

Milton's funding of the Fire Department slows safety reform

By GLORIA HILDEBRANDT

Significant changes have recently been made at the Milton Fire Department (MFD). More improvements are needed, but limited budgets are slowing the town's pace of fire safety reform. When the Office of the Fire Marshal (OFM) found that the Town of Milton was not in compliance with the minimum requirements of the 1997 Fire Protection and Prevention Act (FPPA), changes were required. The OFM found that Milton needed the following: a simplified risk assessment, improved emergency response, and fire prevention education - specifically a smoke alarm and escape program - for the public.

"The Milton Fire Department has made improvements," acknowledges Paul Leslie, Manager of Monitoring and Evaluation for the OFM. "We're waiting to verify results." Although certification is pending, the OFM believes that the MFD is now in compliance with the FPPA. According to Leslie, "The Office of the Fire Marshal is confident that the citizens of Milton are not in imminent danger."

Milton's Fire Chief, Harold Penson, filed a simplified risk assessment with the Town last month. This details Milton's population, types of buildings, high-risk areas, problem areas and fire risks.

Work is being done to improve the MFD's emergency response. The OFM requires 10 fire-fighters on the scene of a structure fire in the urban area within 10 minutes of a call. However, this "10 in 10" goal is unrealistic for the large rural area of Milton, and increased fire-prevention measures must be taken for rural residents. Penson is pleased to report that since July 2002, there have been five firefighters on duty seven days a week, 24 hours a day, at Station Three on Derry Road. Yet the OFM requires 10 personnel, which means part-time firefighters must respond. In order to meet the OFM's response requirements, the MFD believes it must hire more full-time personnel.

If the "10 in 10" requirement can't be met in the large rural area of Milton, the OFM requires thorough fire prevention and public education efforts. Currently, there is only one full-time staff member for fire safety education for the whole Town of Milton. This is inadequate for an area of this size. In 2002, two additional public educators were requested. Because of funding pressures, the Town of Milton did not approve these positions. The MFD now recommends that two more educators be hired over the next two years in order to meet the requirements of the FPPA.

Despite insufficient staff, the MFD has managed to begin an education program by distributing an information package to the residents of Nassagaweya, excluding those in the village of Campbellville. These rural residents should already have received a note from the MFD and four pamphlets: Home Smoke Alarms, Fire Drills - The Great Escape, Fire Safety in the Kitchen and Home Fire Prevention Checklist. These materials will be distributed to the rest of Milton in the next few months. Copies are available at the Fire Prevention Office at 905-878-9251. You can also call this number for a home fire-safety inspection.

In addition, Chief Penson is proud of his fire-protection agreements with neighbouring fire departments, which will assist with water tankers in the rural area. The MFD has achieved the "Superior Tanker Shuttle" credit for rural areas that are within eight kilometres of one of the three fire stations. Penson will give a copy of official confirmation of this to anyone wishing to show it to a house insurance company.

Yet further progress on fire safety improvements remains compromised. As Chief Penson states, "Staff has found it increasingly difficult to meet the necessities of the Office of the Fire Marshal because of the financial impact."

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