

Hopefully you have had the opportunity to read the 2022 ACRD Fire Services Review. The 208-page review was conducted by: Dave Mitchell, who retired as Division Chief, Communications in 1998 from Vancouver Fire and Rescue Services following a career spanning 32 years; Gordon Anderson who retired in 2019 with 29 years in the fire service, serving the last five as the British Columbia Fire Commissioner; Jim Cook who is an experienced professional with over 38 years of experience in the fire service; Wayne Humphry who has over 40 years' experience with BC fire service; and finally, Ian MacDonald, who is a retired corporate securities lawyer who practiced international corporate law in Canada and the United Kingdom. (Page 206-207, 2022 ACRD Fire Services Review) Between them, they have 139 years' experience in fire services. The report is well-written. I appreciate the comprehensive nature of the report.

In 2021, the ACRD commissioned a review to assess the administrative burden facing the Fire Departments in the context of their operational mandates. The review examined the underlying regulatory structure and obligations affecting the Fire Departments, ranging from the Fire Services Act, WorkSafe BC requirements, and applicable service and aid agreements, to training, budgeting processes, staffing, facilities, and equipment. The 208-page report was completed in March 2022. (Page 5, 2022 ACRD Fire Services Review)

According to the report, the principal theme that emerged was the need to provide additional support to the Fire Departments, to assist them with their administrative requirements and obligations. The review concluded that support is best provided through a centralization of certain administrative operations – such as the creation and maintenance of a standardized occupational health and safety program (and all that entails), standardized operational guidelines, the creation of shared training plans and records keeping systems, and the provision of administrative support to each Department when required – to remove that burden from the individual Fire Departments. (Page 6, 2022 ACRD Fire Services Review)

The review also noted that centralization would have several notable benefits: it would ensure that each Fire Department is operating to a similar, compliant standard; it would better enable oversight and understanding of each Fire Department's operations and challenges; and it would streamline updating of fundamental administrative documents and processes, as statutory and regulatory requirements change. By providing this assistance, the ACRD would better enable each Fire Department to focus on operational matters and ensure that it can provide the highest level of service to its residents, in a manner that is both safe and effective. (Page 6, 2022 ACRD Fire Services Review)

This comprehensive review contains some surprising information about Beaver Creek Volunteer Fire Department. Statistics about the types of incidents that the Fire Department responds to were provided in the report. The statistics cover an almost 6-year period (5.83 years to be exact) from January 2016 to October 2021. During that time frame, there was an average of 3.4 structure fires each year in Beaver Creek. The report also noted that the primary response types for the volunteer fire department were medical emergencies, motor vehicle incidents, and rescue. These represent 66.4% of the primary responses for Beaver Creek. In terms of the total of all fire related incidents, they represent 10.7% of the responses in Beaver Creek. The remaining incident types are alarms ringing, reported hydro problems, burning complaints and inquiries of the duty officer. (Page 143 & 145, 2022 ACRD Fire Services Review) I was surprised to learn that medical emergencies outnumbered fire-related responses by such a large degree.

Why are medical emergencies the fire department's responsibility? There aren't any regulatory requirements for fire departments to attend medical callouts. BC Paramedics are tasked with that responsibility.

Ambulance services are funded by the Province of BC. Fire services are funded by local government. Why are local taxpayers paying duplicate to respond to medical emergencies?

News reports talk about BC Ambulance' slow response times. However, in July 2021, the provincial government announced they are "strengthening B.C.'s ambulance system to ensure it is faster and more responsive to British Columbians...." Have there been changes to ambulance services in Alberni Valley? Are their response times a problem locally?

Medical emergencies are a large part of local fire protection services. According to a comment made online by a Beaver Creek volunteer fire fighter, since January 1, 2023, the volunteer fire department has responded to 28 medical callouts. Perhaps we should be lobbying the provincial government to enhance ambulance services in our community? Perhaps we should be sending the BC government an invoice to cover the cost of the volunteer fire department responding to calls for medical assistance? This is an issue that the people of Beaver Creek need to decide. Do the majority of the people in Beaver Creek wish the volunteer fire department to continue to respond to medical callouts?

In a July 2021 BC Government news release, government officials said they have directed the Emergency Medical Assistants Management Licensing Board to examine “expanding firefighters’ scope of practice.” The deadline for recommendations was September 2021. Did the firefighter’s scope of practice expand? And if so, what are the new responsibilities?

On or about Monday, June 5th, Beaver Creek Residents received a 2-page report titled “Beaver Creek Volunteer Fire Department Frequently Asked Questions.” The first sentence in the report said the “2023 ACRD Financial plan includes the transition of the [Beaver Creek] Fire Chief from a volunteer to a full-time position.” That is not what we agreed to do during budget talks in March. We agreed to push the start date ahead for the new position, from April 1 to July 1, 2023, with the understanding that if the public shows disagreement, we will revisit the issue.

