



Municipality of the District of Argyle

Item: Fire Service Review

Date: January 21, 2023

## *Vision statement*

*Argyle is the community of choice to invest, live and play.*

## *Mission statement*

*Argyle invests time & talent in growth opportunities in fishing, tourism, and renewable energy sectors.*

*Argyle provides affordable taxation while providing safe and healthy communities and strives to engage and inform our residents on decisions that affect them most.*

*Argyle provides high class, accessible recreational and cultural facilities and helps celebrate its unique heritage and culture and welcomes new residents to our region.*

### **CAO's Recommendation:**

That council Authorize the CAO and his team to develop a working group of staff and volunteer firemen and other resources as required to produce multiyear recommendations and action plan to modernize firefighting service in our municipality.

### **Suggested motion:**

Move that CAO be authorized to commence review of current firefighting services in Argyle and provide multiyear recommendations and actions for both municipality and fire departments, deadline for report March 31, 2024.

### **Background:**

Volunteer fire departments across Nova Scotia are experiencing challenges, and we are not immune to the issues that our volunteers face. Below is a summary of the issues we noted that affect both the Municipality and volunteers. Also, it is also noted that the Municipality is in a unique position to make positive changes to the service and to the departments. The issues are summarized below in four specific areas, Financial, Training Recruitment and Administration. The issues below are from the CAO's perspective, fire departments would likely have a deeper appreciation.

## **Financial**

Financial results for the past four years are as follows, both with and without area rate:

	<b>Total</b>	<b>Without Rate</b>
Budget 2023	976,841	496,850
Actual 2022	883,247	436,882
Actual 2021	837,830	398,301
Actual 2020	803,959	406,986

Increased commitment to fire departments is evident. 21.5% increase in 4 years for fire services paid by municipal rate, and 22% including area rate increases. The major two rate increases include Eel Brook and West Pubnico, who both increased to pay for a fire station and for fire equipment respectively. The largest area rate is in Eel Brook District at 12.5 cents, to fund a new fire station.

Appendix one would provide a more detailed financial comparison, and would uncover some of the major reasons for cost escalation. Major factors include significant increases in insurance premiums, and increased costs of gear and equipment. Both increases call to question the need to fund as many vehicles, buildings and equipment in the department's possession.

While our commitment to fund the department remains, the increased funding does not necessarily address the needs of our 7 (2 shared) fire departments. They have been very frugal in their purchases over the years, but the cost to deliver a fire service has risen considerably. Costs of bunker gear, related safety equipment and other items have sharply increased. We do not have sufficient information to determine yet if departments are adequately equipped, that decision rests with the departments.

Outside of sharp equipment purchases, we (MODA and the departments) are facing sharp increases in fuel and insurance costs for fire trucks. An updated inventory of trucks was provided by the departments. Each department has several trucks that were purchased over time considering the demand for fire services of that department, not necessarily for the region.

Costs include transfers to the fire departments for operations, but also include central costs of liability insurance, training, workers compensation costs and other pre-approved support of items such as pagers and bunker gear. Expenses are generally approved with some limitations, but there is no overall assessment of adequate fire service equipment for the region. With costs escalating sharply, a review is appropriate.

## **Training**

Our efforts to obtain the total list of training certification are ongoing. Each Chief is responsible for adequate training for their team. Our volunteers are trained locally, for the most part, with certain levels of training done by Valley Fire. Currently, the Fire Committee is considering certified training out of Yarmouth. Additional training is not always met with enthusiasm and is a large commitment to our incoming volunteers. However, it is an essential

aspect of keeping our members safe. We have not enforced a training program to our volunteers as of yet. We are in high need of more, well-trained members.

### **Recruitment**

Currently all our departments are experiencing challenges in volunteer recruitment. Our dedicated volunteers have been a part of this service for years. They are older and experienced, with various levels of training. The younger generation is either unaware, uninterested, or challenged with entering the volunteer fire department service. There is no central recruitment. It is limited to the efforts made by each department. There is no incentive to join, and the training commitment is large, and may not be interesting to new recruits. Nevertheless, our service remains as is. Without new recruits or additional effort, we risk having insufficient volunteers to deliver a service. The number of fire departments in our region is adding to the pressure, as the dedicated volunteers are spread thin. The less trained volunteers, the more likely it is that our service is not meeting quality standards. Our members are proud of the service they deliver and want to preserve a high quality.

