

8.0 COMMUNICATION & TECHNOLOGY

8.1 Emergency Communications and Dispatching

Emergency calls from the public are received at the 9-1-1 call centre located with and operated by the Halton Police Department headquarters on Bronte Road. These are relayed to a joint dispatch office for the City of Burlington and the Town of Oakville operated by the Burlington Fire Department adjoining their Fire Station 4 on Appleby Line (Appleby Dispatch). The change to joint dispatching by Oakville and Burlington took place approximately two years ago but is currently under review. This issue will be resolved separately from the Fire Master Plan and the following has been provided for context.

From one of three control positions calls are transmitted to Oakville fire stations and fire companies by tone alert and hard copy printout. Contact with fire companies is maintained by handheld and vehicle radios. The dispatch call processing software provides prompts and data for recording the call information and dispatching, but does not handle extra calls, cover relocations or multiple alarm responses.

Company movements beyond a first alarm response are thus not pre-planned beyond some basic guidelines. These matters are referred to the platoon chief on duty, which is not ideal. The Platoon Chief may be engaged elsewhere, is located off-site and may have other challenges in performing this critical role. As the volume of emergency calls continues to grow consideration of additional staffing and/or a supervisory structure should be considered by the Joint Operating Committee. Incremental growth and financial planning of a new model may consider options such as:

1. Developing 24/7 on-site supervision capabilities
2. Identifying a Communications Coordinator for 24/7 coverage
3. Providing a third dispatcher on each shift

Recommendations of the Joint Operating Committee should be presented to both the Oakville and Burlington Council.

The dispatch centre is well laid out and has standby power. The Oakville department operates on a municipal trunked radio system (800 MHz), which is the same as that used by the police. This ensures radio interoperability during joint exercises and major emergencies. Fire companies all have vehicle and portable radios.

Appleby Dispatch recently ceased using CRYISIS as their computer based dispatch system and reverted back to a paper-based dispatch system while alternatives are being investigated by both Burlington and Oakville Fire.

The current service provides communications with specifically trained dispatchers. In the past there was a system of rotating firefighters through the communications centre. This process led to numerous training, scheduling and risk management issues. The dispatch partnership allowed firefighters to be used for vehicle staffing and eliminated the requirement to hire more Oakville dispatchers.

All costs for staff, administration and new equipment are determined through a Council approved agreement. All reports indicate that the development of the joint dispatch centre is an innovative project that has the potential for substantial financial efficiencies. There is also the possibility of the centre providing additional services to other agencies in the future which will further reduce costs. From an

operational standpoint, there have been no issues that have not been quickly resolved by the participants and the system is functioning well, however a review is being undertaken at this time to determine how best to meet Oakville's future needs.

8.2 Information Technology

As identified in other sections of this report there is a need to address information technology issues within the department as a whole. All sections made it apparent to the study team during the interview process that there was a need for a computer based records management system. This would reduce the amount of time many of the department's "day" staff spend on paper-based tracking systems, allowing focus to shift to more important duties.

The Fire Department is currently looking at new Computer-Aided Dispatch (CAD) system and Records Management System (RMS) jointly with the City of Burlington through the Appleby Fire Dispatch agreement. At the time of writing the procurement process was underway through a request for proposals however the outcome is dependant on the review of dispatching and communications.

The Fire Prevention section already benefits from a good working relationship with the Planning Department in terms of file and resource sharing. The latter have a computerized system for entering and tracking Building Code inspections. The fire department would benefit from similar electronic reporting and tracking for Fire Code inspections. This would make the scheduling and tracking of follow-up inspections much easier.

Other opportunities to be explored include linking pre-fire planning drawings to in-vehicle mobile data terminals. This would benefit responding fire suppression staff since they could look up pre-fire plans and/or reports en-route to an emergency.

The division should continue to investigate technological options that would allow documentation to take place in the field, or at remote sites (e.g. fire prevention inspection reports, Fire Code violation letters). Such improvements would increase staff effectiveness by minimizing the amount of clerical work to be undertaken in the office.

Summary of Recommendations

1. As the volume of emergency calls continues to grow consideration of additional staffing and/or a supervisory structure should be considered by the Joint Operating Committee. Incremental growth and financial planning of a new model may consider options such as:
 - Developing 24/7 on-site supervision capabilities
 - Identifying a Communications Coordinator for 24/7 coverage
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