

Oct. 7, 2008

Reports to Howick Council: A local news announcement today states that North Huron Council voted to withdraw from the Wingham Area Fire Board. Howick has received no formal notice of this decision from North Huron.

At the Sept. 29th meeting, North Huron expressed a wish to form a new entity combining the Wingham and Blyth Fire Departments under sole control and ownership of North Huron, and they would then sell fire services to surrounding municipalities.

Oct. 14, 2008

Howick Township Council and Morris-Turnberry Council met together to discuss the implications if North Huron withdraws from the Fire Agreement (still no notice or confirmation received from North Huron). Recommended that we obtain and share the cost of services of a Solicitor to review the Fire Agreement and provide interpretation and advice.

Oct. 21, 2008

Howick Council received:

- Letter dated Oct. 14th from North Huron advising that *“the Township of North Huron is desirous of terminating its participation in the Wingham Area Fire Board agreement, and as per Section 14 of the agreement hereby gives notice of termination. The termination will be effective December 31st, 2009.”*
- Minutes of the “Fire Services Review Meeting” held Sept. 29th.
Excerpts from the Minutes:
 - *The purpose of the meeting is to outline North Huron’s vision to facilitate disbandment of both fire boards and provide fire services on a fee for service basis with one Chief answering to Council ...*
 - *Key principle That fire service purchased by any municipality shall be based on true cost recovery.*
- Letter dated Oct. 15th from North Huron explaining their decision. Another discussion meeting is called for Nov. 12th in North Huron, with a request that each municipality send 2 representatives.
- Letter of opinion from North Huron’s Solicitor regarding termination of agreement, and provision of services.

Nov. 18, 2008

Howick Representatives who attended the Nov. 12th meeting in North Huron report no further concrete information was provided by North Huron – historical financial data, but no cost projections for future plans. Proposed Organization Chart for North Huron Fire Services excludes Gorrie Fire Station.

Dec. 8, 2008

Howick and Morris-Turnberry Councils met again. Discussed options for fire services. Received and discussed letter of opinion from Solicitor.

Dec. 16, 2008

After lengthy discussion of pros and cons of options available to Howick, the following resolution was passed by Howick Council:

“WHEREAS the Township of North Huron has declared intention to withdraw from the Wingham Area Fire Agreement,

AND WHEREAS the said Agreement is silent on the matter of the complete dissolution of the Agreement,

NOW THEREFORE Council of the Township of Howick hereby resolves to enter into negotiations with the participants of the Agreement to mutually dissolve the Wingham Area Fire Agreement effective December 31, 2009, and equitably divide the assets of the Fire Board in accordance with the provisions of the Agreement.”

Dec. 22, 2008

Howick and Morris-Turnberry Councils met again to discuss options.

Jan. 20, 2009

Howick Council received and discussed an anonymous proposal to establish an independent task force of volunteers to study the fire services situation.

Feb. 3, 2009

North Huron asking for a response as soon as possible from Howick as to our intentions for providing fire service. Council agrees that the outcome of Howick’s decision is dependent on information that must be provided by North Huron.

Howick Council sends letter to North Huron requesting information, ie. terms and costs for purchasing services, intentions regarding operation of Gorrie satellite station. (copy of letter provided)

Feb. 17, 2009

Howick Council met with Station Chief Bill Doig and Deputy Chief Dale Edgar to get their input on various alternatives for providing fire services.

Mar. 3, 2009

Howick Council received response from North Huron (copy of letter provided).

Excerpts from letter of response:

- North Huron is not yet in a position to begin formal negotiations with regards to specific services and / or exact costing as we are currently engaged in a process designed to set out the following:
 - Establish organizational chart for new North Huron Fire Service
 - Establish key personnel for various leadership positions
 - Establish costs associated with launch of new North Huron Fire Service
 - Establish specific mandate of North Huron Fire Service
- I am able to provide the following information that has been finalized from our perspective. Firstly, the Township of North Huron has determined that it is not feasible for North Huron to provide service from the Gorrie Station due to the unique situation of the station being located in another municipality.

