



Fire & Emergency
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The Town of Niagara-On-The-Lake

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Report:	FES-21-001	Committee Date:	February 08, 2021
		Due in Council:	February 22, 2021
Report To:	Fire & Emergency Services		
Subject:	Fire Department Dispatch Services		

1. RECOMMENDATION

It is respectfully recommended that:

- 1.1 Council receive this report as information regarding the potential for a consolidated regional dispatch centre;
- 1.2 Council authorize the Fire Chief to begin to investigate potential options for continued dispatch services utilizing our current analog infrastructure in anticipation of the conclusion of the existing Fire Dispatch Services Agreement between the City of St. Catharines and Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake expiring in December of 2022; and
- 1.3 Council direct the Fire Chief to report back on potential options, along with associated costs, pros and cons/opportunities and threats, and a recommended implementation plan.

2. PURPOSE / PROPOSAL

To provide Council with an update on a proposed consolidated dispatch centre that includes Niagara Regional Police Service (NRPS), Niagara Emergency Medical Services (NEMS), and Local Area Municipalities (LAM) fire departments. Furthermore, the Fire Chief is requesting authorization to begin looking at options for the continuation of dispatch services from 2023 onwards.

3. BACKGROUND

The current radio system used by Niagara-on-the-Lake Fire & Emergency Services (NOTLFES) is an analog system operating from a single antenna site located at the Virgil water tower. Service calls for the fire department are received at the St. Catharines Fire Services (SCFS) dispatch centre, located on Merritt Street in St. Catharines, where communications staff activate the firefighter pagers by sending a signal from their dispatch centre to the antenna at the Virgil water tower.

Currently, fire dispatch services for NOTLFES are being provided by the City of St. Catharines as per the terms and conditions in the attached Agreement (Appendix I) which commenced on January 1, 2018, and concludes on December 31, 2022.

The current analog system has had many improvements over the past several years, with details available in FES-18-003 (Appendix II) and an Information Report of December 19, 2019 (Appendix III).

4. DISCUSSION / ANALYSIS

On January 13, 2021, CSD 3-2021 (Appendix IV) titled “Next Generation 911 (NG911) Update” was presented at Niagara Region’s Corporate Services Committee by Chief Kevin Smith of NEMS. CSD 3-2021 was subsequently ratified at the January 21, 2021 Niagara Regional Council meeting.

One of the recommendations of the report included *“That staff BE DIRECTED to develop a recommended model of a consolidated emergency dispatch service for Niagara.”* This is motivated largely by requirements to transition to NG911 as per the federal and provincial mandates with a deadline of March 31, 2024. Rather than NRPS, NEMS, SCFS, and Niagara Falls Fire Departments all expending significant funds to upgrade infrastructure to support NG911, a collaborative approach is being sought in order to realize potential efficiencies. An interim update report will be provided at the March 25, 2021 Regional Council meeting.

As current dispatch services for NOTLFES are provided under contract from SCFS through to the end of 2022, and as SCFS is a stakeholder in the consolidated dispatch proposal in CSD-3-2021, there is no assurance that SCFS will be continuing to provide services after the expiry of the existing contract.

Although limited discussion has occurred with LAM fire chiefs up to this point regarding this Regional initiative, Staff have been assured by Niagara Region CAO Ron Tripp that, moving forward, we should expect increased engagement in order to ensure the success of this initiative. Currently, the Town is one of six LAM fire departments (including Fort Erie, Thorold, Welland, Wainfleet, and Port Colborne) that utilize analog radio systems, with the balance utilizing the NRPS P25 digital system.

As our current dispatch provider cannot provide any assurance that services will be provided after the end of our existing contract, and considering that Niagara Region is at the early stages of exploring what a consolidated dispatch model will look like in Niagara, it is recommended that Council authorize the Fire Chief to investigate potential options for continued dispatch services in anticipation of the conclusion of the existing Fire Dispatch Services Agreement between the City of St. Catharines and Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake on December 31, 2022.

Once additional information is available, the Fire Chief will report back on potential options for dispatch services and associated costs, pros and cons/opportunities and threats, including a recommended high-level implementation plan.

5. Strategic Plan

☒ **Protect Distinctive Community Assets**

- ☐ Preserve unique community elements
- ☒ Close gap on capital investments
- ☐ Recognize the importance of tourism in Niagara-on-the-Lake
- ☐ Other

- ☐ **Deliver Smart Balanced Growth**
- ☐ **Create a Culture of Customer Service Excellence**
- ☐ **Excel in a Positive Workplace**
- ☐ **Strength 2-Way Communications**

The Town has made a significant investment in recent years in the Town-owned analog radio infrastructure. This investment has avoided costly equipment replacement, monthly system access fees, and allowed for affordable local dispatching services. The recommendations of this report help to ensure that the Town continues to exercise sound financial stewardship, specifically surrounding potential capital investment.

6. OPTIONS

Option 1 (recommended): Direct the Fire Chief to investigate options for the continuation of dispatch services beyond 2022.

Option 2: Receive this report as information only and await information on the Region's proposed consolidated dispatch model.

7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

While there are no immediate financial implications, the potential for significant impacts to future operating and capital budgets exists. Depending on the capabilities of the new dispatch provider, significant hardware upgrades to Town user equipment may be required if the current Town-owned analog infrastructure is deemed incompatible. Furthermore, many dispatch service providers will be looking to ensure their investment in their NG911 capable centre is recovered through a multi-year service agreement.

8. COMMUNICATIONS

Not applicable.

9. CONCLUSION

Staff recommend that Council direct the Fire Chief to investigate and report back on options for dispatch services beyond 2022.

Respectfully submitted,



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Fire Chief



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