### **Administration**

The administration burden on our departments has crept surely over the past number of years. Chiefs are asked to track relevant training of its volunteers, fill in detailed insurance questionnaires, manage meetings, large capital projects, mutual aid, financial statements, public accountability etc. The expectation to meet administrative criteria is a heavy burden, and one that few volunteers would take on willingly. From our perspective, the largest administrative burdens include: management of internal controls and public funds, treasury. Preparation of financial statements and monthly reports and insurance renewal.

An additional administrative burden is added with the decision to offer Medical First Responder services in the absence of a reliable EHS. The training and documentation associated with this service is significant. For instance, Eel Brook fire department experienced about 44 MFR calls in 104 total calls. This additional service is funded almost entirely by municipal funds. In previous years, the MFR calls were between 1-5 per year.

### **MGA considerations:**

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Funding and adjustments to funding to fire departments is a municipal approved expense. Furthermore, the issuance of fire services is authorized under section X of the MGA, and MODA has 9 fire departments that have signed the agreement to deliver a service.

### **Financial considerations:**

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Argyle has always been supportive of the needs of our fire departments. Council has approved a number of funding requests, has implemented fire registration policies, and special funding requests for equipment, and is an active participant in annual budget allocation. We pay the entire dispatch cost, hold, and manage a group insurance policy on behalf of our departments and carry liability and WCB insurance for all volunteers. Due in part to Council's generosity and the quality of our volunteer group, relationships with our departments is reasonable.

However, our commitments have not extended to a full review of the fire service. Other municipalities have invested in a fire coordination, which would assist staff and volunteers with more coordination. Departments have survived with less and despite our large financial commitment (see appendix 1), the investment will no longer meet the needs of our departments.

The municipality does not manage any of the funds of the 9 departments, we do not manage training schedules or equipment purchases centrally. Area rates are set by each department, for capital purchases primarily. Operations are paid through the general rate.

Traditional council's practice with departments has been hands off. We rely heavily on their independent decision making. Their decisions do not always have the entire region in view, though they are exceptional at supporting each other in times of an emergency through mutual aid.

Council is not shying from a lack of will, rather we face a lack of focused investments for our departments. In Dwayne Hunt's presentation to our fire committee, it was noted that their service and equipment is high quality, with a cost that is significantly less than Argyle. This was achieved by right sizing the service and then ensuring that the revised service is well trained and equipped. It is staff's view that we owe the taxpayers that same work.

## Appendix one – Financial data– Fire protection– Municipality of Argyle

	Budget 22-23	Actual 21-22	Actual 20-21	Actual 19-20
PER CAPITA GRANTS	312,500	288,250	271,925	269,232
TRAINING EXPENSE	21,300	1,846	4,275	6,423
CONFERENCES	-	-	-	9,231
DISPATCH FEES	22,000	17,399	22,273	25,189
AIRPACKS (2)	26,500	20,877	21,310	18,232
PAGERS (2)	1,600	1,057	1,099	980
VEHICLE RENTALS & PD	3,000	-	-	1,766
FLEET IMPROVEMENT POLICY	40,000	40,000	40,000	40,000
TRAINING EQUIPMENT & MEDALS	-	1,265	-	-
INSURANCE (ACCIDENT/LIFE)	24,500	23,757	23,243	23,243
FIRE TAGS & BANQUET	2,500	-	600	-
RADIO LICENSE FEES	5,600	5,179	5,582	5,462
RADIOS	-	-	3,614	7,227
WORKERS COMPENSATION	9,850	9,799	4,379	-
INSURANCE VEHICLE LOSS	18,500	24,157	-	-
MISCELLANEOUS	-	3,296	-	-
INSURANCE CONSULTANT	9,000	-	-	-
	<b>496,850</b>	<b>436,882</b>	<b>398,300</b>	<b>406,986</b>
WEST PUBNICO AREA RATE	161,750	152,879	151,725	115,538
QUINAN AREA RATES	35,135	32,281	31,605	31,089
EAST PUBNICO AREA RATE	19,888	19,163	19,196	18,885
EEL BROOK AREA RATE (5 OF 6)	148,410	137,168	133,276	129,276
WEDG & DIST. AREA RATE (7 OF 15)	78,690	73,900	73,099	71,869
ISL. & DIST. AREA RATE (YR.3 OF 5)	26,836	22,466	22,292	22,235
LAKE VAUGHN AREA RATE	4,496	3,996	3,914	3,734
KEMPTVILLE AREA RATES	4,786	4,482	4,423	4,347
FIRE AREA RATES	<b>479,991</b>	<b>446,335</b>	<b>439,530</b>	<b>396,973</b>
FIRE PROTECTION	<b>\$ 976,841</b>	<b>\$ 883,217</b>	<b>\$ 837,831</b>	<b>\$ 803,959</b>