Howick Council is in general agreement that it is important for Howick Township to retain the fire station in Gorrie. Council will continue to actively investigate the options for providing fire services, including the establishment of an independent fire department for Howick Township.

Reeve Demaray concluded that this brings us to this point in time, and addressed the following question to Mr. Zimmerman, Office of the Fire Marshall (OFM) – “What do we need to do to establish our own fire department”?

FIRE PROTECTION SERVICES

Mr. Zimmerman began by clarifying that it is not within his scope to determine what direction the municipality should take – it is up to Council to make such decisions, and the OFM will then assist and advise in implementing those decisions. He noted that establishing a fire department is one option for Howick - others include joint fire boards, fire protection agreements, automatic aid agreements, or a combination of some or all of the above. It is necessary to assess the whole community to see what is needed in the way of fire services. Perhaps more than one fire department may be necessary to effectively service the needs of the Township. Mr. Zimmerman advised Council to confer with a solicitor about the implications of “lowering” the current level of service provision.

Addressing requirements for setting up a Howick Fire Department, it is necessary first for Council to decide the level of service based on the needs of the municipality, which are identified through a ‘needs and risk assessment’. Provincial legislation [*Fire Protection and Prevention Act*], states mandatory requirements for a municipality include:

1. ‘*Fire Prevention*’, including completion of risk assessment, providing inspections on request or complaint, implementing a smoke alarm program, and carrying out public education programs. All of these are already in place for Howick.
2. ‘*Fire Suppression*’ services that address the identified risks.

Mr. Zimmerman and Mr. Kuntz volunteered to answer any questions from Council.

(Q = Question: R = Response)

Q. *Want to clarify – Howick Council has the authority to set the level of service?*

R. Yes. It is up to Council to determine what is required.

Q. *If Fire Boards are OK, why did North Huron withdraw from the Agreement?*

R. Cannot speak for North Huron. The OFM has no position regarding Fire Boards – its role is to advise and assist municipalities. Some Fire Boards have become “cumbersome” since the changes in legislation, and some Agreements do not reflect the new legislation.

Q. *What are the manpower requirements for a fire station?*

R. First, Council must establish the desired level of service. It is expected that a fire station is staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In small, rural municipalities expectations and requirements are not as high. Although Howick has three villages, the population is such that it is still classed as “rural”. Once Council has set the level of service, criteria for service delivery are put in place, and the fire department must respond “in a timely fashion”. The set level of service dictates the number of firefighters required.

Captain Doig and Deputy Edgar, when asked if Howick has sufficient manpower to operate a fire department, both felt that the 18 volunteer firemen currently on staff would be sufficient.

Mr. Zimmerman added that Howick could supplement the fire department capability through agreements for services with neighbouring municipalities. He cautioned that Mutual Aid (reciprocal assistance) cannot be used to cover staff shortages.

- Q. *What would be the impact on insurance costs for residents if there was no fire hall in Gorrie?*
- R. Peter Keil, Keil Dadson Insurance Brokers, and Tim Wylie, Wylie Insurance Brokers, provided information:
- the impact would be greater for the residents of Gorrie than for others since those in proximity to the fire hall get a better premium rate.
 - properties further than 13 km from the fire hall are deemed “unprotected” and already pay a higher rate.
 - It is difficult to quote dollar values as Insurance Companies’ rates vary.

Chief Doig (Gorrie resident) added that he asked his insurance provider to give him a comparison, and was advised that his annual premium would increase between \$150.00 - \$160.00.

Reeve Demaray asked if the others in attendance wished to ask questions.

Q. *Mayor Kelly asked why Howick representatives on the Wingham Area Fire Board did not support Morris-Turnberry’s request at the recent Board meeting that North Huron be required to provide a second appraisal [of the Board’s assets] as stipulated in the Joint Fire Agreement.*

R. North Huron attempted to obtain a second appraisal, but was unable to do so. Mayor Kelly replied that Morris-Turnberry provided the name of another Appraisal firm, but North Huron dismissed it.

