

Date: July 11, 2024

To: **Mayor and Council.**

Name and title: Eric Depenau, Director, Administrative Services

Subject: Report on Enhanced Fire Patrols

Attachment(s): None.

Recommendation(s):

That Council:

1. DIRECTS Administration to REVIEW options to incentivize businesses to screen their garbage, recycling and outdoor storage areas with a view to eliminate excess containers as described within the report titled, "Report on Enhanced Fire Patrols" dated July 11, 2024, from the Director of Administrative Services.
2. DIRECTS Administration to REVIEW options to establish a cardboard recycling program with frequent pick up in the downtown core as described within the report titled, "Report on Enhanced Fire Patrols" dated July 11, 2024, from the Director of Administrative Services.
3. DIRECTS Administration to REVIEW options to establish a program where pallets can be properly disposed of and/or recycled as described within the report titled, "Report on Enhanced Fire Patrols" dated July 11, 2024, from the Director of Administrative Services.
4. DIRECTS Administration to REVIEW options to reduce the buildup of tires in the downtown core as described within the report titled, "Report on Enhanced Fire Patrols" dated July 11, 2024, from the Director of Administrative Services.
5. REFERS to the Standing Committee on Intergovernmental Affairs consideration to engage with BC Housing to examine the rules and restrictions of its provincially funded shelters in Prince George as described within the report titled, "Report on Enhanced Fire Patrols" dated July 11, 2024, from the Director of Administrative Services.
6. DIRECTS Administration to meet with the RCMP on the detachments strategic plan where discussion on municipal priorities can be shared as described within the report titled, "Report on Enhanced Fire Patrols" dated July 11, 2024, from the Director of Administrative Services.

7. DIRECTS Administration to explore an event where the municipality can support the removal of derelict vehicles as described within the report titled, "Report on Enhanced Fire Patrols" dated July 11, 2024, from the Director of Administrative Services.

Purpose:

This report is to provide Mayor and Council with the results of the Enhanced Fire Patrols pilot project that took place in downtown Prince George between May 18, 2024, and June 18, 2024. In addition to reporting on results this report also provides Council with recommendations and information to be considered in forming further direction on this issue.

Background:

On May 2, 2024, Council directed staff from Bylaw Services and Prince George Fire Rescue to conduct enhanced patrols in downtown Prince George to deter fires and other nuisance crime in the area overnight. The Prince George RCMP were consulted in the planning stages and invited to participate in this initiative. Due to staff shortages and competing priorities the RCMP were not able to participate physically in the patrols but were prepared to provide support on an on-call basis. Bylaw Services and Prince George Fire Rescue conducted 10 patrols on various days of the week between the hours of 10 PM and 6 AM.

The patrol area was between 2nd Avenue and 3rd Avenue from Victoria Street to George Street, the alleys between 3rd Avenue and 4th Avenue from Victoria Street to George Street, between 4th Avenue and 5th Avenue from Victoria Street to George Street and between 5th Avenue and 6th Avenue between Victoria Street and George Street.

The goals of the patrols, as communicated at the outset, were:

1. **To gather data.** Patrols were to collect information such as the number, location, types of fuel, suspected origin and damage stemming from these fires to be used to enhance decision making and inform other actions.
2. **To educate offenders and deter recurrence.** To change dangerous behaviors through education.
3. **To conduct an escalating strategy of enforcement.** To stop offenders who are not deterred by task force presence and education.

Goals 1 and 2 were largely satisfied through the conduct of these patrols. Goal 3 was not realized to the extent desired by administration and lessons learned have been compiled should similar work be undertaken in the future.

During the patrols, there was an average of 45 people located outside. This does not include those sheltering at the Lower Patricia Boulevard Encampment (LPBE). These individuals were gathering on downtown streets and were generally in groups of 3 or 4. The areas where individuals were located were consistent throughout the patrols. Most groups had fires that were generally small and were being used for warmth. People were asked about fuel for the fires. It was reported that the fuel was generally cardboard or broken pallets. It was observed that these materials are readily available in the alleys of downtown Prince George. These materials were observed during the patrols in open, insecure garbage dumpsters or simply stored in the alleys outside of the rear of businesses. It was also reported during the patrols that pallets are being regularly dropped off at the LPBE to be used in making shelters or fuel for fire. It is not known who provides those pallets to the encampment.

It was reported that in the alleys within the patrol area there were 93 dumpsters located with very few secured. The most common areas where people were located during the overnight patrols were as follows:

- 277 George Street – The Northern Health Overdose Prevention site
- 144 George Street – AWAC Shelter
- 1220 2nd Avenue – St. Vincent DePaul
- 1386 3rd Avenue – Northern Hardware
- 1126 3rd Avenue – POUNDS
- 808 Canada Games Way - Civic Plaza

58 fires were located throughout the patrols, some of which were unattended. All were easy to extinguish but left marks/damage on the surfaces where they were burning.

