

CASTLEGAR

REPORT TO COUNCIL

MEETING DATE: October 4, 2021 **REPORT NO.:** 21-123
SUBMITTED BY: CAO **FILE NO.:** 7130-01
SUBJECT: Merry Creek Wildfire – Lessons Learned

RECOMMENDATION:

THAT Council receive Report # 21-123 titled “Merry Creek Wildfire – Lessons Learned” for information.

PURPOSE:

Report for Council and the community that summarizes the feedback heard from the public, Council and staff regarding the City’s Emergency Operations Centre response to the Merry Creek Wildfire which will inform future City planning.

This Report is for consideration at the October 4, 2021 Committee of the Whole Meeting and adoption at the October 18, 2021 Regular Council Meeting.

SUMMARY/BACKGROUND:

On July 1, 2021, a wildfire broke out between Highway 3 and Meadowbrook Drive. The fire quickly grew, leapt the highway and threatened homes and a seniors care facility within the City and others within the Regional District of Central Kootenay (RDCK).

Fire fighting services were provided by City of Castlegar Fire Department, other local Fire Departments and BC Wildfire services. Given the size and location of the wildfire, the City activated its Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) to level 3, because there were multiple agencies involved and required the EOC to be fully staffed. Tactical Evacuation Orders and Evacuation Alerts were issued for homes within the City, including the Castlevue Care Centre and the RDCK.

The fire was quickly contained, and thankfully no structures within the City were damaged. The community was very fortunate as the outcome could have been catastrophic. The event provides an incredible opportunity for the community and all agencies involved to reflect and identify what went well, what could have been done better (or different), and what lessons we learned so the City can improve its emergency response services in the future to ensure we are best prepared.

To learn from the event, the City sought input from three groups:

- The public
- Council
- Staff

Summary of feedback from the public

The City created an email address wildfire@castlegar.ca and advertised a direct phone number where people could share what went well and what could be improved. This was promoted on social media, the City's website, and in the July quarterly newsletter sent to all homes and businesses. The City received 57 responses via email, phone and Facebook. Many respondents thanked the City for reaching out to the public for input and the feedback had the following themes:

What worked well

- There was overwhelming gratitude for the fast response of local fire fighters who saved lives and homes.
- Respondents expressed thanks to all the volunteers and community members who helped.
- The Emergency Support Services (ESS) reception center processed evacuees in a timely manner.

Three key areas for improvement

Emergency Planning

- Traffic control during the emergency was not well-managed and re-entry into the evacuation zone was not consistent. The City should look into a pass system to show at check points.
- Cellular service was glitchy during the fire so the City should consider how to get residents information during challenges like that and power outages. Ex. loud speaker, sirens, etc.
- The City should have an evacuation plan and plans for those with mobility issues or other limitations for evacuating quickly.
- Interior Health's policy for evacuating seniors care homes within a 20 kilometers radius from the fire should be re-evaluated.
- Many community members wanted to help. A space should be created during emergency events to communicate with the public how they can help. Ex. Facebook page.
- The City should encourage more fire smarting which is a free service for residents.
- Adjustments should be made to mutual aid agreements to help support the quickest fire-fighting response.

Information Sharing

- Information about the fire and evacuations was too slow, especially in the early stages.
- Information provided during the tactical evacuation was confusing and it was difficult for evacuated residents to determine what was going on and how to get timely and official information.
- Communications from the City and the RDCK was confusing and should be coordinated during emergencies which impact both areas.
- The City should advertise one spot where residents should go for official, up-to-date information regarding emergencies.
- The City should have provided email and text alerts; the RDCK alert system did not work well for Castlegar residents.

- There should be better information/communication to the reception center so it can be posted for evacuees and signage should be improved outside the reception center so its clear to evacuees where they need to go.

Education

- The City should create emergency preparedness initiatives that prepare residents and businesses for emergencies. Ex. card or info mailed to all homes, presentations on what to do in an emergency, community discussion on emergencies, checklists for seniors.

Summary of feedback from Council

Feedback was sought from Council regarding information heard from the community during and after the events. The following is a high-level summary:

- Information needed sooner and the City serving as the “official” source of emergency information.
- Pre-emptive outreach with the community of what to do and expect during an emergency.
- Further training with Council for their role during an emergency.
- Clarify boundaries between the City and RDCK.

Summary of feedback from the staff

All staff who supported this emergency, and other management staff, debriefed August 10, 2021 on the Merry Creek Wildfire. The session was intended to walk through the EOC activation and operations that supported the wildfire response. The on-the-ground fire response was not discussed.

Staff recommendations ranged from simple fixes to longer-term planning elements that will have resourcing and budget implications. In total, 72 recommendations were identified, and all have been actioned to a City staff member.

