

OPINION



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Editorial

Don't rush into fire union, York Region municipalities

ISSUE

**Municipalities want region
to investigate an amalgamation
of our fire departments.**

While nobody has bought a diamond ring or got down on bended knee to propose, there has been plenty of discussion of a potential union of fire services across York Region, be it for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer.

It's not the first time the suggestion has arisen, in the wake of mergers of police departments in 1971 and transit more than a decade ago. The amalgamation of Newmarket and Aurora fire departments into Central York Fire Services in 2002 sets a precedent for a successful partnership.

In 1997, a study forecast millions of dollars in savings, as well as improvement in services, should amalgamation of the nine fire departments occur.

It didn't, obviously. The proposal resurfaced this year, when Newmarket and Aurora councils started shopping for a ring — passing the first resolutions that the region explore the idea of a merger.

Other municipalities followed suit, with Vaughan deciding this month to launch a pilot project to share fire, rescue and response support with Markham and Richmond Hill.

However, this week, a Richmond Hill council committee recommended rather than jumping on the amalgamation bandwagon, the town should take part in the pilot project proposed by Vaughan.

The idea is likely gaining fresh appeal with politicians, not only in York but across the country, in a time of increasing fiscal challenge, as a way to provide increased service levels without increased costs through operating efficiencies and more effective utilization of resources.

The escalation in salaries is a cause for concern, forcing governments to make tough decisions,

either raising taxes or cutting services.

Critics of the provincial arbitration system — which also applies to police officers and paramedics — say because pay is mandated relative to firefighters in other municipalities, a vicious circle is created in which salaries climb at a higher rate than other public sector workers.

The Ontario Chamber of Commerce says the process is hurting communities because it doesn't take into account fiscal realities, while Progressive Conservative Leader Tim Hudak wants to see legislation that would require arbitrators to respect municipalities' ability to pay.

In light of the politics, from the perspective of the firefighter associations, carving out their own deal with the region, creating a larger, powerful union and harmonizing pay and benefits must have appeal. In fact, the unions are actively campaigning municipal politicians for amalgamation.

For municipalities, efficiencies would be expected through co-ordination of policies, procedures, training and purchasing, and reduced staff in administration, communication and fire suppression. Is it a match made in heaven, then? The reality is we would face significant upfront costs in standardizing equipment and training alone.

As for the future? Following amalgamation in Toronto in 1998, the fire department has tripled in size, with a budget to match.

That said, amalgamation is worth exploring, if the process is impartial and transparent and the entire report made public.

The region's study should also offer other options, such as smaller-scale mergers among compatible municipalities and ways to share resources.

Taxpayers have a right to know exactly what to expect, both in terms of cost and service, before putting a ring on it.

**BOTTOM LINE: Fire service
amalgamation deserves exploring,
under right conditions.**

LETTER OF THE WEEK

Victoria Day weekend fireworks continues town tradition

The Ballantrae fireworks and movie night held during the Victoria Day weekend was a huge success.

The cars were parked on both sides of the Aurora Road from Hwy. 48 to Ninth Line. The park was packed with families with kids in tow. The tennis courts were open for all to just bang the balls around and the Ballantrae Public School playground was fully utilized.

Pyro Mario put on as good or better fireworks display than we have ever seen in all the years that he has been lighting up the skies for us.

The food services trucks sold dinner and dessert for all in attendance. York Region Police and Whitchurch-Stouffville's fire department and the parks and recreation folks were all out there to keep everyone at a safe distance and that was much appreciated.

I have raised my family in Whitchurch-

Stouffville since moving here in 1981 and this is the type of event that defines our community. It is safe, family oriented and a wonderful place to meet and greet our neighbours.

*I thought this would be lost with
the radical changes to Memorial
Park but thankfully not.*

I thought this would be lost with the radical changes to Memorial Park but thankfully not. It has merely moved to Ballantrae.

Congratulations to Councillor Phil Bannon and to all of those volunteers who made this happen.

I look forward to seeing this continuing to be an annual event and we can then truly continue to call Whitchurch-Stouffville Country close to the city.

FRANK J. VAN VEEN
WHITCHURCH-STOUFFVILLE

Co-ordinate response on emerald ash borer

*Re: Feds, province need to step
up on ash borer infestation,
editorial, May 9.*

It is appreciated that you highlighted this "uncosted aspect of international trade" that will hit municipal property owners to bear the brunt of the costs through their taxes either at the regional or municipal level.

Private property owners with ash trees will also be affected when emerald ash borer kills their ash trees.

Conservation authorities also receive funding for their operations from municipalities and regions — do they have ash trees?

As the Canadian Food Inspection Agency is ulti-

mately responsible — as your federal taxes are used for the prevention, control and management of ash borer or any imported pest — it has decided over the next 12 months to "regulate" as far as the French River, which leaves little support for the most populous and significant recreational areas of Ontario.

As the province is not mandated to deal with this issue other than support and consult between levels of government, in my opinion, and considering the federal management jurisdiction to prevent overlap of responsibilities between levels of government, there is no co-ordinated response to this decade or longer challenge of the loss of our native ash tree species in Canada.

Thanks for mentioning the Ontario Urban Forest Council, celebrating its 50th anniversary, and that we are trying to raise awareness on this long-term negative environmental issue.

Our council will bring attention to this "creeping, human influenced, environmental disaster" by continuing to notify large land owners, such as municipalities, school boards, conservation authorities and other levels of government of the impact of this destructive insect pest and suggestions on how to prepare for it before a reactive response is required.

The OUF has information and links that are helpful to residents at www.oufc.org.

PETER WYNNYCZUK
ONTARIO URBAN FOREST
COUNCIL

This is debatable

**WEIGH IN ON THE DISCUSSION ... e-mail your
comments to jmason@yrmg.com**