

PRESENTATION TO CREST BOARD
May 16, 2018

Good afternoon Board members and thank you for this opportunity to speak. As my friend James just stated, we are two citizens who have taken a keen interest in the initiative to establish a regional fire dispatch centre, which would streamline fire call handling and improved coordination of interagency firefighting activities.

My interest comes from being the RCMP representative on the original CRD 9-1-1 Implementation Committee. I always felt that we fell short of achieving the best Enhanced 9-1-1 system because of the multitude of Primary and Secondary Answering Points. The advent of the CREST system made it significantly easier to reduce the number of dispatch centres and brought about the possibility of merging all fire dispatch activities into one facility.

Commencing early next year, the SICCC will centralize 9-1-1 Primary Call answering and Police dispatch operations, significantly enhancing and simplifying the handling of 9-1-1 calls. The SICCC will have the capability of dispatching the “closest available Police personnel” to serious calls, as they will have a continuous ‘birds eye’ view of available police resources throughout the CRD, a benefit that is not possible with three Police Dispatch Centres.

James and I have spoken at CRD Board and Protective Services Committee meetings as well as to Saanich Council, CRD Protective Services staff and to the Victoria and Saanich Fire Chief’s. We have listened to various discussions around the feasibility of a single fire dispatch centre at various meetings and read every report we could access on the topic. We have not heard or read one **valid operational**

reason for not moving to a single dispatch facility. On the contrary, the concept has wide support and disagreements over costs are the only concerns that have been raised in some quarters.

With the encouraging news last October that Victoria would contract its fire dispatch with Saanich, it seemed like a giant step was being taken towards reducing the number of fire dispatch centres and that the region would at least reduce the number of centres to two and, possibly even one (excluding DND).

This was followed by news in March that five Saanich dispatch clients were opting to move their dispatch services to Surrey, based on responses to RFPs they sent out to various service providers, Surrey Fire being the least expensive.

Statements from the 5 CRD directors representing the 5 client departments conflict with statements made by the Saanich Fire Chief and CAO. Saanich claims the figures given to the 5 last November were intended as a basis for negotiation, while those 5 seem to believe the new fees proposed by Saanich were presented on a 'take it or leave it' basis.

Thankfully, Saanich recently extended the agreements with the 5 departments until the end of the year, with moderate fee increases.

A wide and somewhat confusing array of prices now exist, including those based on the Saanich's Third Foundation Consulting report, responses to the RFPs sent out by the 5 departments and responses to CRD Protective Services RFPs from Langford and Saanich,

one based on dispatching all departments and a second based service to all, less the 5. In two cases, competitive 'in region' bids, based on all agencies participating, have resulted from the responses to the CRD RFPs.

So why would a single dispatch centre make any difference to the region's citizenry?

A single dispatch centre simplifies fire call transfers from the SICC, the Primary Answering Point.

With only one fire dispatch, there would be no possibility of transferring a call to the wrong fire dispatch centre.

A single fire dispatch centre would have a complete and ongoing overview of fire activities throughout the region, would know the status of all firefighting resources and could, subject to enhanced mutual aid agreements, dispatch the **nearest** firefighters to fire scenes, hazmat incidents and first responder calls regardless of municipal boundaries.

While this can also be achieved through multiple dispatch centres, it cannot be accomplished as quickly, as information must be relayed between dispatch centres.

A study for the CRD by Planetworks Consulting in 2011 also pointed out that a single fire dispatch centre would reduce the total number of staff needed, from a minimum of four 24/7 to three, a significant ongoing cost-savings consideration. Additionally, support technologies would only be required in one location, rather than three locations plus in a suitable backup facility.

We encourage the Directors from the 5 'leaving' departments to reconsider their decisions to leave.

Unintended consequences of the 5 leaving are the possibility of fee changes for the remaining fire

departments through loss of economies of scale. Additionally, it seems that the Saanich/Victoria agreement has stalled as a result of the announcement by the 5 to go out of region.

This past March, the three Peninsula municipalities amended their mutual aid agreements so that all three departments now respond to structure fires in all three municipalities. The following quotes currently appear on the Central Saanich website, referring to the tri-municipal mutual aid agreement:

“It significantly improves safety for all residents on the peninsula and it makes the best use of the current resources available,” said **Central Saanich Fire Chief Chris Vrabel**.

“This protocol has been in place informally since the 2017 summer fire season, we are all pleased to formalize it into our current tri-municipal mutual aid agreement,” added **North Saanich Fire Chief John Trelford**.

Sidney Fire Chief Brett Mikkelsen said, *“It makes a lot of sense for our departments to work more closely and to share our resources wherever possible, this is a win-win for people living and working on the peninsula.”*

So, if North Saanich and Sidney transfer their fire dispatch to Surrey and Central Saanich retains its service with Saanich, how will two dispatch centres dispatching these three departments enhance public safety on the Peninsula?

Then there are the costs that CREST will need to pass onto the 5 agencies. For the 5 agencies, sticker price seems to have become the most important consideration. For the 5 Councils, as stewards of their respective municipal expenditures, price must be a consideration, but should it be the only consideration? Can Surrey provide the same level of integrated service as local dispatch providers?

In closing, I would like to quote an observation from the authors of the *Capital Integrated Services and Governance Initiative*, which involved the region's Mayors and the (then) BC Ministry responsible for local government, referring to regional cooperation:

“The CRD is an important institution. It does a good job on some things and has a harder time with others. Getting to yes on big contentious issues is a problem.”

Here is an opportunity to look beyond your own individual boundaries and consider the best solution for the region. We ask the 5 agencies to reconsider their intention to transfer their dispatch services out of region and to evaluate the next set of numbers being developed by CRD Protective Services. By leaving, you may impact the cost of dispatch to others. We live in a region – this is an instance when regional considerations should trump local considerations for the sake of public safety.

We will watch this discussion with great interest. Thank you for your attention.

Colin Nielsen