

FLYERS

Inserts for Thur., Feb. 6, 2014

- | | |
|---------------------|-------------------|
| 2001 AUDIO VIDEO | MOUNT ALBERT |
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| JEI LEARNING CENTRE | SMITH |
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| SCHOOL | T&T SUPERMARKET |
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| LASTMAN'S BAD BOY | THE BAY |
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| LOBLAWS | TOYS R US |
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| M&M MEATS | WALK N COMFORT |
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Closest department should respond to fire: union

BY SIMON MARTIN
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Discussion about the benefits of regionalized fire service has emerged in the wake of the Mount Albert Fire Hall fire.

This particular fire posed unique challenges, as paid on-call staff in Mount Albert responded to the call, only to be rendered helpless as their equipment was engulfed in flames. They had to wait for backup from Queensville.

The call came into dispatch at 8:08 a.m. and East Gwillimbury Emergency Services were on the scene at 8:16 a.m., town representatives said.

However, nearby residents and Fire Chief Phil Dawson said it took an additional five to 10 minutes for the supplementary forces to arrive, meaning it took somewhere between 13 and 18 minutes for the first truck to arrive after the call.

For Whitchurch-Stouffville resident Frank Van Veen it's hard to understand why the fire station in Ballantrae wasn't the first one called to provide backup. After all, the station is four kilometres closer to Mount Albert than Queensville, with a faster drive up Hwy. 48.

Google Maps estimates the drive is five minutes quicker. At the time of the fire, both Ballantrae and Queensville stations were manned by full-time firefighters.

Proponents of a regional fire service, such as Ontario Professional Fire Fighters Association President Mark McKinnon, said the goal should be getting the quickest response, regardless of municipal boundaries.

"If we were a regional service, the closest on duty firefighters would have responded," he said.

"It provides better service for residents."

Similar concerns were raised in East Gwillimbury last March when a tragic house fire killed Kevin, Jennifer, Robert and Cameron Dunsmuir.

For Whitchurch-Stouffville resident Frank Van Veen it's hard to understand why the fire station in Ballantrae wasn't the first one called to provide backup.

The closest manned station to that fire was in Newmarket and it didn't receive a call. The response time from East Gwillimbury was more than 12 minutes, but the Ontario Fire Marshal cited lack of working smoke alarms as reason for the deaths, not response time.

While firefighters in York Region are in favour of regionalization, Mr. McKinnon said there seems to be little political appetite for it at the municipal level. "Municipalities say, 'If I let my fire department go, what else do I have?'" he said.

In May, East Gwillimbury Mayor Virginia Hackson said there is little appetite for serious discussions about the possibility of regional fire service among York municipalities.

While East Gwillimbury looked into signing an automatic aid agreement with Central York Fire Services, council decided to move forward instead with full-time firefighter hiring. At the time, Ms Hackson called the decision the most sustainable option for the town's future.

The estimated cost of the automatic aid agreement with Central York was significantly cheaper, at somewhere between \$260,000 and \$300,000 annually.

East Gwillimbury is hiring six more full-time firefighters in the fourth quarter of this year so it can have 24/7 service. Right now, it has full-time firefighters on duty 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. and they are supplemented by 81 paid on-call volunteers.

The six additional full-time firefighters would give East Gwillimbury 12. Mr. Dawson's preliminary goal was to have 20 full-time staff by 2017, but that is not set in stone.

For Mount Albert resident Kirk Kelly, it's time for the town to get full-time firefighters. That isn't in any way a reflection of the work of the paid on-call volunteers, but a response to the reality of huge growth coming to Mount Albert and other centres in the coming years, he said.

According to the 2012 East Gwillimbury Emergency Services annual report, the average response time to a fire was eight minutes and 38 seconds. The average response time in 2011 was nine minutes and one second. According to the report, full-time firefighters generally can respond to a fire five minutes faster than paid on-call, since they are already at the station.

Because the Ontario Fire Marshal's investigation into the fire hall blaze is ongoing, Mr. Dawson said certain information will be provided when it becomes available.

"Every call has many factors that affect response time," he said. "Our main goal is to get the temporary Mount Albert fire station up and running as soon as possible."

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