

Review of fire services stokes amalgamation debate

BY NIAMH SCALLAN, NORTH SHORE NEWS MARCH 13, 2011

A report on North Shore fire services has reignited the debate over amalgamation of the community's fire departments.

The report, created for the district by Dugal Smith and Associates last year, tracked the three North Shore fire units' record in cooperating and collaborating services since the move to standardize operations to "reduce costs and improve service."

West Vancouver's chief administrative officer Grant McRadu reviewed the document and tabled his findings at a Monday council meeting. His review outlined inefficiencies and difficulties in the current service model.

Presenting the report to councillors, West Vancouver fire chief Jim Cook said there was a "high degree of cooperation between the three North Shore fire departments."

But the district review highlighted major barriers to increasing cooperation between the departments. According to the review, "it is difficult for any one individual, department or municipality to drive change in the fire service without the authority or agreement to do so."

The district review also stated that the current cooperation model's predicted annual cost savings -- estimated at \$513,000 -- is "likely a long term rather than a short term possibility."

Coun. Michael Smith voted against council's decision to receive the 2010 report.

"I'm a little bit disappointed here," Smith said. "Clearly, this is not acting in the best interest of taxpayers. . . . We have to look for better efficiencies."

Echoing the concerns in McRadu's review, Smith called for one central fire services organization on the North Shore to reduce costs and improve service efficiencies.

"Nobody will address the issue on the North Shore that we have three chiefs and three bureaucracies," he said. "If we had one central command, one chief and one bureaucracy for the North Shore, all the fire-fighters would be trained under the same training department. It makes so much sense that nobody can speak against it."

"Politicians and bureaucrats are lagging behind everybody else," he added.

But Coun. Bill Soprovich spoke out against Smith's comments, calling for a focus on safety rather than cost savings.

"What do you put first, efficiencies or safety?" Soprovich asked. "There are no guarantees that a combined service is going to be safer for our citizens."

District staff is expected to return to council with feedback on the fire services review in July 2011.

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