Q. *Why are we not insisting that North Huron be required to act in accordance with the provisions of the Agreement?*

R. It is not always possible to follow an agreement to the “letter of the law”. Treasurer Farinha added that a solicitor will advise that it is impossible, and at times, making such demands has the potential to incur added risk and/or financial detriment.

Q. *What is an Automatic Aid Agreement?*

R. Mr. Zimmerman replied that this is a fire protection agreement “with a time limit” attached. For example, it would provide that a neighbouring fire department would respond to a call in your municipality for up to a specified period of time (ie. 1 hour) to supplement your service, or to cover until your department is able to respond. These are becoming more common now.

Q. *There is presently no rescue truck in Howick. Are we required to have one?*

R. That would be based on the level of service set by Council. At present, Wingham does not provide “first response” (medical assist) service. The basic requirements would be a pumper truck and a tanker truck since Howick does not have municipal water systems. Both of these are also required in order to participate in Mutual Aid agreements. As more training and equipment are acquired, it may be necessary to utilize another vehicle.

Q. *Will it cost more to run our own fire department?*

R. It will probably cost more than we’re paying now [under the fire agreement], but it is anticipated that purchasing services from North Huron will ultimately cost a lot more since we will have no say or control over costs, and no equity.

Further discussion and comment continued when Reeve Demaray advised that Council is in agreement that Howick does not want to lose the fire hall in Gorrie, and intends to do what it can to ensure that does not happen.

Norman Fairles, who was on Howick Council when the Wingham and Area Fire Agreement was implemented, commented on Howick’s fire protection prior to the joint agreement, when it was necessary to negotiate service agreements annually with five neighbouring municipalities and absorb ever-escalating costs. It is his hope that the present agreement, which has served the partners well for 25 years, may still be salvaged before it’s too late. Howick Council generally agrees that North Huron has made it quite clear that their decision to withdraw is irrevocable, and that option is no longer viable.

Mr. Zimmerman was asked if the OFM has specific criteria for determining the “level of service”. The preliminary defining factors would be derived from the municipal risk assessment. For example, Gorrie firefighters would not be required to be trained to “technician” level for dealing with significant hazardous material risks, but would be expected to have awareness of such risks. They would need the training and equipment required to provide

the appropriate level of response, without assistance or backup, for the needs identified by the risk assessment and the level of service set by Council. Council is authorized by the *Fire Protection and Prevention Act* to set a level of service that relates to the resources available. Once Council makes the decisions on what is to be done, the OFM can provide guidelines and advice on how to achieve the goals.

While researching options, Howick Council visited the Teeswater Fire Department. Deputy Reeve Yungblut provided financial and equipment data for Teeswater fire department. Responding to a comment that perhaps Howick could use Teeswater as a template for equipment needs and operating costs, as it is rural and similar in coverage area, Mr. Zimmerman advised that each municipality is different in as much as the risks differ from one to another.

Asked that if Howick has its own fire department, would Council also purchase service from other municipalities, there was general agreement that the contract with the Town of Minto to cover the northeast corner of Howick from the Clifford fire station will be retained. Mr. Kuntz (OFM) suggested that Howick may want to look at Automatic Aid agreements. A question was asked if Howick should plan to provide first response service in the future, since Minto Fire Department provides that service, whereas Wingham does not. Mr. Zimmerman commented that “tiered response” agreements are “very tricky” and suggested that Huron County Emergency Management Services would be able to provide a report showing how many calls would have been tiered responses. A Howick Fire Department, in its present state, would be maintaining the level of service currently being provided.

Mayor Kelly commented that Howick is in an “enviable position”, that Morris-Turnberry has few options available to them at this point. It was suggested that if Howick establishes a fire department, they could provide coverage to an area of Morris-Turnberry.

