

Merging fire departments to be re-examined

BY PATRICK CASEY
Staff Writer

York Region will take another stab at amalgamating its nine municipal fire departments — four years after a similar proposal died.

On Thursday, York council agreed to re-examine the benefits of establishing either one regional fire service or dividing the nine departments into an urban and rural mix.

Over the next three months, the region will update a consultant's report first released in April 1997 that recommended a regional department, saving taxpayers \$96 million over 25 years while providing enhanced service and training.

Although the original report was never adopted, Newmarket fire chief John Molyneux said officials should re-visit the issue.

"People that are in trouble don't really care what it says on the door of the fire truck," said Molyneux, the region's fire co-ordinator. "They want quick response and trained personnel who have the ability to help when they get there."

"They really don't care where the hell the trucks

come from. The report said we could do it better and cheaper. And the concept of the closest vehicle going to the call is probably a good concept.

"Fire departments are an expensive, but necessary insurance policy," he said.

Whitchurch-Stouffville Mayor Wayne Emmerson predicted York Region will become a provincial leader in fire service if the departments are amalgamated.

"It has taken a long time but we have to dust off the report," Emmerson said. "If it's not going to be supported, the only people that will lose out are the residents."

A regional force would have firefighters from the closest fire hall respond to a call. Immediate backup would also be available.

However, approving the endeavour will prove challenging, especially after the bickering councillors engaged in over a temporary regional fire dispatch centre.

Last fall, council ended 30 years of discussion and approved a dispatch operation in Unionville to handle fire and emergency calls for

most of the region.

But Vaughan is prepared to back out of the deal and establish its own dispatch on Dufferin Street, upset the Town of Markham will operate the facility instead of a joint fire services board.

"We hope this is not going to create problems but we feel strongly about this," Vaughan Regional Councillor Michael Di Biase explained. "It's crucial everyone has a say and not have one municipality take control."

A permanent communications depot for York Regional Police, fire, 911 and ambulance calls must still be located.

Although York Region has committed \$5.5 million to establish the Unionville dis-

patch, regional chairperson Bill Fisch said the centre's operations remain a municipal responsibility.

Before the meeting, Fisch said Vaughan's proposal for its own dispatch would be incredibly inefficient.

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