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PROPOSED CENTRALIZED FIRE COMMUNICATION SERVICE

The Finance and Administration Committee recommends the adoption of the recommendations contained in the following report, April 26, 2005, from the Chief Administrative Officer, as amended to include a further recommendation 4 as follows:

- “ 4. In light of Regional needs and the effort expended on this initiative to date, a letter be forwarded to the Minister of Community Safety and Correctional Services requesting that he reconsider granting an amendment to the *Fire Protection and Prevention Act* to allow an upper tier municipality to act as an employer in implementing a centralized fire communication service.”

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

1. Regional Council direct staff to not proceed with the development and implementation of a centralized fire communication service for the participating seven area municipalities.
2. Regional Council endorse no further action be taken with respect to the provision of a centralized Regional fire communication service unless the following circumstances arise:
 - favourable amendment to the *Fire Protection and Prevention Act* (FPPA) to allow York Region to be an employer to implement a fire communication service; and
 - the nine area municipalities jointly request that the Region provide such a service on their behalf.
3. A copy of this report be sent to the area municipalities in York Region and the Province of Ontario, specifically the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services.

2. PURPOSE

The purpose of the report is to provide Regional Council with an update of the proposed delivery of a centralized fire communication service for the following municipalities: Aurora, Newmarket, Georgina, East Gwillimbury, King, Vaughan, and Whitchurch-Stouffville.

3. BACKGROUND

On February 13, 2003 Regional Council offered to provide a Regionally operated centralized fire communication service and requested the local municipalities to indicate their position for continued support of this concept. This was based on a progress report, which included a preliminary business case on projected capital and operating costs, governance and labour relation issues.

The preliminary business case concluded that the centralization of fire dispatch had the potential for cost savings over ten years. The business case also concluded that if all nine municipalities did not participate, costs savings would be reduced. The rationale and cost savings anticipated from this initiative was also premised on creating a centralized communications centre for Police, including 911, Fire Dispatch, and Emergency Medical Services communications.

On February 13, 2003, Regional Council also endorsed a “service contract” governance model. Under this model, the local municipalities would determine the appropriate service levels to be funded by them based upon an agreed cost allocation. The Region would manage the service delivery. Markham, Richmond Hill and Vaughan currently use a similar governance model with the municipalities for whom they provide fire dispatch services.

Since that time, Markham and Richmond Hill have withdrawn their support in principle for the concept of a centralized fire communication service due to cost and service delivery concerns. The area municipalities of Aurora, Newmarket, Georgina, East Gwillimbury, King, Vaughan, and Whitchurch-Stouffville obtained resolutions from their respective Councils to support, in principle, a Regional operated centralized fire communication service.

Regional staff have been working on several key components of the proposal:

- obtaining legislative amendments to allow the Region to operate the service; and
- further operating and capital cost analysis.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

4.1 Legislative Amendments

Regional and Provincial staffs have been discussing the legislative situation since 2002. Initial discussions with the Office of the Fire Marshal indicated that a minor legislative amendment under the *Fire Protection and Prevention Act* (FPPA) could allow the Region to act as an employer in operating a centralized fire communication service and that this was primarily seen as a “housekeeping” matter.

In July 2004, York Region formally requested to the Province that the definition of “municipality” in the FPPA be amended to ensure that an upper tier municipality can be an employer of “firefighters” within the meaning of the FPPA. This minor revision would ensure that the same labour relations framework within the Act would apply to bargaining units in the proposed fire communications services as in our local area fire departments.

The Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services did not support the minor amendment to the FPPA according to his correspondence to the Regional CAO in February 24, 2005. The Deputy’s letter concluded that the only way to effect the proposed change is to amend legislation, for a one-off, municipality-specific request. Given the other competing legislative priorities, the government does not view this as a general legislative priority, nor does it view it as appropriate to make a general change to this legislation to accommodate a single situation. A similar letter was also sent to the President of the Ontario Professional Fire Fighters’ Association.

Consequently, other labour relations options were considered:

- The feasibility of transferring existing fire dispatchers to Regional bargaining unit with an essential services agreement; and
- The feasibility of entering into a fee for service agreement with the City of Vaughan to operate a centralized fire communication service on the Region’s behalf.

Following discussions with area municipalities initially on the Steering Committee it was concluded that achieving governance, accountability and a positive labour relations environment under these options would be unduly complicated. Therefore, the ability for the Region to be an employer for Fire Communication Services is not possible, at this time.

4.2 Future 911 Joint Communications/Emergency Operations Centre

The Region has identified the future requirements for a purpose-built facility that will be sustainable for extended periods of time during a serious emergency or disaster. The fire dispatch centre is one of the components of this proposed facility. The construction and operation of a centralized communications centre is not a current priority for the Region given other financial budget pressures. The Province of Ontario has not indicated a willingness to transfer ambulance call-taking response to the local level further indicating that a joint communities center is not a current priority.

4.3 Operating and Capital Cost Analysis

A needs assessment, feasibility study and business study analysis, including capital and operating costs, were conducted to provide the rationale and justification for a centralized

fire communication service on behalf of the seven area municipalities. The study was based on projected operating and capital projects at three interim locations (i.e. Regional Administration Centre, Fire Station in Newmarket, and a Vaughan location) and undertaken by McCauley Consulting.

The purpose of the study was to provide the Region and seven local municipalities with sufficient information to determine the financial and operational impact of such a service. The charges for such a service would be based on the previously agreed cost sharing formula and would be recovered through a special area levy.

Operating costs were estimated at \$1.9 M and would be covered by an apportioned fee from the seven participating municipalities annually. Operating costs included:

- Staffing and administration
- Capital debenture costs
- Information technology support including purchase of a Computer Assisted Design (CAD) system.
- Accommodation and building maintenance

The projected capital start-up costs were estimated at \$1.7M and consisted of:

- Purchase of CAD technology
- Renovation of McCaffrey Fire Hall Building
- Purchase of furniture, these capital costs are prorated and included in the annual operating costs

By comparison the current operating costs for fire communication services provided by Vaughan and Richmond Hill, which do not include technology upgrades that would improve service delivery, total approximately \$1.2M.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

To date the Region has retained McCauley Consulting to undertake the background feasibility work for a proposed centralized fire communications service. In the 2005 approved budget, funding was included to further undertake project management work by McCauley Consulting and debenture funding was identified as a future funding source for a fire communications facility. Subject to Council advising staff not to further proceed these funds will not be required.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

Effective fire communication services are essential for the operation of local municipal fire departments. The associated technological upgrades to enhance the existing communications systems will remain under the purview of the area municipalities.

7. CONCLUSION

Given that the Ministry did not allow the Region to be an “employer” under the FPPA to operate a fire communication services and that other options are unworkable, it is recommended that Regional Council not proceed with the development and implementation of a centralized fire communication service for the participating seven area municipalities.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.