

HALIFAX

P.O. Box 1749
Halifax, Nova Scotia
B3J 3A5 Canada

Item No. 14.1.8
Halifax Regional Council
October 4, 2016

TO: Mayor Savage and Members of Halifax Regional Council

SUBMITTED BY: Original Signed by 

Jacques Dubé, Chief Administrative Officer

Original Signed by 

Jane Fraser, Acting Deputy Chief Administrative Officer

DATE: September 21, 2016

SUBJECT: Volunteer Firefighter Honorariums

ORIGIN

- March 31, 2015 Council motion put and passed to endorse "Not decommission volunteer sub-stations 25 (Ostrea Lake-Pleasant Point), 31 (East Ship Harbour), 36 (Meaghers Grant), and 43 (Grand Lake-Oakfield)."
- January 26, 2016 Council motion put and passed that "Halifax Regional Council request that information on increasing the current honorarium for volunteer fire fighters be brought forward for the upcoming Halifax Fire and Emergency Services Committee of the Whole (Budget) Presentation with an accompanying staff report outlining options."
- February 7, 2016 Council motion put and passed that "Option 2 (RE Volunteers) be placed in the Parking Lot (i.e. increase honorarium budget by \$1.1 million to better ensure a volunteer response through an on call/standby system for rural stations and/or through a guaranteed minimum flat rate based on station location (rural, suburban, urban) and direct staff to return to council with the details of the new program before implementation."
- February 16, 2016 Council motion put and passed that "Halifax Regional Council remove the matter of volunteer honorariums from the deferral pending a staff report being brought to Council in June 2016 and with the understanding that should Council approve an increase to honorarium the funding will be found in the 2016/17 budget."

LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

Halifax Regional Municipality Charter 2008, c. 39 Section 35(2)(b) the Chief Administrative Officer may appoint, suspend and remove all employees of the Municipality, with power to further delegate this authority;

Administrative Order 24 Respecting Fire & Emergency Service in Halifax Regional Municipality, Section 1(5)(2) The Chief Officer may appoint to the Fire Service any person qualified under subsection (1) when a vacancy occurs through the death, retirement, resignation or discharge of a member with the result that the complement of the Fire Service is below the staff complement approved by Council or where the Council increases the staff complement of the Fire Service.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that Halifax Regional Council:

- (1) Approve an increase to volunteer firefighter honorarium of \$570,000 in 2016/2017 and that the full amount of \$1.14 million be added to the honorarium in subsequent years and;
- (2) Approve a withdrawal of \$570,000 from the General Contingency Reserve, Q421 to fund the increase to the volunteer firefighter honorariums in 16/17.

BACKGROUND

Volunteer firefighters are crucial to the continued viability of Halifax Regional Municipality's (HRM) fire service. Halifax Regional Fire & Emergency (HRFE) strongly relies on its volunteer members to help meet the community's need for timely and effective emergency response. The reality is that without an active volunteer component, many areas of our municipality would not have fire protection. Volunteer firefighters provide over \$10 million worth of service to our community when their in-service participation hours are calculated at current IAFF rates.

As with other jurisdictions the number of volunteer firefighters in HRM has been decreasing over time. In HRM's case we have seen a significant reduction in the last decade. Currently our records indicated HRFE has roughly 525 volunteer members. The volunteer pool size is specific to each station. While some volunteer stations (in more populated areas) have a very healthy and active volunteer membership, unfortunately others do not. Our most challenging areas for attracting and retaining active volunteers continues to be along the Eastern Shore, up the Musquodoboit Valley and Black Point; encompassing a total of 11 stations and their corresponding communities.

The reasons for the decline in volunteer numbers include:

- A declining volunteerism trend across North America
- An ageing demographic
- More demands of people's time
- More stringent fire training requirements
- Active volunteers may work far from their stations
- Population shifts from rural and suburban communities to the urban core.

In 2013, five volunteer substations were decommissioned due to inadequate numbers of volunteers. In 2015, HRFE recommended decommissioning four more substations for the same reason. This was not supported by Regional Council. Instead, Regional Council expressed a desire to positively impact the volunteers. During the 2016/17 budget deliberations, Regional Council requested information on increasing the honorarium for volunteer firefighters with the goal to attract and retain volunteer firefighters in the rural areas of our community.

DISCUSSION

Volunteer firefighters are compensated for expenses via a honorarium based on participation at training events and response to emergency incidents. In 2015, a honorarium point was worth about \$16. The total honorarium budget is \$1,904,300 with the average member receiving \$2,950. In addition, HRM provides injury/life insurance coverage to our volunteer firefighters with optional benefits at the cost of the volunteers and their families. Officers receive a stipend to recognize the additional services (administrative and leadership) they provide.