On June 5th, I took a photograph of the 2-page report and posted it on my political page on Facebook. I also shared it on a page where many people in Beaver Creek visit to gather and share information. To date, there have been 126 comments posted online, both for and against creating the new position. I also received personal messages, emails, and telephone calls.

In the days that followed, the comments online revealed that more people were against making the change, than for it. Some taxpayers fear what may happen without a proper plan in place. One person online said “What are the guarantees this doesn’t explode into a financial disaster? Can anyone show me where after five years as a paid chief the rest of the volunteers were not on payroll....” These are good questions. Where will the fire department be in five years?

Changing the fire chief position into a paid position, changes the fire department from a volunteer model to a composite model. Beaver Creek Volunteer Fire Department’s report did not discuss the fire department moving to a composite model? Composite fire departments can be very expensive for property taxpayers, particularly when there is little industrial tax base in the service area that would benefit from the service.

The Beaver Creek Volunteer Fire Department’s report said that “the volunteer chief model does not provide sufficient time resources to support the department.” The centralized volunteer fire department model set out in the 2022 ACRD Fire Services Review offers a way to lessen the workload on volunteer fire chiefs and departments. Under a centralized administration system, the current ACRD Regional Fire Services Manager position would be responsible for the creation and maintenance of standardized occupational health and safety policies, standardized operational guidelines, the creation of training plans and records keeping systems and any other regulatory matters that need to be addressed. (Page 80, 2022 ACRD Fire Services Review) As well, the Regional Fire Services Manager would have support to carry out the tasks. One of the recommendations from the review was “the ACRD create a new administrative support position that reports directly to the Regional Fire Services Manager. The duties of the position would include the management of all administrative records and reports related to the operation of ACRD fire services.” (Page 85, 2022 ACRD Fire Services Review)

By providing this assistance, volunteer fire chiefs would be able to better focus on operational matters and ensure that they can continue to provide the highest level of service to Beaver Creek residents, in a manner that is both safe and effective. The administrative support position could be filled by a volunteer fire chief.

The cost of the position would be borne by Beaver Creek taxpayers, then shared between service areas that choose to participate in the centralized administration service.

The fire services review presented more than 40 recommendations (Page 7, 2022 ACRD Fire Services Review). None of the recommendations included transitioning fire chiefs from volunteers to full-time positions. Nor did any of the recommendations include changing the volunteer fire departments to composite fire departments.

The Beaver Creek Volunteer Fire Department's report also talked about volunteer fire fighters. The report said "attracting, training, and retaining volunteers [was] challenging." The 2022 ACRD Fire Services Review addressed that issue as well. One of the recommendations is "the ACRD consider implementing improvements to the compensation structure to enhance recruitment and retention of volunteers." Another recommendation is that "the ACRD consider implementing a wage loss replacement policy for Department members while attending training and education programs." (Page 85, 2022 ACRD Fire Services Review) I think Beaver Creek taxpayers would be pleased to better compensate volunteer fire-fighters.

All in all, Beaver Creek would be opening the door to centralized administration for fire services where each participating area would receive shared cost benefits. Down the road, Bamfield and Cherry Creek may choose to become part of this centralized service.

At a board meeting on December 14, 2022, the ACRD agreed to apply for a Restructure Planning Grant from the BC government, to study governance options for Cherry Creek Improvement District, including the potential conversion to regional district services. The BC Government agreed to provide funding to undertake the review. Cherry Creek Improvement District provides drinking water and fire protection. It is likely the improvement district will be dissolved and rolled into the regional district in the near future. That means that the ACRD would be responsible for another fire service. That could also mean the ACRD would be employing 3 full-time fire chiefs and the current Fire Services Manager to serve a population of 7,527 (Beaver Creek 3,096, Cherry Creek 1,977, Sproat Lake 2,454 taken from ACRD website)

After reading through the comments online, I understand that most people want to see a well-thought-out plan before any changes occur. They also want to be a part of making that plan. We need to make that happen. There isn't anything stopping us from creating an online survey to question Beaver Creek residents about the fire protection services they want to see. We could also hold a town hall meeting to discuss the issue. I will provide the ACRD a screenshot of all online comments and copy of all other communications received regard this issue.

At this time, I move to put a hold on hiring a full-time fire chief until a plan is developed. The plan would take into consideration the 2022 ACRD Fire Services Review which recommended centralized administration. I request a deadline of December 31, 2023, to complete the plan, so that the public has an opportunity to provide their input.

Susan Roth

June 14, 2023