## Appendix two – Summary of presentation – Dwayne Hunt - Barrington

Here are the point-by-point highlights.

- In 2002, there were 8 fire departments/stations, 30 vehicles, varying levels of “service.”
- All departments were struggling with volunteers, training, lack of funding....
- They had minimal engagement with council, and at times it was not pretty.
- Between 2002 and 2018 they amalgamated departments, mostly by choice, one not (they were deregistered as a fire department)
- In the end they had 3 stations.
- In 2012 a Fire Coordinator was hired – and they passed policy 54 which is a comprehensive policy (this is attached for your consideration).
- In 2013 training was mandatory, fire coordinator did all the training and coordination.
- 2019 an improved funding model was done, and refined. In the end, all fire-related costs are area rated, except for the Office of the Fire Coordinator and the training.
- The bookkeeping is done by MOB staff, their financial statements has a schedule that shows all fire departments’ financial info.
- Area rates are locked in for 3-5 years at a time, to allow for proper planning from the departments.
- Large capital purchases are prioritized and coordinated; they provide a subsidy each year of 23-25k to the department. Everyone takes their turn.
- In 2012 47 % were trained under NFPA standards, today its 90%.
- They have a vehicle replacement plan.
- Coordinator deals with insurance, WCB claims etc. He is the conduit between council and departments.
- In Nov-Dec – CAO and Coordinator meet with departments to do budgets, templates are created and provided to the departments.
- 50-50 draw revenues are slush to fire departments.
- Their service is through the roof, they recently purchased a ladder truck, all equipment is 20 years or younger.
- In 20 years, they went from 30 to 15 vehicles, 8 to 3 stations.
- Residential rate was reduced at one point, in favor of increasing the area rates.
- Their budget annually is about \$820,000, ours is \$962,000.
- They created a school credit for volunteer firemen, those willing to join and take level 1 training would get a school credit. Proved hugely successful.
- All annual testing of equipment etc. is done by Coordinator.
- Dwayne is a big supporter of amalgamation and was not shy about it.
- Keys to success included, collaboration towards a common goal, understanding of the benefits, sufficient and comfortable funding, fairness to each other and to the resident and awareness of the issues.
- Challenges included that it was hard, the momentum must be forward (not backward), open minds are required, find key champions in the departments, equality of consideration, and effective communication (always a challenge).
- Dwayne stated that training is key to everything, as it provides the comfort that the volunteers are ready to face fire issues, and important to Municipality who relies on these people.
- He stated that not one FIREFIGHTER left because of amalgamation. Some left, but they were not FIREFIGHTERS, they were perhaps volunteering for different reasons.

### Next steps

The council and staff should meet with the Fire Committee to get their reaction to the meeting, and together, consider next steps in our support of the fire department.

### Appendix three – Financial data– Fire protection– other Municipalities

	<u>Actual 2022</u>	<u>Actual 2021</u>
District of Argyle	\$ 883,217	\$ 837,831
District of Barrington	\$ 718,315	\$ 717,684
District of Yarmouth	\$ 1,054,352	\$ 1,046,430
District of Clare	\$ 308,355	\$ 313,843
District of Digby	\$ 517,406	\$ 555,136

The Municipality of Yarmouth costs include cost sharing of the Town of Yarmouth paid fire service, thus more difficult to compare to our investment. The three remaining municipalities are local and similarly sized.

Number of fire stations are as follows:

Argyle	9 (2 shared)
Barrington	3
Clare	7
Digby	11

Overall, comparing units is challenging without analysing in more detail – as part of a review, staff would delve deeper in the details.