

## Report of the Town Hall Meeting of the Salt Spring Island Fire Protection District

Meeting held: **16 February 2015**

**In attendance:** Trustees: Dan Lee (Chair), Ron Chamney, Michael Garside, Richard Hannah, Bruce Patterson, Michael Schubart, Michele Severn.

Staff Members: Chief Tom Bremner, SSIFFA Lieutenant Mitchell Sherrin, Corporate Administration Officer (CAO) Andrew Peat

Guests: Richard Walker (Walker Resource Group), Dave Ferguson (FireWise Consulting Ltd.)

32 residents

**Called to Order:** 18:30

Chair Lee thanked members of the public for attending and introduced the evening's guest speakers Richard Walker of Walker Resource Group (WRG) and Dave Ferguson of FireWise Consulting Ltd. (FWC). The purpose of the meeting was to enable members of the public to ask questions of the consultants regarding the findings of their reports.

At the direction of the Chair CAO Peat was asked to record a summary of the meeting's discussion.

### **Summary of Report**

#### **Walker Resource Group**

Richard Walker (WRG) stated that work started in mid-September and his assessment was informed by an extensive public engagement process. It is the assessment of WRG that the fire/rescue service on Salt Spring is an example of a very well trained, professional emergency response unit.

WRG concluded that it is their assessment that, as a whole, the fire and rescue service on the island is much more professional than it has been in the past and the management of the operations is on par or better than in most comparable communities in the province. The cost of the fire and rescue service is not excessive given the costs in similar communities, however the extent to which the full roster of services can/should be provided in future needs to be examined by the community. The report identified areas where improvements can be made to the Board governing model; areas where cost efficiencies could be realized; and that prior to renewal of the collective agreement with the firefighters union in December 2016 the board should research and begin crafting a negotiation strategy. In the opinion of WRG the most pressing items on the Board's agenda are opening the decision making process to include more public participation; a more robust administrative unit; and the need for a new facility to replace Fire Hall #1.

#### **FireWise Consulting Ltd.**

Dave Ferguson reported that FireWise Consulting Ltd. (FWC) conducted an Inspection and Audit of Salt Spring Island Fire/Rescue to establish a benchmark for the fire

department in regard to its compliance with generally accepted standards and best practices.

The report of FWC contained thirty-seven recommendations which are largely minor in nature. The Inspection and Audit did not reveal any alarming issues or serious non-compliance concerns. Chief Bremner and all firefighters were commended for their commitment to public safety.

### **Questions from the Public**

#### **Was two days on site work adequate time for FWC to conduct an Inspection and Audit?**

Dave Ferguson commented that a team of three people from FWC were on site for the two days. A “boat load” of information was made available to them in advance of the onsite work and considerable work was done off site. Dave Ferguson was fully satisfied that the report and recommendations are meaningful.

#### **Concerns were expressed about continuing delays in installation of exhaust extractions systems at all three fire halls.**

Dave Ferguson commented that while delays were frustrating he was satisfied that procedures in place diminish the risk to staff. He commented that it was their recommendation that Occupational Health & Safety Committee reports be distributed to the Board if only for information purposes as the Board is ultimately responsible for the health and safety of their employees.

#### **Richard Walker was asked to comment on his thinking regarding his recommendations concerning wage costs and zero based budgeting (WRG Recommendations #11, 12, 14 & 15).**

Richard commented that it is important to understand that in 2006 career members met the Labour Relations Board standard for unionization and that a collective agreement has been in place for some 10 years. Between 2006 and 2011 wage rates increased incrementally to the union scale. Notwithstanding the escalation in wage costs, the total cost of fire protection services for Salt Spring (reflected in the mill-rate) is at or below the provincial average for communities of our size and islanders are getting better than average service for their tax dollars.

The report recommends that the District begin the process of seeking the advice, expertise and guidance from professional negotiators with respect to what can and what cannot be expected in the December 2016 negotiations with the union. Richard commented that the dollar cost of wages and benefits is too high to continue “business as usual”. The District has to negotiate “with” the union and not “against” them.

Before the next budget cycle, the community must be engaged in a dialogue to discuss what level of service the District is expected to provide (including First Responder, inspection, fire safety training and education). Every service costs money and the realities of island living must be acknowledged (the community is underserved by the RCMP because the island is not a municipality, the ambulance service is not generously funded,

and being an island we cannot rely on timely assistance from adjacent areas). In many respects the District's "scope of service" has expanded because by default there has been no other organization available to do the job and/or assist.

Richard commented that in the "zero based budgeting model" there are no blanket across the board increases but rather each budget line starts at zero and costs must be justified and defensible.

**Richard Walker was asked to comment on the need to examine the administrative function within the District (Recommendation #18).**

Richard commented that the District has traditionally relied on the volunteer trustees to perform many administrative functions and cannot realistically continue to do so. Increased cost needs to be viewed as the "necessary lubricant" to allow the organization to run more efficiently.

**Dave Ferguson was asked to comment as to whether career staff could safely work an average sixty-three hours per week.**

Dave Ferguson stated that the issue was outside the scope of his engagement and he could not comment. Career staff hours include regularly scheduled hours (average 35 hours per week), Stand-by-Duty (average four 14 hour shifts per month) and volunteer POC hours.

**Richard Walker was asked whether the number of people who participated in the public engagement process (109 persons) was sufficient to infer the "public's" assessment of and desires for the fire service.**

Richard replied that he felt that his assessment of public concerns and positions expressed in the report are accurate with a high degree of statistical certainty. Public engagement is important to enable trustees to gauge what level of service the District is expected to provide and paramount when discussion concerning a new fire hall is again brought forward.

#### **Adjournment**

Chair Lee thanked Richard Walker and Dave Ferguson for attending the "town hall meeting".

The meeting concluded at 19:48.

  
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Dan Lee

Chair Board of Trustees

  
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Andrew Peat

Corporate Administrator