It was stated that Howick Council is not willing to make any commitment to purchase service from North Huron in the absence of any information forthcoming regarding costs, and anticipating that North Huron’s costs will multiply if plans for a new fire hall for Blyth are realized. Council deems it preferable to operate our own fire department with control of costs, and acquisition of equity.

The matter of the appraisal of assets was touched on again, noting that the appraisal firm assigned a value of \$50,000.00 to the land on which the Wingham fire hall is located. Mayor Kelly noted that the purchase price of the land 25 years ago was \$60,000.00. It was clarified that North Huron will be obtaining separate appraisals for that property. The Fire Board is still in the process of reviewing the draft appraisal of assets received from American Appraisals.

Reeve Demaray posed this question – Does anyone here want to see the Gorrie Fire Hall closed? – to which no one responded affirmatively. North Huron has stated that they will not continue to operate the satellite station in Gorrie, and Howick Council believes that the Township cannot afford to lose it, or the services of the dedicated firefighters in Howick who have served the community well for 25 years. There is more to consider than just the cost in dollars.

Chief Doig and Deputy Edgar responded to a question about staffing projections, and whether there will be enough firefighters to carry us into future years. As with any fire department, the numbers fluctuate slightly, but in the 25 years of operation they have always had enough men – men who always give more than 100% and go the extra mile. Reeve Demaray added that Council has had meetings with the Howick firefighters, and was impressed that they are ready and willing to set up an independent Fire Department. It is expected that if and when a decision is made to form a Howick Fire Department, more applications will be forthcoming.

Mr. Zimmerman noted that manpower is always a problem, and recruiting and retaining young men seems to be more difficult these days. He is also aware that the Howick men are very dedicated.

The issue of first response was discussed, and an opinion was expressed that there are times when ambulance dispatch is too hasty in calling the fire department to respond. It was noted that Teeswater fire department provides first response service, and their system seems to work reasonably well. Their dispatch knows the location of ambulances at all times, and will call the fire department only when they feel that the ambulance will not be able to reach the scene within the prescribed time frame.

After some speculation as to the reasons why North Huron made the choice to withdraw from the Joint Fire Agreement (ie. to have full control of fire services; amalgamation of the Wingham and Blyth fire departments; to simplify procedures) and in view of North Huron’s decision to abandon operation of the Gorrie station, it was conceded that those decisions have left Howick Township with little choice.

Reeve Demaray advised that Howick Council must begin immediately in order to do what is necessary to provide fire services for Howick Township before the Joint Agreement terminates at the end of this year, and declared that at the next regular meeting of Council, a resolution will be proposed that a fire department be established in Howick Township.

OTHER BUSINESS (TIME SENSITIVE)

Planning & Zoning: The Attons and their Planning Consultant have requested a place on the agenda for the March 17th Council meeting. Does Council wish to have the Township's Planner attend?

PWC Wilson advised that the Planner has been invited to attend the March 17th meeting.

Recreation – Training: Supervisor Bruce Skillen has received information about a workshop "*The Rise of Alcohol-Related Liability*" being held in Mitchell on Tues., March 24th. He requests authorization to attend this session.

MOTION #078/09

Moved by Versteeg

Seconded by Scott

THAT Howick Township Council hereby authorizes the attendance of Recreation/Facilities Supervisor Bruce Skillen at the "Rise of Alcohol-Related Liability" Workshop in Mitchell on March 24, 2009, and agrees to pay the registration fee of \$25.00 and any other costs associated with his attendance at this event.

CARRIED

ADJOURNMENT

MOTION #079/09

Moved by Scott

Seconded by Versteeg

THAT HOWICK TOWNSHIP COUNCIL now adjourns the March 12th, 2009 Special Meeting of Howick Township Council at 9:25 pm with Council to meet again at the Regular Council Meeting scheduled for Tuesday, March 17th, 2009 at 7:00 p.m., or at the call of the Chair.

CARRIED

REEVE

CLERK