Pursuant to the *Motor Vehicle Act*, a volunteer with a minimum 20% participation can claim exemption from the vehicle registration fee. Canada Revenue and Taxation (CRA) allows for a volunteer to claim a \$3,000 tax credit if they complete a minimum of 200 hours of service; Provincially, the volunteer firefighters tax credit reduces an applicant's personal income taxes by \$500 if they served a minimum of six months with a minimum 20% participation rate and only received a reasonable reimbursement for expenses. Only one of these tax credits can be claimed. Changes to the honorarium program proposed in this report may affect the ability of a volunteer to claim the Provincial tax credit. However, we do not anticipate this will be a problem.

During the development of proposed revisions to the volunteer firefighter honorarium, HRFE conducted an industry best practice review with seven composite (career and volunteer) departments; six across Canada and one in the United Kingdom, and consulted with volunteer station chiefs (officer in charge of a volunteer fire station) across HRM.

From the review, the findings show that increased compensation positively influences volunteer recruitment and retention. Examples of what other jurisdictions currently have in place include:

St. John's Regional Fire Department, Newfoundland

- Volunteers receive a lump sum honorarium payment

Leduc County Fire Services, Alberta

- On-call firefighters receive hourly pay based on type of duty and rank

Ottawa Fire Services

- Volunteers receive hourly-based remuneration based on a classification system (probationary, firefighter levels 1 – 4; captains and lieutenants receive an additional honorarium twice per year).

Hamilton Fire Department

- Volunteer firefighters are unionized (Christian Labour Association of Canada CLAC)
- On-call firefighters receive hourly pay based on rank

Grand Prairie Regional Fire Service, Alberta

- Paid on-call firefighters receive an hourly wage based on rank and class
- Rural firefighters are eligible to claim a \$3000 CRA tax credit, urban volunteers are not eligible for the tax credit.

Sudbury Fire Services, Ontario

- Volunteers receive a hourly-based honorarium
- Upon completion of the probationary period, members receive a one-time lump sum of \$500.

Essex County Fire & Rescue Service, United Kingdom

- Paid on-call firefighters receive hourly pay based on rank
- Also paid an annual retainer of approximately £2000

HRFE Management engaged volunteer chiefs at Board of Chiefs Meetings (station chiefs in each division meet monthly), at an All Chiefs Meeting (all station chiefs across HRM meet bi-annually) and through the

Volunteer Firefighters Council (representatives from all ranks and divisions identify issues and provide advice to the Fire Chief).

Based on the findings from the best practice review and discussions with volunteer stations chiefs, the following table summarizes the intended purpose of the additional expenditure:

Proposed Expenditure of Funds	Intended Outcome
Increase the honorarium fund to raise the value of honorarium points; increasing compensation for services provided.	Attract new volunteers; increase participation of existing volunteers; reduce the turnover of volunteers.
Increase the officer stipend fund.	Entice volunteers to pursue leadership positions and assume the extra responsibilities of an officer; retain experienced officers.
Create a fund to recognize the ongoing recertification efforts of our members in our Blue Card command and control system.	Recognize the extra hours required to attain certification; prepare more volunteers for fireground operations; retain these highly trained members.
Increase funding for volunteer recruitment strategies specifically for equipment, messaging, advertising etc.	Provide a more consistent approach to recruitment; increase the number of volunteers recruited.
Create a new position within the volunteer service to coordinate and work with the station chiefs.	Reduce the administrative burden for volunteer stations chiefs; retain experienced officers.
Provide funding to help volunteer firefighters gain Professional Qualifications through the Nova scotia Professional Qualifications Board.	Recruitment; retention; service enhancement.
Pay the honorariums quarterly instead on annually as we do now.	Recruitment; retention by allowing volunteers to better budget their compensation.
Create a call/standby system in our most vulnerable areas (Station 26 - Oyster Pond, Station 28 – Sheet Harbour, Station 29 – Moser River, Station 30 – Tangier, Station 33 – Three Harbours, Station 35 – Cooks Brook, Station 36 – Meagher’s Grant, Station 38 – Middle Musquodobit, Station 39 – Upper Musquodobit, Station 40 – Dutch Settlement, Station 55 – Seabright, and Station 56 – Black Point.	Risk mitigation and service enhancement by providing a guaranteed response in these areas.

Based on our extensive consultation with our current volunteer members and our research on what other jurisdictions do, HRFE is confident that HRM will benefit from an increased number of new volunteer recruit firefighters, and increased participation and retention rates.

HRFE will measure the effectiveness of these initiatives through the tracking the number of new members, the number of emergency calls and training sessions attended, and by the number of people who leave the service on an annual basis. Our proposal will see stipends/honorariums paid out quarterly as opposed to annually so we will be able to review it much more often than we have in the past.

HRFE will report back to Regional Council on the success of these initiatives via an update in the annual budget and business plan report and presentation.

