

Report recommends new fire model

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by Vance Gutzman

Deep River's long-awaited fire master plan, which has been gathering dust for more than a year, was finally released for public consumption last week.

The \$30,000 document is recommending the town make a transition to a composite fire department composed of one full-time fire chief, one full-time deputy fire chief/fire prevention officer and one full-time training officer/public education officer.

More importantly, the composite fire department recommended by Dillon Consulting (the master plan's author) would be comprised of at least 32 volunteer firefighters – all in all an abrupt change from the current complement of nine full-time firefighters plus the chief.

The town brought Dillon Consulting on board to develop the fire master plan more than two years ago, and did so in the wake of a 2011 review of the town's fire protection services by the Ontario Fire Marshal's (OFM) office.

The OFM concluded that the town's current fire suppression capability does not meet the current needs and circumstances of the municipality, and Dillon Consulting agrees with that conclusion.

"Our analyses confirms the findings of the OFM 2011 review that the Deep River Fire Department currently has insufficient internal firefighting resources to achieve the recommended initial response deployment of four firefighters, and the depth of response deployment of 14 firefighters to a moderate risk occupancy (such as single family dwellings), and 24 firefighters to a high-risk occupancy (such as a long-term care centre)," the Dillon report states.

Dillon Consulting studied a number of options (based on the 2011 recommendations from the OFM) for restructuring the town's fire service before settling on the recommended organizational model.

"This option increases the overall complement of full-time staff and volunteer firefighters available from the current 10 to a range of 35 to 40," Dillon's report states.

"In our view the benefits of this larger complement of firefighters provides the opportunity to deploy the depth of response levels of 14 firefighters to moderate risk occupancies and 24 firefighters to high risk occupancies."

The proposed complement, the report notes, would also save the municipality a pile of money.

The Dillon report's financial numbers are based on the town's 2011 operating budget of \$8.09 million.

The fire department's operating budget that year of \$1.24 million accounted for 15.3 percent of the town's total operational expenditures.

The option being recommended by Dillon Consulting would reduce the fire department's budget by a massive \$709,000, down to just \$495,064 – a 60 percent decrease that would leave the fire service accounting for just six percent of total municipal operating expenditures.

That would also reduce the town's cost per household for fire protection from \$641.52 down to \$248.50.

"In our view this analysis confirms that the current economic circumstances of the Town of Deep River, with regards to the costs for fire protection, reflect significantly higher costs than those of a representative group of comparable municipalities," Dillon's report states.

"The economic viability of providing fire protection services in considering the recommendations within the OFM 2011 report must be a primary consideration."

The Dillon report also contains an implementation plan stating that making the transition from 10 full-time staff to the composite department being recommended could be accomplished in a number of recruitment and attrition phases.

First off, it states the town would need to recruit for the new positions of a full-time deputy fire chief/fire prevention officer and a full-time training officer/public education officer.

"In our view initial preference should be given to hiring staff to fill these positions through an internal competition limited to the current full-time firefighters," the report states.

During that phase of the process the municipality would also, according to the report, need to recruit and train the first 24 volunteer firefighters of the minimum 32 that are being recommended – with the remainder to be trained and brought on board following the completion of that initial recruitment and training process.

And town council, Dillon Consulting notes, has two options before it for managing the transition from full-time firefighters to volunteers.

The first option would be to use an attrition process whereby the current full-time firefighter positions would not be filled as the current firefighters either accept other positions within the department, leave the department for personal reasons or retire.

Alternately, the town could develop a financial package that would act as an incentive for early retirement.

"There are numerous models for this type of incentive within the municipal workplace.

"We recommend that this option be further pursued by the municipality in considering the options for transition," the Dillon report states.

"Ultimately, a program that achieves the voluntary support of the firefighters should be the goal."

Deep River's firefighters have been working without a contract since December 31, 2011 and are scheduled to go to arbitration with the municipality this coming October.

"We hope the firefighters association will come back to the bargaining table so we can deal with the issues and start to move forward to a composite department," Mayor David Thompson told the NRT in reference to the recommendations contained within the Dillon report.

"If not, we hope the arbitrator will rule in our favour."