

Hastings Highlands Fire Service Review recommends multimillion dollar investment to ensure effective fire service delivery

By Bill Kilpatrick

At the July 19 meeting of Hastings Highlands council, Lyle Quan, a consultant with the Emergency Management Group presented a high-level overview of the 200 page Hastings Highlands Fire Department Master Plan. The presentation of the plan was the culmination of a process that, according to the agenda, began with the issuing of a Public Fire Protection Analysis Request for Proposal back in February of 2022. In his opening remarks, Mayor of Hastings Highlands Tony Fitzgerald said, regarding the report, 'It's been a long time coming and I know that the public has been chomping at the bit to hear this report and see it. It has been a series of circumstances that have kept it so long [from being made public], we certainly are not trying to hide it from anybody.' Fitzgerald then spoke about the circumstances that have delayed the presentation of the fire plan including the election, plus two months of training for staff and council, followed by a series of 'minor emergencies' that delayed the plan even longer. Fitzgerald then stated that he was glad that it was finally being presented to council and the public adding that now council can, 'begin the next steps of our review of the entire fire service department and what we are going to do and when we are going to do it and, of course, most importantly, how we are going to pay for it.'

Quan began his presentation by outlining the three-step process that the Emergency Management Group used to compile the report such as information gathering and data analysis, which included examination of the fire halls and equipment, the types of training that is being done, and recruitment. This information was all gathered and analyzed and as a result there are 35 recommendations that have been put forward. According to Quan, the report revolves around 'three lines of defense for public safety' as outlined by the Office of the Fire Marshall and those are, 'Public Fire Safety Education, Code Enforcement Through Inspections and Emergency Response Capabilities.' The 35 recommendations are separated into two categories of either operational or strategic. Operational recommendations are those that can be addressed by staff and have little to no cost associated with them whereas strategic recommendations, as the report states, 'require large financial investment.' The main strategic recommendations revolve around fire prevention, the fire stations themselves, the need for a new aerial truck and training for the fire department. Recommendations are broken down into the specific details or actions required, the estimated cost and when the recommendation needs to be completed.

The report calls for Hastings Highlands to be more proactive when it comes to fire prevention and education and recommends that the municipality hire either a full-time or part-time fire prevention officer as the chief currently does this role. The report suggests that volunteer firefighters could be used to address this need. The report suggests that this recommendation be completed in one to three years and could be done using staff or by hiring a part-time fire prevention officer at an estimated cost of \$20,000 per year. Other recommendations are as follows:

The report recommends that the municipality purchase a fixed training facility or a mobile training unit if the Ontario Fire Marshall's training facility is not available for training. This should be done in one to three years at a cost of between \$200,000 and \$700,000.

The report calls for the replacement of the fire department's radio communications tower in within the next three years, the cost for this is unknown.

Currently Hastings Highlands has six fire stations and of those only three are currently active. Herschel North, Bangor, and Lake St. Peter are all closed which means that only three are functioning leaving gaps in service. The report offers two options to help remedy this, but it means reducing the number of fire stations from six to three and gives the choice of building one new station or building three new stations at a cost of \$1-million to \$7.5-million over the long-term of one to 10 years.

The report recommends that the Fire Chief get a new four-wheel drive pick up truck to replace the current vehicle when it needs replacing at a cost of \$40,000 to \$80,000.

Members of the Emergency Management Group did assessments on all of the current fire stations in Hastings Highlands and made

multiple recommendations and because of the number of upgrades required the report states that, "a full assessment will be required by the facilities department to obtain an estimate of costs," but the report puts the costs of the upgrades anywhere between \$100,000 and over one million dollars over one to six years.

The report recommends that the Hastings Highlands Fire Department's fleet be reduced based on the assessments from the Fire Chief, Chief Administrative Officer and council and the savings are to be determined when the assessment is complete.

The report recommends the creation of a part-time administration person or a new records management system at an approximate cost \$20,000.00 per year for the administration position and \$5,000 to \$20,000 for the records management portion.

There were many other recommendations that either did not have an estimated price or required staff time to complete.

After Quan finished his presentation there were a number of questions from multiple members of council that ranged from clarification questions and monetary questions, to building structural questions. After hearing the report and after the question period, council then had a decision to make on how to move forward. The resolution regarding the Fire Department Master Plan gave two options on how to proceed, option one was to give staff direction to make recommendations to council regarding capital and operating implications based on the report. Option two, was to hire a third-party company to review the existing fire department structures and give recommendation to council regarding capital and operating implications. Council appeared to agree with Mayor Fitzgerald's assessment that the report was thorough enough that no third-party consultant was required and therefore council unanimously approved option one.

The next steps in the fire service review process now that option one has been approved, according to the agenda report, is that council will include "a 'Fire Service Review - Community Engagement Strategy' as part of the report detailing how and when the public can submit their comments to council on the fire station structure review and where they can find more information on the proposed recommendations. Staff will ensure proper circulation of this information by posting it in print, on our website and social media." Council will also have to create a plan on how to move forward based on the 35 recommendations and create a feasibility study based on the fire station recommendations.

For more information on the Hastings Highlands Fire Service Strategy find the full report by visiting the Hastings Highlands home page under Agendas and Minutes and then click on the CivicWeb portal and find a link to the agenda for the July 19.