

STAFF REPORT TO COUNCIL

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DATE: May 2, 2024

TO: MAYOR AND COUNCIL

NAME AND TITLE: Eric Depenau, Acting Director Administrative Services

SUBJECT: Enhanced Patrols

ATTACHMENT(S): None

RECOMMENDATION(S):

THAT Council DIRECT administration to carry out enhanced patrols as described in the report titled Enhance Patrols, dated May 2, 2024.

PURPOSE:

This report is offered to provide Council with an increased service delivery option in response to fires that are occurring in the downtown core.

BACKGROUND:

The increase in burning complaints and item fires in the downtown core are a significant issue. Due to the nature of these fires, it has been deemed challenging by Prince George Fire Rescue to categorize these fires in a manner that gives authority under the Fire Bylaw or the BC Fire Services Act to address these concerns as one individual agency. Therefore, joint responses are being considered to curb the number of incidents.

It is proposed that enhanced collaborative patrols between Prince George Fire Rescue, Prince George Bylaw Services and the RCMP be launched to reduce the number of inappropriate fires in the downtown with the further goal of reducing property damage stemming from these fires.

This initiative proposes the establishment of proactive patrols both on foot and with vehicles, to locate and document fires that are occurring, identify individuals responsible for dangerous fires downtown, to educate and to enforce, as appropriate, against these instances.

As this is a joint initiative between multiple agencies, a term of reference for the patrols will be developed as well as adequate training (as determined between the operational leads from each agency) to support successful project delivery.

Goals:

1. To gather data. Patrols will collect information such as the number, location, types of fuel, suspected origin and damage stemming from these fires to help form information that can be used to enhance decision making and inform further actions.
1. To educate offenders and deter recurrence. The desire being to change dangerous behaviors through education.
2. To conduct an escalating strategy of enforcement, as required, to stop offenders who are not deterred by the presence of these patrols or through education.

Information, stemming from the three goals, will be compiled into a council report which may include recommendations for further action.

Approach / Rationale

Patrols are expected to be conducted by 1 Bylaw Officer, 1 RCMP Member and 1 Firefighter between the hours of 10 PM and 3-4 AM three times per week for 4-6 weeks (12 to 18 patrols). Exact staffing will depend on operational needs. These patrols would be scheduled in advance but carried out on different nights each week to help prevent individuals from anticipating the patrols' attendance. It is assessed that to be successful, an escalating approach similar to that used to deter open drug use and loitering would be utilized.

As example, for inappropriate burning, a bylaw ticket for an offence may be issued (as example under 3.1 of the Clean Air Bylaw – Open Burning). If an individual is located a second time, then a second bylaw ticket may be issued. A third instance may result in the RCMP recommending a criminal charge of mischief. While it is unknown if such a charge will be approved by Crown Counsel, this documented escalation would put the municipality in a position to seek an injunction against individuals if there were further occurrences. This could subsequently lead to arrest and charges related to breaching a court order.

If an individual is found setting or maintaining a fire in a deliberately destructive manner, i.e. the side of a building, the RCMP have indicated that they may recommend a criminal charge of mischief in the first instance.

Joint patrols are recommended as the RCMP have the authority to arrest for mischief if warranted, and the ability to submit Report to Crown Counsel for charge approval. Fire Rescue are subject matter experts and can aid in identifying the type and cause of fire and can assess the extent of potential damage. Bylaw Services have developed relationships with many individuals who frequent the downtown and have authority to issue tickets under the Clean Air Bylaw for any offence listed in part 3 of the City of Prince George Clean Air Bylaw (open burning and recreational fires).

This proposed action supports the principles of escalating enforcement. By starting with bylaw tickets, where appropriate, these tickets can form part of the body of evidence that would nourish the RCMP Report to Crown Counsel. This may be further accompanied by Fire Rescue's opinion evidence on the danger as well as evidence that there is a distinction between an appropriately constructed and managed fire used for warmth or cooking and one that is destructive in nature.

Staffing:

Fire Rescue and Bylaw participation in this activity would be compensated for through existing department budgets. RCMP participation would also be covered internally through that agency.

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES:

This work can be viewed under several priorities including the strategic pillar of social health and wellbeing and subsequently the desire to ensure a safe, healthy, and clean community for all, as example.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS:

Increased patrols during the times outlined will incur overtime costs. As example, within Fire Rescue, the 12 to 18 patrols proposed are expected to cost between \$20,000 and \$27,500. Each work unit is prepared to absorb these costs within their existing budgets.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION:

This report provides a recommendation for increased, limited duration, interagency patrols to deter inappropriate fire in the downtown area.

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED:

Eric Depenau, Acting Director Administrative Services

Prepared by:

Charlotte Peters, Bylaw Services Manager

Cliff Warner, Fire Chief, Fire Services

APPROVED:

Walter Babicz, City Manager

Meeting Date: 06 May 2024