People who were located sheltering on the street during these patrols were asked where they were from and why they were not able to secure beds in shelters. In almost all instances' people reported that they could not get into shelters as they were not allowed in or they had been in the shelter, left and then could not get back in. In terms of where people had come from, the majority stated they were from Prince George but there were a small number of people who stated they were from other locations in Northern British Columbia.

People were also asked why they did not take up shelter in the Lower Patricia Encampment. The response was consistently given that they fear the criminality that is alleged to be taking place at the site. Comments included allegations of sex and drug trafficking. Individuals also shared a belief that many of the fires in the LPBE are arsons occurring as retribution (outstanding debts and punishing those who speak to the police to report illegal activity as example). These comments have been referred to the RCMP. Some of the ongoing fire activity at the LPBE has previously been deemed suspicious by Prince George Fire Services.

RECOMMENDATIONS/DISCUSSION POINTS

Downtown Business/City of Prince George

Council may:

1. Proactively use the provision of the Zoning Bylaw that requires garbage and recycling bins (as well as outdoor storage areas) to be screened in. Past work on similar projects suggests that securing bins directly often poses challenges as locks are easily cut and business owners absorb these costs without significantly preventing the issue.
2. Consider opportunities to support / incentivize screening in garbage, recycling and storage areas (such as additional support to existing programs like the related DBA micrografting stream).
3. Work with businesses to reduce the number of dumpsters that are present in each alley.
4. Establish a regulated cardboard recycling program with more frequent pick up so that there is not as much readily available.
5. Establish a program where pallets can be properly disposed of and/or recycled.

6. Work with local businesses and groups like Tire Stewardship BC to reduce the buildup of tires on properties downtown.
7. Explore an event where the municipality can support the removal of derelict vehicles. A specific instance in the spring where a derelict vehicle was involved in a fire downtown highlighted this as a possible activity. The City could engage with local auto wreckers to support an annual event (coinciding with earth day as example) where people could call 311 to be added to a list to have vehicles removed from their property. The municipality could help advertise and coordinate the list. This is an activity that some other municipalities in the Regional District Fraser Fort George have undertaken (Valemount as example).

BC Housing/Shelters

Council may:

1. Meet with representatives of BC Housing to examine the policies and procedures of its provincially funded shelters in Prince George to determine why so many people are reporting that they are not permitted to stay in local shelters and how best to address these occurrences.
2. Formally request that BC Housing and the Ministry of Housing explore a standardized training program for shelter workers, so they are better equipped to deal with providing service to their clients. An initial review suggests that no such program exists currently.
3. Requesting that BC Housing do all it can to extend shelter offers to those at the LPBE as reports suggest it is an unsafe place for the unhoused to shelter.

Prevention/Enforcement

Police engagement in this type of activity is assessed as greatly assisting in the gathering of information such as names and locations of where people come from. Although some individuals were cooperative, many were not. If future patrols are contemplated the ability of the RCMP to participate will need to be re-examined. While the RCMP was involved in the planning stage and supported the initiative at the May 2nd Council meeting, constraints prevented their full participation.

The presence of police would also assist with progressive enforcement as during enforcement, information (such as gathering names) is required. With out RCMP support this aspect of the patrols was significantly lessened.

Council may:

1. Direct staff to engage with the RCMP regarding the detachments priorities to better understand current focus areas. There could be increased emphasis from the City of Prince George in communicating municipal priorities to increase awareness within the RCMP. Along with this there could be a request for additional (biannual as example) meetings to inform council of progress on these priorities. These actions appear consistent with contract management principles.
2. Formally requesting the RCMP to have the Downtown Safety Unit provide proactive patrols downtown overnight. Having some overnight presence may be an effective way of preventing

some of the nuisance crimes and bylaw infractions that are being reported. Having a varied schedule between dayshifts and nightshifts would also avail the police to other agencies to assist in priority initiatives.

Summary and conclusion:

At a staff level, these patrols have been successful in 2 of the 3 goals initially proposed. Although limited progressive enforcement took place the patrols provided valuable insight into activities downtown after dark. It is determined that there is value in doing this again in the future – specifically the fall and spring shoulder seasons. A renewed formal request will be made for RCMP participation should these patrols take place again.

Respectfully submitted:

Eric Depenau, Director of Administrative Services

Prepared by Charlotte Peters, Manager of Bylaw Services

Approved:

Walter Babicz, City Manager

Meeting date: 2024-08-19