The more substantive recommendations are:

Administrative, training and EOC setup

- Training is required for people who might get called in to support emergencies
- Training is required for controlling traffic and restricting access during evacuation orders
- The City’s Emergency Plan should be reviewed & updated
- Develop a plan for setting-up the EOC and prioritizing actions in the early stages of an EOC activation
- Liaison with RDCK EOC to discuss the event and coordination and training for events which involve both areas
- Set-up a training exercise to get people comfortable in roles, interact with other groups such as the ESS reception center, and improve information sharing and situational analysis between field and EOC staff
- Establish and publish a list of ESS contact numbers
- Need resource(s) dedicated to answering the EOC phone line

Planning

- Prepare our geographical information system to easily export address lists
- Prepare temporary access permits for returning residents
- Ensure appropriate staffing and training for EOC and define the expectations of staff who fill critical EOC roles.
- Ensure additional resources for the Information Office to support timely information on the City's website and Facebook page (and responding and monitoring) and media relations & monitoring.

Information Technology

- Set-up a dedicated EOC phone line and space for an EOC member to take calls in a quiet and uninterrupted setting
- Improve phone switchboard capabilities by creating how-to documents on recording voice messages and re-directing calls after hours
- Improve Network, printer, scanner, plotter and template access
- Explore what the ESS reception center (which was at an RDCK facility) requires from City staff during an EOC activation
- Determine back-up solutions to running the EOC in the event of a network failure

Information Office & Communications

- Create pre-emptive/proactive communication messaging and templates and how-to documents for updating the City's website and posting to Facebook
- Establish a central online location for emergency information and share with the City before emergencies occur. This should be paired with a phone number
- Update Evacuation Alert and Order templates to include required information such as physical addresses
- Formalize communication protocols with external agencies
- Discuss the pros and cons of coordinating information with RDCK EOC Information Office
- Create media protocol for getting information from the City during emergencies
- Post all information shared with the public at the ESS reception center

ALTERNATIVES:

N/A

IMPLICATIONS:

(1) Social

The community expressed clear gratitude for the quick and professional response by Emergency Services crews.

Responding to emergencies in a timely and professional manner:

- keeps our community safe
- eases anxiety during uncertain times
- builds trust within the community

Learning from serious emergencies like this shows the City appreciates hearing from the community and has a desire to improve.

(2) Environmental

A significant patch of established forest was lost to the wildfire. Much of the area is in the RDCK; however, the area should be monitored over the next couple of years for rotting trees that could fall on the highway or dwellings.

A changing climate, including hotter and drier summers, continues to increase the risk of wildfire events around Castlegar. This should be factored into City planning.

(3) Personnel

When considering that the event occurred on a statutory holiday, the City was well staffed and trained to respond to the event.

This is the first time the City's EOC has been activated to level 3 in 15 years. This real-life exercise provided a great opportunity for staff to put their EOC training into action and identify areas where further training and operational adjustments are needed.

As an organization, we were fortunate that the Merry Creek Wildfire event was short lived. A well trained and fully staffed EOC has significant staffing implications.

Lessons learned from this event, and from other events in the province this year, indicate that additional resourcing will be required in the future.

(4) Financial

The Merry Creek Wildfire was assigned a task number by the provincial authorities, which allowed the City to recover the majority of additional cost incurred by the City. The Province of BC did not reimburse the City for exempt staff overtime during the emergency; staff propose updating the City's Exempt Staff Compensation Policy to ensure this is recoverable in the future.

Actioning the Merry Creek Wildfire recommendations from staff, Council and the public will have human and financial implications to the way the City delivers its emergency preparedness services. As adjustments are identified, they will be brought to Council.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS:

The City adopted an updated Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) in 2020. The CWPP provides the following high-level guidance:

It was found that the City's interface is dominated by mostly coniferous species of variable density. In general, it was found that these stands pose a moderate level of threat to the City. Regional weather patterns increase the wildfire risk to values on the south and southwest edges of the community, which are more exposed to the funnelling effect of winds in the Columbia Valley.

The overall wildfire risk to the community was found to be moderate, with cause for the municipality to manage vegetation in certain areas, improve control of development in the

wildland-urban interface, increase its outreach to the community for wildfire prevention as well as undertake a number of other FireSmart initiatives. Partnership with regional and provincial governing bodies as well as public education initiatives will also help Castlegar to reduce the risk of wildfire.

The guidance and the lessons learned from the Merry Creek Wildfire event reinforces that planning and funding of wildfire protection should remain a priority for the City.

IMPLEMENTATION:

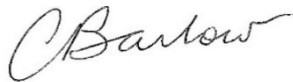
Many of the straightforward staff recommendations have already been completed. Follow-up meetings to discuss the larger staffing, training and communication implications will be had through the fall and winter. Spring flooding and summer wildfires are the most likely emergencies to strike Castlegar and area and impact our planning windows.

This is the first event in recent memory that impacted so much of the community and triggered a full scale EOC activation. The feedback and experience we have gained is invaluable as we take this opportunity to now talk to other agencies and learn how they incorporate EOC operations and planning into their overall municipal services. As the best solutions begin to emerge for addressing the more significant lessons learned contained within this report, Staff will provide recommendations on impacts to the budget and staff resourcing.

COMMUNICATION:

The Merry Creek lessons learned are included in the October 4, 2021 Committee of the Whole Meeting package and available to the public via the City's website. They will also be promoted in the October 4, 2021 Council Highlights and promoted on the City's Facebook page.

Respectfully submitted,



Chris Barlow, A.Sc.T.
Chief Administrative Officer