



Committee of the Whole Report

Meeting date:	July 28, 2020
Title:	Fire & Emergency Services - Enhanced Fire Communications System
Prepared by:	Phil Schwartz, Fire Chief
Reviewed by:	Laura Johnston, CAO

Recommendation

That West Grey council receives the report Fire & Emergency Services - Enhanced Fire Communications System; and

That West Grey council supports the enhanced fire communications system as proposed by the Grey County Fire Chiefs' Association, to be funded by Grey County; and

That West Grey council approves the annual user fee for West Grey fire department radio communications at a cost of \$30,017.92 for each of the first two years, and \$37,222.22 for each of the next six years.

Executive summary

Grey County Fire Chiefs' Association have proposed a new, enhanced radio communications system. The new system has been approved by the County of Grey who have agreed to fund the initial building of the infrastructure for the system. Grey County Chiefs would agree to pay an annual user fee to pay back the costs and maintenance of the system.

Background and discussion

The current radio system was developed back in the mid-1970s and for the most part has been a good system. It was serviced by one repeater tower in Ceylon and one in the Rockford area. In those days the fire fighters were summoned to the hall by a siren located on the fire hall roof. The calls were answered by nine fire phones located at various locations around town by the firefighters' wives. They then operated the siren until someone picked up the phone at the fire hall and took the address. We were self-dispatched in those days. Then in the mid-1980s, the dispatch center located in Hanover police station handled the calls for several different fire departments in Grey and Bruce Counties and firefighters were mustered by pager, as they are now. That same radio system was still sufficient for the day as the volume of calls remained low. As time progressed and the service in Hanover closed down West Grey Fire, in the late



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2012, needed to find other means of dispatch service, joining in with the Owen Sound Police service dispatch center.

Over the past two and half decades, the call volume for fire and emergency calls has increased dramatically. This increase has affected the old radio system and it is no longer viable and reliable. Issues include too much radio traffic with the increased call volume of both paging and communications on the same frequency. As well, two dispatch centers use the same frequency Owen Sound and Tillsonburg, causing constant walkover. Some of these issues can, and do, cause a health and safety risk to our firefighters as well as the general public. In the case of the firefighters if a mayday call was activated there is a possibility that the call could be missed or not heard if there was significant radio traffic at the time. In the case of the public, if a page was transmitted and another fire service was transmitting at the same time a page could be dropped. This has already happened to West Grey on two or three occasions.

With the new, enhanced system, there will be two frequencies - one for paging and one for communicating. All fire services will also retain their tactical channels for on scene. All radios, mobile and portables, when keyed to transmit, will send a signature so dispatch knows whose radio is activated. With the new system, dispatch will have the capability to hear all radio equipment including portables, which depending on location they do not hear now. This will give dispatch the ability to hear a mayday call which presently is only heard on scene by the incident commander, providing the incident commander hears it. Also with the two dispatch frequencies, paging will be separated giving reliable page out without interference. The new system will only allow one transition at a time, as all radios send a signature when keyed. This will stop walk over.

The new system comes with a cost. The initial set up costs are being covered by the county. The yearly fee per radio on the system which will be covered by each fire service. Presently West Grey has 101 radios in operation, which includes all fire mobiles and portables as well as mobile repeaters and all emergency management radios. All radios are programmed with the same frequencies with fire, works and emergency management channels. With the new system we have to cut back and separate out fire radios as this system will be for fire only. We will then have 67 radios in the system a reduction of 34 radios for fire. All other portables will remain for emergency management and works. Fire will no longer be able to communicate with works on the new system, so some old portables will be retained in the rescue units to be able to communicate with works if the situation arises.



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Legal and legislated requirements

There are no legal requirements requiring the new system.

Financial and resource implications

This is a 10-year project. Every year there will be a cost for tower rental, system administration (adding / removing users, programming devices, and liaison with Telequip), and frequency licensing fees. The cost is estimated at about \$125,000 in years one and two and will be billed to each municipality on a per radio basis. Beginning in year three, when the voice and paging infrastructure is no longer covered under warranty, there will be an increase of about \$30,000 to cover preventative service and technical support and maintenance for all infrastructure components. The cost to West Grey will be \$30,017.92 for years one and two and \$37,222.22 for each of the years three to eight. The cost will be divided between all four fire budgets.

The above costing does not include dispatch fees. The cost for dispatch services will remain the same as it is provided separately from the infrastructure upgrade and are from separate budget lines. This system is not owned by dispatch; it is owned by Grey County and its fire services.

Staffing implications

There are no staffing implications.

Consultation

Grey County had hired a Radio Communications Engineer responsible for consulting and setting up the requirements based on the needs of the Grey County fire services. The needs will alleviate shortcomings and issues that have developed over the past 45 years as the demand for airtime has increased for fire communications in Grey County.

Alignment to strategic vision plan

Pillar: Work together

Goal: Build partnerships

Strategy: Explore new cost-sharing initiatives

Attachments

None.



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Next steps

On committee recommendation to council to pass a resolution in support of the enhanced fire communication system and forward the resolution to Grey County. County council has already approved an RFP and will need the support and commitment of the lower tier municipalities to move forward with the project.

Respectfully submitted:

Phil Schwartz, Fire Chief