

Some B.C. mayors balk at funding extra firefighter training

They're concerned about ambulance wait times, but are also worried about shouldering extra costs and provincial government downloading

BY KELLY SINOSKI, VANCOUVER SUN SEPTEMBER 23, 2014



Ambulance wait times and municipal government funding issues are at the centre of a dispute involving B.C. mayors, firefighters and ambulance attendants.

Photograph by: NICK PROCAYLO, Vancouver Sun

Some B.C. municipalities are balking at Delta Mayor Lois Jackson's plan to train her firefighters to the same level as paramedics, a move prompted by her concern about longer ambulance wait times.

The mayors share those concerns, but say it will force them to shoulder even more costs that should be borne by the provincial government.

The move, announced by Jackson this week at the Union of B.C. Municipalities convention in Whistler, follows recent changes by the B.C. Ambulance Service to scale back response times for less-serious emergency calls. Mayors say that's leaving some patients waiting for more than an hour, in some cases, in potentially crisis situations.

First responders are no longer required to attend cases such as falls, traumas, motor vehicle accidents and assaults, with lights and sirens blaring. Mayors argue this is falling to firefighters, who could be stuck waiting for hours for a paramedic to arrive.

The B.C. Ambulance Service was not available to comment Tuesday.

However, provincial emergency officials had previously acknowledged the move would add an average six minutes to routine calls. But they also said it would boost the response rate for critically ill patients by at least a minute, and reduce speed-related crashes involving ambulances.

But Maple Ridge Mayor Ernie Daykin said Delta's move will likely mean municipalities will have to pay more to train firefighters in order to provide services that are a provincial responsibility.

"We need to take a long, hard look at the local implications," he said. "That's another huge potential download on municipalities if they're there and they're the first responders. It seems we're going back

to the way it was.”

Jackson, who will also sign a new contract Thursday that gives firefighters a 20-per-cent pay increase, said she’s “working for the people of Delta.” She noted she has been pushing for such changes for the past six years, long before the provincial changes came into effect. Similar changes have been in effect in Prince George for the past five years.

Jackson argues it makes sense to ensure firefighters have the skills to respond to an emergency, especially if they have to wait a half-hour or more for a paramedic to arrive or 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, such as by doing blood sugar test or injecting an EpiPen, for instance, they can be charged for doing work outside their licence, said Mike Hurley, president of the B.C. Professional Firefighters.

“It will be to the benefit of the people on the ground. Our fire guys will be there and they will be trained so they can use the EpiPen and other things the ambulance can,” Jackson said. “If we have an earthquake or a huge disaster, I will have all of my firefighters untrained. We’re going to have the best, most highly trained firefighters in the province.”

Hurley said his organization has been trying for 25 years to get government to allow firefighters the option to train to a higher level. This will not only assist patients, he said, but provide more preparation for paramedics when they arrive on scene. He noted the First Responders’ Act was created in 1998 with the belief that local firefighters would arrive on scene about four to six minutes ahead of the paramedics, but many firefighters are now waiting for up to two hours.

He said he doesn’t buy into the B.C. Ambulance Service assessment that it can assess a patient’s situation over the phone. “It’s been a frustrating adventure. It doesn’t make any sense.”

Surrey Mayor Dianne Watts said while she agrees that municipalities should not be taking on another order of government’s jurisdiction, there is room for efficiencies that would see firefighters and paramedics “working better together.”

She noted when she was stung by a wasp and had an allergic reaction, the firefighter who arrived on scene could not inject her EpiPen because they had no authority to do so.

“That’s problematic,” she said. “Most of the work done by firefighters is going to calls related to health issues. There are most certainly areas where they need to have additional training.”

But Burnaby Mayor Derek Corrigan said it’s bad enough that the provincial and federal governments are consistently downloading to municipalities, without mayors like Jackson inviting them to do so. The higher wages for firefighters, he added, will also have a trickle-down effect on all municipalities, who will then have to pay more for police and fire staff as well as other city workers.

He said B.C. Ambulance has underestimated the need for paramedics, which has put the pressure on local firefighters.

“(The province) is out there criticizing us for costs going up and they’re the ones downloading all the responsibility on us,” he said. “Mayors are the ones responsible for the services in their community.”

ksinoski@vancouversun.com

[Twitter.com/ksinoski](https://twitter.com/ksinoski)

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