

New fire regulations could cost rural residents

By Sarah Sobanski

Proposed provincial legislation for Ontario's firefighters could cost North Hastings Fire Service nearly \$15,000 per new firefighter. Fire chief for the service Pat Hoover attended Hastings Highlands council March 7 to report on mandatory firefighter certification requirements proposed by the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services for next January.

According to the report, course costs alone would add up to more than \$2,500 per new firefighter. The service would then need to pay for his or her training hours at around \$7,500 for nearly 500 hours. Plus travel costs to Trenton and back, more than an additional \$4,500.

There has been a lot of pushback from rural Ontario, and rightfully so, Hoover said at the meeting. In his report he wrote further review and consultation were needed of the regulation change and that rural Ontario should have a larger voice at the table. He suggested the regulation carry a greater impact on rural volunteer fire service than that of urban full-time fire service. These costs don't include mandatory certification requirements proposed for existing firefighters including fire inspectors, fire investigators, fire instructors, hazardous materials personnel and fire dispatchers. Expectations are being revised because these roles are exposed to increase risk, Hoover reported.

He also takes issue with the time allotted for firefighters to become certified at the level of the new regulations. Requirements proposed for new firefighters must be met, with some exceptions, by January 2019. For existing firefighters, that deadline is extended to January 2020.

You can't currently get through Firefighter 1 in 24 months, said Hoover. Not in a volunteer situation where there are good people with full-time jobs and families and other commitments in the community. We're asking them to give up their time.

Hoover suggested one course could take multiple weeks to complete and some of the new certification requirements wouldn't be applicable to rural firefighting. Firefighter 1, 2 and Hazmat 427 Core Ops will be required, according to the report.

Currently, we are training to the standard. By training to the standard, we train to what our firefighters are currently providing as service, he said. It's not a one piece fits all solution and that's kind of the approach the government has taken on this regulation: a firefighter's a firefighter's a firefighter. Well, they're not. There's different levels of service across the province.

He added, We may have to look at reassessing the level of service provided by the municipality to our community to fulfill these obligations. Whether or not we stay at our current level or we drop back to exterior attack only.

North Hastings Fire Service is funded through municipal taxes. Its level of service is set by the councils of each of the municipalities it services. It doesn't receive any funding from the province though the ministry, according to the report, will consider provincial funding to support implementation of this regulation, once final.

I honestly don't think that there is going to be any funding, said Hoover. However, we will have to assess our situation after the passing of the regulation.

He said the more responses that can be sent to the province outlining how the new regulation will kill rural fire service, the better. Final comments were accepted until March 11.

North Hastings Fire Service has more than 70 volunteer firefighters.