of, ongoing fire fighter training.

One of the maintenance and operating costs that the report identified revolves around the six fire stations that Hastings Highlands is operating. Of those six, currently only three are operational and three are facing "operational challenges." The three that are in operation are Maynooth with 10 volunteer fire fighters, Monteagle with nine volunteer firefighters, and Birds Creek with 21 volunteer firefighters. The fire stations which are facing operational challenges are Herschel North which has not been active for seven years due to a lack of volunteers, Lake St. Peter, which is closed due to black mold contamination, and Bangor has only one volunteer firefighter making it inoperable until more volunteers can be recruited.

Currently, as the report notes, the south portion of Hastings Highlands has good overlapping fire response coverage based on a ten-minute response time, but with Bangor being closed "the north-east section is left mainly uncovered," which means an increased response time as fire stations in the south are left to cover that area. This is important because, as the report states:

"The overall goal of any fire department is to arrive at the scene of the incident as quickly and as effectively as possible. If a fire truck arrives on scene in four minutes or less with a recommended crew of four or more firefighters, there is increased opportunity to contain the fire by reducing further spread to the rest of the structure. Alternatively, if the first fire attack team arrives with fewer than four firefighters on board, it is limited to what operations it can successfully attempt."

The report also cites something called the Fire/Response Propagation curve which shows how quickly a home's contents can ignite from the time of fire detection until flashover-- the ignition of all contents-- occurs, which according to the chart is anywhere from eight to 10 minutes, but, with modern furniture and furnishings, the reports goes on to state, a flashover in a room can happen in as little as 4 minutes. The National Fire Protection Association standards 1720 (2020) section 4.3.1 sets minimum staffing requirements to meet the needs of the fire department and in Hastings Highlands, according to the report, "would require six firefighters on scene within 14 minutes 80% of the time." Given that the report also states, "If a fire truck arrives on scene in ten minutes or less, there is increased opportunity to contain the fire by reducing further spread to the rest of the structure," it can be concluded that if a truck arrives after 10 minutes it reduces that opportunity.

Another factor that needs to be taken into consideration regarding response time is the proximity of the volunteer firefighters to the fire. Lyle Quan, a consultant for the Emergency Management Group and author of the report, stated that, in terms of response times, "It all depends on where the volunteer firefighters are and how quickly they can get there." The report goes on to say that Hastings Highlands currently has no "definitive response time expectation/criterion noted in the Establishing & Regulating By-Laws," which are Council's direction to the fire department that prescribe what fire services to provide the municipality. The report recommends that council create a minimum response time to help monitor the effectiveness of the fire services.

The report, as stated in a previous article, outlined that to ensure proper fire response time in the north-east corner of the municipality it recommends, either the recruitment of sufficient volunteer firefighters to staff the Bangor fire station, or the implementation of one of two options that requires reducing the number of fire stations from six to three and either creating three new stations, or the relocation of one station at an estimated cost of between \$1 million and \$7.5 million dollars over the next one to 10 years. Council is also exploring options for potentially refurbishing the Bangor station to keep it functional, the issue of staffing,

however, still remains to be a problem.

There was some disagreement at the July 19 meeting about how the staffing at the fire stations is calculated and what exactly constitutes a full roster at any given station. Councillor Nancy Matheson asked Quan if Hastings Highlands could still use Bangor as a fire station as long as it was fully equipped and if the fire service could use the volunteers from the other fire stations to run the equipment. Quan, spoke about the agency that assesses and rates those stations, the Fire Underwriters Survey, stating that he believes that they assess stations based on who is assigned to that station, adding that he does not want to speak for the Fire Underwriter's survey, but believes a full compliment for a station in Hastings Highlands is 15 volunteer firefighters, a point that was confirmed by Councillor Keith Buck who said he spoke directly to members of the Fire Underwriters Survey. Hastings Highlands currently only has 30 volunteer firefighters which appears to mean that the Underwriters, could conclude, based on their own 'proprietary formula,' that Hastings Highlands only has two full-time fire stations. The rating based on that formula, as Councillor Buck pointed out, 'has a huge impact not only on the over all community, but at the end of the day they also rate the insurance costs to our stakeholders.' The lack of volunteer firefighters and functioning fire stations could mean an increase in insurance costs for the municipality.

Safety of the volunteer firefighters was also a concern outlined in the report. During the assessment of the six fire stations there were numerous issues identified at all of the fire stations including a lack of a diesel exhaust catchment system in any of the fire stations, the proximity of the firefighter's gear in relation to that exhaust due to a lack of proper storage areas, no emergency backup power at any of the stations and there are no shower/wash-up areas either. The report states that, 'The main concern is the lack of shower/wash up areas that need to be made available at all the stations. Firefighters must be able to decontaminate themselves from exposures to smoke, toxic gasses, chemicals, blood, and pathogens as soon as possible after a call and before going home.' Quan stated that council should not only install showers, but they should create a standard operating procedure that outlines what firefighters must do in the event of contamination, adding that, the procedure must state that they should never put their contaminated gear in the back of their personal vehicle and drive home. By installing the showers it would bring the municipality into compliance with the Occupational Health and Safety Act that is highlighted in the report which states, 'Workers who may encounter hazardous chemicals are to be afforded proper washing and clean up facilities.'

Recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters, as the report outlines, 'has been identified as a challenge with just about every volunteer fire service. There are numerous reasons for leaving, including the firefighters not feeling appreciated by the municipality, the time and effort required for both training and response to calls, firefighter's family not being recognised for 'loaning' their family member to the community.' A national survey, cited in the report, gave further reasons why people stopped volunteering including not having the time to volunteer, conflicts with the organization, too much training, attitude of existing personnel towards newcomers, criticism from officers and older members, a lack of camaraderie, and dealing with an adverse atmosphere created by those in leadership positions. While the report states that the aforementioned issues do not directly reflect the status of Hastings Highlands Fire Service, it's obvious that retention is an issue for the fire service as 3 people resigned from serving at the Bangor station in 2022 and, as was already mentioned, the Herschel North station has lacked sufficient volunteers for the last 7 years and as a result has been inactive.

The Fire Service Review gives many suggestions of 'opportunities' to increase retention of volunteer firefighters, but many of the suggestions involve additional expenses such as pay incentives, performance pay, wellness packages, benefit packages, RRSPs and pensions with contributions from the municipality, but given the amount of capital and infrastructure expenses that are outlined in the report, it appears that the municipality will have to make some difficult choices between paying to ensure volunteer retention and paying for equipment maintenance, training, and building upgrades. However, the report does suggest that by purchasing modern trucks, equipment, and stations it can maintain and even improve morale which may encourage volunteers to stay, but it also may not depending on what other retention issues are impacting the fire service. Mayor Tony Fitzgerald summed up well the multiple issues and expenses outlined by the report when he said that it was 'a masterclass in reality check,' adding, 'We have to come up with what works for us and what can we afford and we need to look at all options.'