

Fire chief in the hot seat

By Jim Eadie

The fire department was back on the radar at the Wollaston Township council regular meeting held on Nov. 22 at the township office.

Fire chief Rick Middleton came to ask council to consider paying lost wages to two young firefighters incurred, or about to be incurred, attending training at out of town fire training centres. One student attended training in Trenton at a cost to the township of \$375, plus mileage and accommodations. The student incurred the loss of three days' wages. The second student was leaving for Gravenhurst that evening. The cost of training in Gravenhurst to the township is \$65 plus mileage, however it is much more difficult to arrange training in Gravenhurst. The student this time is losing five days' wages to attend. The approximate total amount requested to be approved by council was approximately \$800.

'We don't want to become a geriatric department,' said Middleton. 'We are trying to attract younger people.'

Middleton noted young people are busy with family, new careers, don't have the financial ability to give up to a week in wages, lack seniority, job security and holiday time.

'I am just concerned about setting a precedent here,' said Deputy Reeve Marilyn Brickles.

'We could put all of this training into an employee. Then they go to Ottawa and have a leg up there,' said Councillor Michael Fuerth. 'What is the advantage of sending people out? We can do the same training here.'

'Hastings Highlands is training now with a member of Hastings Highlands fire department,' said Councillor Lynn Kruger. 'If you wanted him instead of sending them out of the municipality.'

'If someone comes, it is eight or 10 weekends at six hours to eight hours plus mileage to have the guy come in,' said Councillor Bob Ireland. 'Gravenhurst could be the least expensive way to go.'

'The more we expect of our volunteers, the more we have to appreciate and compensate them,' said Reeve Graham Blair.

'I am a bit disappointed,' said Fuerth. 'You could have got a pre-commitment.'

'I guaranteed him that however we do this, we will compensate him,' said Middleton.

A motion to compensate the lost wages of the two firefighters did not carry. Ireland voted in favour of the motion, Brickles, Kruger and Fuerth voted against.

A second motion calling on staff to investigate other potential ways of accomplishing appropriate training was carried unanimously.

'I think it is late running in and asking for this,' said Kruger. 'We know now all the training can be done here.'

Middleton then directed the clerk to pay the lost wages to the two firefighters from his own payroll. 'If it comes out of my pocket, that is the way it will happen,' he said as he left the meeting.

The following day, comments relating to council support for the fire department appeared on the Wollaston Fire Dept. Facebook page, and later in the day the Facebook page was taken down.

'I am going to do my year-end report for council on Dec. 13,' he said. 'They were worried about setting a precedent, but this community is cash poor. Our most valuable resource is our people. Other fire departments support their firefighters this way. North Kawartha, for example. I felt a bit like I was ambushed. That is not too strong a word.'

Middleton also noted that the firefighters voted to support him, and pay the lost wages out of their Spring Fling account. The Spring Fling is an annual fundraising event held to raise money to support the fire department. The municipality has no control over this account, according to Middleton.