

Understanding Parksville's Fire Service *The Future*



Over the next few years, the PVFD will face a number of challenges - recruitment and retention of volunteers, the continuous evolution from a strictly "fire suppression" service to a broad "multi-disciplined emergency response" service, and the continuing challenge to provide properly trained and equipped crews. All will have significant effects on the future of the department.

High turnover in the department has meant shorter lengths of service and less experienced members. The demographics of our community and the lack of local career opportunities will affect department turnover. The PVFD recognizes the commitment required; significantly different from most volunteer jobs. The smaller the community, the smaller the resource to call upon for volunteers. At this time, there are 39 volunteer firefighters, just enough and the department would prefer to see a waiting list.

"We are optimistic about the future of the department. Recruitment will always be a challenge; it's a struggle to get volunteers and most importantly, to retain them. Our firefighters have full or part-time day jobs as well as training and volunteering. We recognize it's not easy," said Fire Chief Doug Banks.

The PVFD, similar to other departments, faces budget pressures and must continually assess service delivery options to ensure fiscal responsibility while at the same time meeting the expectations of citizens. The longer an effective volunteer force can be maintained, the less financial burden on the City. The PVFD and the City will need to consider the economy of a volunteer department versus a paid department. A slow transition is expected over time, with two staff added closer to 2020, intended to take care of equipment maintenance, pre-incident planning, training and inspections. This will help to fill workload gaps and relieve pressure on volunteer resources.

Factors which could trigger further staff increases include increasing call volumes, volunteer unavailability or the inability to recruit enough volunteers. Other influencing factors could include boundary expansion leading to increased building inventory, infill with higher density construction, population and/or call volumes, which might also trigger the need for an additional station or stations.

Although it is impossible to predict the future, the PVFD actively plans for the future by maintaining comprehensive data on trends, historical data on calls for service and on membership. The department plans such as the staffing plan are updated regularly and the strategic plan is updated at least every five years. The department monitors municipal plans and attempts to predict likely outcomes in terms of emergency services impacts and future needs. The crystal ball might look something like this:

- Two additional positions by 2020.
- Little change in terms of volunteer staffing foreseeable for next 10 years.
- One station for foreseeable future unless changes in the municipal boundary or amalgamation.
- Possible move to a more paid-call system for volunteer members.
- Consider more ways to recognize service commitments such as medical and dental benefits or savings plans for volunteer members.
- Possibility of looking at a part-time, availability based, scheduling and paying of firefighters to ensure on duty coverage for times when volunteer staff are historically unavailable.

