

West Hants Regional Fire Service

Regional Fire Service Modernization and Organizational Readiness Update

Committee of the Whole

Purpose

To provide Council with a high-level update on the work underway to assess, strengthen and further develop the West Hants Regional Fire Service as an integrated Regional Fire service.

The current phase of work is focused on organizational readiness, governance, standardization, operational consistency, training, asset management, external partnerships and establishing a reliable baseline for future decisions.

Director of Fire Services – Background

I recently joined the West Hants Regional Municipality as Director of Fire Services, bringing more than 25 years of experience in the fire service, emergency management and public-sector leadership.

I began my career as a volunteer firefighter, developing a first-hand understanding of the important role volunteer firefighters play within their communities and the realities associated with delivering a sustainable volunteer fire service. I subsequently spent more than two decades with Toronto Fire Services, where my experience included frontline emergency operations, officer responsibilities, training, fire prevention, emergency management, labour relations and organizational leadership.

Throughout my career, I have been involved in organizational change, policy and procedure development, strategic planning, emergency preparedness, governance, training and firefighter health and safety. I have also worked with municipalities and public-sector organizations on emergency management, organizational assessments, business continuity, risk management and service modernization.

This combination of volunteer, career and municipal experience provides an important perspective as West Hants continues the evolution of its unified Regional Fire Service.

Over the past few weeks, I have focused on listening, learning and developing a clear understanding of the West Hants Regional Fire Service, its people, operations and priorities. Each department and station brings considerable history, experience and strong community connections that provide an important foundation for the Regional Fire Service.

Regionalization presents an opportunity to build on these strengths while advancing greater consistency in governance, training, operations, equipment, planning and service delivery.

Working collaboratively with Fire Chiefs, officers, firefighters, municipal leadership and external partners, the focus will be on building a safe, sustainable and accountable Regional Fire Service that is responsive to the evolving needs of West Hants.

Strategic Direction

Since assuming the role of Director of Fire Services, I have met with all four Fire Chiefs and continue to meet with fire service personnel and key stakeholders to better understand the current operating environment, individual station capabilities, existing practices and emerging organizational needs.

The approach at this stage is intentionally measured. Before significant structural, operational or capital decisions are made, it is important that the Municipality has a clear understanding of its current capabilities, assets, personnel, risks and future requirements.

The objective is to continue moving the fire service from a collection of historically independent operations toward a coordinated Regional Fire Service while respecting the history, strengths and contributions of each department and station.

Fire Chiefs Working Group

I have established a Fire Chiefs Working Group consisting of the four Fire Chiefs and one Deputy Chief from each station.

This group will serve as a primary operational advisory and coordination body as the Regional Fire Service develops. Its initial priorities include reviewing existing policies, bylaws, procedures and operational practices to identify gaps, inconsistencies and opportunities for regional standardization.

Existing operational and administrative guidelines will be reviewed, consolidated and, where required, new guidelines will be developed with consideration of applicable legislation, recognized fire service practices and relevant NFPA standards.

The initial target is to have several key administrative and operational guidelines established by the end of October, with additional guidelines developed progressively as the broader assessment continues.

Regional Organizational Readiness Assessment

I have directed each Fire Chief to complete a comprehensive Organizational Readiness Workbook for their respective stations.

The workbooks include information relating to:

- Apparatus and vehicle inventories;
- Firefighting and support equipment;
- Personnel complement and organizational structure;
- Training and certification levels;
- Equipment and apparatus replacement projections;
- Facilities and infrastructure;
- Asset ownership;
- Operational capabilities; and
- Current and anticipated service requirements.

This information will provide, for the first time, a consolidated regional picture of the Fire Service.

Once completed, the information will form the foundation of a Regional Fire Service Assessment and Capital Asset Management Strategy.

This will allow the Municipality to move toward evidence-based planning and will assist in identifying service gaps, vulnerabilities, duplication, equipment replacement requirements, response capabilities and opportunities for greater regional coordination.

It will also assist in prioritizing initiatives based on operational risk and community need rather than addressing requirements independently at individual stations.

Organizational Structure

The organizational structure of the Regional Fire Service will also be reviewed.

As West Hants continues to grow and the expectations placed on the Fire Service evolve, the organizational model must be capable of supporting consistent leadership, accountability, training, health and safety, emergency response and administrative oversight.

The review will consider opportunities to establish greater consistency in organizational structures, roles, responsibilities and reporting relationships across the Regional Fire Service.

Any significant organizational recommendations will be developed following completion of the broader assessment and brought forward through the appropriate municipal process.

Training and Operational Consistency

Training will be another significant area of focus for the Fire Chiefs Working Group.

Current training capabilities, practices and training materials will be reviewed with the objective of establishing a more consistent Regional Fire Service approach.

This will include developing and standardizing training notes, operational expectations and core competencies so firefighters from different stations are trained to operate using common procedures and terminology when responding together.

A regional approach to training will also allow West Hants to better leverage existing instructors, facilities, equipment and expertise across the six stations.

The long-term objective is to establish a consistent operational foundation regardless of the station from which a firefighter responds.

Joint Training and Operational Readiness Initiative

I have identified a unique opportunity to leverage a building scheduled for demolition to conduct extensive joint training involving firefighters and officers from across the six stations.

Training will focus on coordinated fireground operations, firefighter survival and self-rescue, search and rescue, Rapid Intervention Team operations, accountability and Incident Command.

This initiative will provide a realistic environment to strengthen interoperability between stations, reinforce consistent operational practices and further develop officer command capabilities.

