

Comment: It doesn't make sense to build fire hall at new Esquimalt Town Square



The Department of National Defence fire hall on Esquimalt Road.
Photograph By Times Colonist

I am an Esquimalt taxpayer with some experience in protective services. I understand Esquimalt is going ahead with a new seismically sound public safety building to be located near the existing hall in the new Town Square, which is approximately 500 metres from the massive new Department of National Defence fire hall on Esquimalt Road.

The City of Victoria has on its radar the construction of a new fire hall on the

west side of the two bridges, which means in a short period of time, we will have three professional fire halls serving an area of 8.5 square kilometres and a population of approximately 27,000.

article continues below

The number of professional firefighters at any given time for these three professional halls would be between 20 and 28.

I am not sure this duplication of services would be replicated anywhere else in Canada, and cannot think of anyone who would agree this is a smart, cost-effective use of emergency personnel or taxpayer money.

An alternative, saving both the township and the city significant annual costs and providing much better coverage, would be for Esquimalt to merge with Victoria Fire and build a combined public safety building on the corner of Dominion and Esquimalt (for example) for coverage of Victoria West and Esquimalt and faster response to the north side of Esquimalt.

We could even think outside the box and blend the Union Hall site with the old Texaco site, closing Dominion off to Esquimalt Road and build a combined Victoria/Esquimalt public-safety showcase that would house police and fire and whatever else was deemed suitable.

This plan would alter the oft-maligned 800-block entry to Esquimalt forever, provide joint ownership and allow for the Esquimalt Town Square to be developed in a way more user-friendly capacity, without burdening the all-important ground floor with protective services that are not conducive to a “town square” vibe.

One concern for Esquimalt could be a comparison to the Victoria Police Department merger in 2003 and the perception that we are paying too much for the service we’re getting.

Policing has many variables that constantly change and require additional

personnel, staffing and many fluid, time-sensitive decisions, whereas the number of firefighters required to operate apparatus or be present for minimum staffing in an Esquimalt/Victoria West hall would rarely, if ever, change. From a budgeting perspective, one protective service is, by necessity, a moving target, while the other has proven to be very predictable.

Taking this collaborative approach would do the following:

- Allow both municipalities to combine financial resources — and Esquimalt's \$5 million in amenity funds for hosting the sewage-treatment plant — to build a new protective-services building with significant cost savings.
- Reduce overtime costs in Esquimalt. In recent years, Esquimalt Fire Department's overtime costs have been close to or more than the Victoria Fire Department's. Esquimalt Fire has 26 members and Victoria Fire has close to 130. The more staff, the more flexibility on coverage.

It is a bit ironic that in 2009, the late, legendary and brilliant Ted Hughes conducted an audit on Esquimalt Fire Department and made many recommendations on ways to reduce overtime. This cost Esquimalt taxpayers \$60,000 and has simply led 10 years later to “déjà vu all over again,” as Dizzy Dean would say.

- Esquimalt could reduce staffing costs by removing what will be redundant senior positions.
- Esquimalt would have permanent automatic aid for serious incidents. Currently, Esquimalt relies on a finite agreement with the Department of National Defence that is subject to change based on the views of the base commander, as the priority in emergencies will always be \$1 billion in navy ships. As a subsidiary or “out hall” of the Victoria Fire Department, the resources of the two or possibly three other halls would be automatic for

major incidents.

- Victoria would then have fire and emergency protection for rapidly growing Victoria West.

In summary:

- Combine financial resources on a major capital expense.
- Esquimalt will have a permanent solution to uncertain mutual-aid agreements.
- Esquimalt can shave as much as \$500,000, plus or minus, off annual operating costs.
- Victoria and Esquimalt can combine funds to build a showcase public-safety building at or near the entry to Esquimalt.
- Two Greater Victoria municipalities would actually work together to solve a fire-protection and safety problem.
- Victoria would gain access to, and use of, all of the state-of-the-art Esquimalt Fire apparatus.
- Having three professional halls in such a small geographical region with a population of 25,000-30,000 simply does not make sense from any perspective.
- The Esquimalt Town Square would be more people-friendly with non-emergency ground-level options for retail or public access.

At the very least, this discussion needs to be held at the highest levels of elected officials between the Township of Esquimalt and the City of Victoria. I realize time and money has been invested in the two paths we seem to be on, but it is not too late to have a common-sense re-think and ask some serious questions about our future and the future of protective services on

the west side of the bridges.

Tom Woods, MBA, is a retired firefighter and longtime Esquimalt resident who graduated from Esquimalt High in 1980.



© 2020 Copyright Times Colonist

You Might Be Interested In