

Aurora's growth poses a challenge to fire department: Chief

By Brock Weir

With showrooms popping up from the dirt week after week, Aurora's 2C development has quickly become a flurry of activity.

The development, north of Wellington Street East, roughly between Bayview Avenue and Leslie Street, is expected to bring in over 4,000 new homes, and additional businesses, to Aurora over the next decade. While growth ultimately means more tax dollars will be flowing into municipal coffers, more people, more homes, and more traffic will ultimately have an impact on local emergency response, according to Ian Laing, Chief of Central York Fire Services (CYFS).

Chief Laing made his comments at last week's Council meeting in his yearly overview of the CYFS, the joint fire service serving both Aurora and Newmarket.

"Currently, we have one crew working down in the Leslie Street and Wellington Street Station," said Chief Laing. "I think they are going to see their call volume dramatically go up as the areas become inhabited. Right now we are in a very dangerous phase because when the buildings go up, they are like veritable lumber yards."

Chief Laing was speaking less than 48 hours after an extensive fire in Richmond Hill badly damaged a new subdivision which was under construction. That, he said, underscored the point.

"It is a tremendous risk. What we have done as part of the [upcoming] Master Fire Plan review is sit down with consultants and show them what we think we are going to need in the future and then we go and analyse all that data."

The mandate of the CYFS calls for the first apparatus to arrive at the scene of an incident within six minutes of the original call. The CYFS falls short of that goal at four stations, he added, and this is likely to become more difficult with growth.

Recent discussions by the CYFS, as well as the Joint Council Committee, the group of Councillors from Aurora and Newmarket overseeing the operations of the fire service, have identified the need for an additional fire station for Aurora, possibly located on St. John's Sideroad, in the vicinity of Yonge Street.

"The new Master Fire Plan is being revised," said Chief Laing. "We are at our five-year renewal cycle, so you will hear more about this in the future."

Costs of the fire service last year in the CYFS operating budget was just over \$20 million, he said, breaking down 59.75 per cent of this to Newmarket and the balance of 40.25 per cent to Aurora. It is a .5 per cent increase over previous years, but a formula which breaks down by assessment, call volume, and overall population.

Contributing to this, he added, were increases in overtime, a budget which had often been exceeded in recent years.

In 2011, the CYFS hired 22 additional fire fighters which, in turn, staffed five additional fire trucks. Agreements in place mandate five crew for each apparatus and with the later addition of a sixth truck, there was some flexibility in "downstaffing" the sixth truck or taking it out of active service if there were not enough staff members to go around. The development of the 2C, however, would impact this flexibility as the CYFS will be "taxed" in maintaining staffing levels.

Over the past year, there was a 30 per cent decrease in fire calls over previous years, but any savings this might have realised were tempered by an increase in medical calls.

One of the most significant fire calls received over the last 12 months, however, was the April 11 fire at Aurora United Church, which brought in fire crews from across York Region to battle the blaze. This, said Chief Laing, was a prime example of the benefits

of York Region's mutual aid system.

"It is the only incident I am aware of that all fire services in the Region either responded to or assisted us," he said. "I was extremely proud of the firefighters that worked at that incident and we were all disappointed that the tragic outcome was the way it was. At the end of the day, we looked at it that there were no lives lost, and there was potential [with the nursery school in the building]. Everybody did their job.

"The initial attack on the fire side was interior so we attempted an interior aggressive attack and the heat was so intense they had to slide down the stairs on their bellies and four of them were taken to hospital to receive treatment for injuries. Nobody wanted the outcome to be different more than we did, but unfortunately it wasn't the case and we just have to look at what we did and make sure we do everything we can to prevent such a fire in the future."