The training will also help identify operational and training gaps that can be incorporated into the broader Regional Fire Service Assessment and future regional training strategy.

Leveraging a building already scheduled for demolition provides a unique opportunity to conduct realistic training that would be difficult to replicate within a traditional training environment. All activities will be subject to appropriate risk assessments, safety controls, property-owner authorization and applicable training requirements.

The broader objective is to use this opportunity as an early step toward establishing a stronger regional training culture and a common operational approach across the West Hants Regional Fire Service.

Governance and External Partnerships

I am working to strengthen the Regional Fire Service's relationships with provincial, regional and mutual aid partners.

I have contacted the Nova Scotia Office of the Fire Marshal to better understand provincial resources, regulatory expectations and potential partnership opportunities.

Similarly, I have reached out to Regional Emergency Management to ensure appropriate coordination between emergency management and fire service capabilities.

And have also contacted Fire Service Coordinators and Directors from across Nova Scotia.

A joint virtual meeting is being organized to establish relationships between municipal fire service leaders, discuss emerging trends and common challenges, share information and identify opportunities where resources, expertise or initiatives may be leveraged collectively.

Building these relationships will help ensure West Hants remains connected to broader developments within the Nova Scotia fire service and can benefit from lessons learned and resources available elsewhere in the province.

Mutual Aid

I have engaged our mutual aid partners and am starting to schedule meetings to review existing mutual aid relationships, operational expectations, response requirements and agreements.

The objective is to ensure that current arrangements remain appropriate for the changing needs of West Hants and neighbouring municipalities and that mutual aid partners have a common understanding of response capabilities, communications and operational expectations.

Where gaps or outdated provisions are identified, recommendations for updated agreements or response arrangements will be developed.

Emergency Communications

I have met with Valley Communications to better understand its communications infrastructure, operational capabilities and current practices.

Discussions have begun regarding existing dispatch and response protocols and the ability of the communications system to support potential future changes arising from the Regional Fire Service Assessment.

Emergency communications are a critical component of regionalization. Any future changes to response models, station assignments, automatic aid, mutual aid or dispatch criteria will need to be coordinated with communications capabilities and infrastructure.

This work is therefore being undertaken concurrently with the broader operational assessment.

Strategic Outcomes

Collectively, these initiatives are intended to establish the foundation for a modern, coordinated and sustainable Regional Fire Service.

The work underway will provide the Municipality with better information to support future decisions relating to:

- Public and firefighter safety;
- Service levels and response capabilities;
- Regional operational standards;
- Training and competency;
- Apparatus and equipment standardization;
- Capital asset planning;
- Facilities and infrastructure;
- Organizational structure;
- Mutual aid and partnerships;
- Emergency communications;
- Financial planning; and
- Long-term sustainability.

The objective is not simply to standardize for the sake of standardization. The objective is to establish a coordinated Regional Fire Service where operational practices, training, resources and investments are aligned with community risk and the future needs of West Hants.

Temporary Hold on Capital and Equipment Purchases

As part of the Regional Fire Service assessment, a temporary hold has been placed on spending and purchases until an initial assessment of existing assets, operational requirements and regional priorities has been completed.

The purpose of the temporary hold is to ensure that new expenditures are aligned with the future direction of the Regional Fire Service and that purchasing decisions are supported by a clear understanding of existing inventory, condition, lifecycle, ownership, operational need and replacement priorities.

The Organizational Readiness Workbooks currently being completed by each Fire Chief will provide much of the information required to support this assessment. This will allow

equipment and capital requirements to be considered from a regional perspective rather than independently by individual stations.

This approach will also provide an opportunity to identify areas where equipment and apparatus can be standardized, purchasing can be coordinated, duplication can be reduced and future replacement requirements can be incorporated into a longer-term Capital Asset Management Strategy.

The temporary hold is not intended to compromise operational readiness or firefighter safety. Critical or emergency requirements that are necessary to maintain operational capability, regulatory compliance or firefighter safety will continue to be assessed on a case-by-case basis through the Director of Fire Services.

Once the initial assessment is completed and regional priorities have been established, recommendations regarding capital and equipment requirements will be incorporated into the broader Regional Fire Service planning and municipal budget processes.

Next Steps

Over the coming month, the priority will be to complete the Organizational Readiness Workbooks, continue stakeholder engagement, advance priority operational and administrative guidelines, assess training capabilities, review organizational structures and continue engagement with provincial, regional and mutual aid partners.

The resulting information will be consolidated into a Regional Fire Service Assessment identifying strengths, gaps, vulnerabilities, priorities and recommended future initiatives.

This assessment will also support development of a longer-term Capital Asset Management Strategy to provide Council with greater visibility into future apparatus, equipment, facility and infrastructure requirements.

As this work progresses, Council will continue to receive updates at key milestones.

Financial Implications

There are no significant new financial commitments being requested at this time.

The temporary hold on capital and equipment purchases provides an opportunity to establish a clear regional baseline before additional investments are made.

The work currently underway is intended to provide Council and Administration with greater visibility into existing assets, future replacement requirements and anticipated capital pressures. This will support more coordinated, transparent and predictable long-term financial planning for the Regional Fire Service.

Risk Considerations

The primary organizational risk at this stage is making significant operational or capital decisions without a complete understanding of the Regional Fire Service's current assets, capabilities and requirements.

This risk is being mitigated through standardized information collection, direct engagement with Fire Chiefs and personnel, review of existing practices and development of a comprehensive Regional Fire Service baseline.

Recommendation

That Committee of the Whole receive the Regional Fire Service Modernization and Organizational Readiness Update for information.