

Cellular phones may cause delays in response time

Using cellular telephones in York Region to dial 911 during an emergency could mean critical delays in response, officials have confirmed.

Last Sept. 15, a 35-year-old York Region man suffered a heart attack while playing basketball in Thornhill. A cellular phone was used to alert emergency personnel. But the original call was sent to the Georgian ambulance centre in

Barrie for dispatch and the man died before help arrived. A similar incident in was reported in Vaughan last summer.

Some technical changes can be made, but it's not going to solve the problem, regional councillor Gord Landon said. "It (emergency response) is just going to be slower with cellular phones."

Under York Region's 911

telephone system, calls are initially answered by trained Bell Canada staff at a central emergency bureau in Ottawa. The caller is asked if they require fire, police or ambulance help.

Once that is established, the call is forwarded to the appropriate local dispatcher in seconds.

When a conventional stationary phone is used, the sys-

tem automatically displays a caller's address. But there is no specific location transmitted by cellular phone calls.

According to Landon, the system automatically routes ambulance calls with no specific address to the Barrie dispatch office.

Ambulance centre manager Al Duffin, said the Barrie centre dispatches units for Aurora, Newmarket and Georgina.

Stouffville ambulances are alerted from Oshawa.

Usually, Thornhill ambulances are dispatched from Mississauga.

Landon said it took about 13 minutes and two phone calls for ambulance and firefighting crews to arrive on the scene Sept. 15. Officials are still trying to determine why it took three minutes just to transfer the call from Barrie to local firefighting dispatch, he added.

"This is too long of a time frame to have the ambulance responding," he said.

Landon noted the first call did not indicate a heart attack emergency. Such information would have triggered a tiered response involving fire department personnel equipped to handle heart attack victims, he said.

All fire crews are dispatched from a central Newmarket office and usually provide faster response than ambulance. Use of a cellular phone was one of several factors that may have contributed to delays, he said.

Landon used to be 911 management chairman. The committee was dissolved after the system began operation.

Discussions are being arranged to address the problem.

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