

# Mayors want B.C. Ambulance Service to reconsider downgrade of medical calls

## Firefighters are increasingly waiting long periods for ambulance to arrive

BY KELLY SINOSKI, VANCOUVER SUN    OCTOBER 3, 2014



Metro mayors are concerned that, due to the downgrading of medical calls, firefighters are increasingly tied up waiting for ambulances and are not available to fight fires, such as this one in Vancouver in June. File photo.

**Photograph by:** NICK PROCAILO, PNG

Metro Vancouver mayors agreed Friday to send a letter to the B.C. Ambulance Service, asking for a “pause” in its plans to further downgrade some of the region’s medical calls until it has consulted with municipalities.

The decision, made at Metro mayors’ committee meeting, follows increasing concerns from municipal councils that their firefighters — as first responders — were taking on too much responsibility and are sometimes being tied up for hours while waiting for an ambulance to arrive. Concerns have been mounting since last October when the B.C. Ambulance Service announced it would downgrade 74 call types from emergency to routine, and told fire departments they could ignore many emergency calls.

This means first responders — paramedics and firefighters — are no longer required to have their lights flashing and sirens blaring for all calls involving falls, traumas, motor vehicle accidents and assaults. Provincial emergency officials acknowledged the move will add an average of six minutes to routine calls, but said it will also boost the response rate for critically ill patients by at least a minute, and reduce speed-related crashes involving ambulances.

Port Moody Mayor Mike Clay said while he supports the resource allocation, noting it has improved

response times for serious calls, **the underlying problem is that the ambulance system is underfunded** and under-resourced. "We are concentrating on the symptoms and not the cause," he said. "I've heard people in Port Coquitlam have had to wait an hour. I don't think it matters how they classify it, there's something wrong with the system. It doesn't take an hour to get a pizza."

The B.C. Ambulance Service, which is funded by the province, could not be reached for comment.

Dr. Martha Dow, who was commissioned by Surrey to look at the impact of the changes to municipalities, agreed there are systemic issues that have to be addressed.

**Burnaby Mayor Derek Corrigan said the situation means more downloading onto municipalities,** which may end up paying more because firefighters are tied up waiting for ambulances and are not available to fight fires or extricate accident victims out of crumpled cars. He cited one case, where firefighters responded to a car crash and found a man who appeared to be unsteady on his feet. The firefighter at first thought alcohol may be involved, but it turns out the man crashed because he had a heart attack.

However, this only came to light because a doctor was passing by and stopped to help, he said. He added other problems could arise when a call is first made, especially if it's phoned in by a child or someone with a language barrier.

**"We are trending up significantly in the cost of firefighter services,"** Corrigan said. "We have to continually pay those expenses and I don't think the ambulance service is going up at the same rate. While they're doing the best that they can the problem is there's not enough money and that fact is making it harder for paramedics to deal with these situations."

The situation has prompted **Delta Mayor Lois Jackson to announce that she will train her firefighters to the same level as paramedics so they have the skills to respond to an emergency,** especially if a patient takes a turn for the worse after the initial assessment is made over the phone. Firefighters are usually the first responders to any crime scene across B.C., but at the moment are restricted to basic interventions such as CPR or providing oxygen. If they go beyond that, they can be charged for doing work outside their licence.

But White Rock Mayor Wayne Baldwin said it is crucial for the province to step up with more funding for the system.

"Quite clearly the province is failing in this and they're leaving the residents exposed," Baldwin said. "When the first call goes into 911, it decides who's going to live or die in some cases. The province is derelict in this and we're pussyfooting around to say we'll help out."

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