

Fire department master plan recommends new headquarters

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Fire Chief Nick Ruller (File photo)

Niagara-on-the-Lake's volunteer fire department is in good shape, and the fire chief is doing a great job, but recommendations for improvement of service delivery include two expensive capital projects.

Rick Monkman, a consultant with Emergency Management and Training, offered a brief summary of the Town's 300-page, 10-year Fire Master Plan to council last week.

He said the Town is meeting all minimum federal and provincial standards, which is important, because if they can't meet those standards, the municipality is at risk for exposure to liability should there be any problems.

He had praise for both the fire department and its fire chief.

"The NOTL service is made up of dedicated, professional personnel, that meet their level of service," and are meeting the needs of their growing community, he said.

"We've been involved with the number of master plans, and to see what is going on in your municipality is very impressive."

The volunteer model is working well in town, should be maintained through investments by councils, both financial, and also through "fruitful dialogue" with fire staff, and understanding the challenges they are facing.

"The work of your fire chief is well-organized," said Monkman, praising Chief Nick Ruller for the data he gathered to aid in the consultant's review, and for the way he is "moving his fire service forward, and being very proactive." Ruller, he said, "has made great strides in the short length of time he's been involved with the fire department."

The chief, he added, "is dedicated to making decisions that will maintain a very effective volunteer service."

Monkman also had some good news to share about response times.

While the recommendation for volunteer departments is a response time of between 10 and 14 minutes, NOTL has "a very great response time of six minutes," for 80 per cent of the calls, he said.

He also offered 29 recommendations, some strategic, at a cost to the municipality, and some operational, at little or no cost, for improving the service.

One of the expensive recommendations is to build a new headquarters for the fire department on the town-owned property beside the Anderson Lane fire hall.

He suggested full-time fire department staff could be located there, with a purpose-built Emergency Operations Centre and a training room. Since the staff are also firefighters, it could improve the response time from the Old Town station, he said.

He also recommended a “duty crew” at the Old Town station, on weekend days in the summer, and on days of Town events that attract a lot of tourists.

It could help provide a good, consistent level of service, reducing responses to three minutes, at a time when traffic volume is high, and a lot of volunteers could be out of town, said Monkman.

The other costly recommendation comes after decades of debate about consolidating the St. Davids and Queenston fire stations.

The consultant suggested both a new fire hall and a new location, combining the two stations.

Monkman said he reviewed putting an addition on one station, but found some problems with that. Both are aging, deteriorating buildings, and will need major structural work in the future, he said. That would be difficult to do to a station that is still operating.

Also, it would be better for staff morale to consolidate the two groups of firefighters in one new location, and very different from moving one group to another, existing station.

Morale is very important to firefighter retention, he said.

There are other recommendations in the master plan that apply to all stations. None of them have automatic standby generators. If power goes off someone has to go to the fire station to hook it up, and “during the time of emergency is not the time to be going to the station and manually getting the generator going to open the doors,” he said.

The town hall is the same, he says, and continuity of services could be compromised due to a long-term outage from an ice storm or blizzard.

Monkman also recommended a new diesel exhaust extraction system for all fire stations, which none of them currently have. Carbon monoxide cancers are being found in a number of firefighters, he said, and a new system would reduce exposure of firefighters to diesel fumes.

Another recommendation in the review concerns personnel. Monkman suggested the Town could use additional fire prevention and education resources, including a full-time fire prevention officer and a part-time education officer. But there is already a staff member in the fire department who has fire inspector certification, and the positions could be filled without having to hire more staff, he said.

Any decisions about recommendations in the master plan moving forward, including priorities and timelines, should be made through discussions with the fire chief, he said.

Councillors thanked Monkman for his report, and agreed with his praise of the fire chief.

“We are very proud of Nick, and we know he and his team are doing a great job,” said Coun. Allan Bisback.

Coun. Wendy Cheropita agreed. “He has been spectacular, a gold standard in his role.”

Ruller told The Local moving forward to act on the report starts with a look at which recommendations will most improve the service the fire department provides, and also on a cost/benefit analysis.

The recommendations are just that, he said, and his job will be to gather the data that will support them, or may suggest other options.

For example, he said, the “duty crew” that was suggested might be required at different times, or at a different station than was recommended, depending on the number of calls and where they originate.

Having full-time staff located at a fire station was first suggested about two decades ago, Ruller said, and might be best tied to the Old Town station, in a new building or an addition to the existing one, but again, any decision will be based on further data analysis.

Bringing in a consultant to have a “critical look” at the way the department operates has been helpful, he said. “If there is something you’re missing, it’s good to catch it,” but there was nothing in the report that came as a surprise.

About three years ago, when there was staff turnover and some changes made to the way the department was organized, there was a pretty thorough look at how it was operating, leaving him well-positioned to provide the data the consultant was looking for.

“We really looked at everything we were doing, and why we were doing it.”

They also looked at whether they were meeting regulations and standards, Ruller said, so there were no surprises there.

Any decisions to implement the changes laid out in the report are up to council, he said, based on a report that will come from staff with its own recommendations, and those that are warranted will likely be tweaked to meet the needs of the community, while preserving the value the volunteer model provides.