

Chief, Council ponder Regional fire merger

By Brock Weir

When Fire Chief Ian Laing arrived in Town from Mississauga to take the helm of Aurora and Newmarket's amalgamated fire service, he was arriving on the scene of what he felt was a 'model' other communities could emulate.



Since Ian Laing came to Aurora and Newmarket from Mississauga to take the helm of the Central York Fire Services, one of his most memorable experiences was naming young Aurora resident Owen Veloso (pictured with his parents Laura and Brian) an honorary firefighter in a celebration last April.

Auroran photo by David Falconer

Arriving here from Mississauga a little over three years ago, he found himself in the middle of what was a relatively new model, however. In that time as the head of the Central York Fire Services (CYFS), he says he has found it is a model that works and has watched proudly as it has gone from strength to strength.

The establishment of the CYFS, which is under the control of both Towns, has been an undoubted success story but in the time he has been head of the local force, the success of the local model may have snowballed into a drive in some quarters to amalgamate all the fire services in York Region into one.

A recommendation from the Joint Council Committee (JCC), the group comprised of Aurora and Newmarket Councillors to oversee fire services in both towns, to consider doing just that is before Council for consideration this week.

But looking upon the success of his own department's development, however, he would be hard pressed to raise an eyebrow.

'Here I am sitting as the Chief of a Consolidated Fire Service that is a success story, so how could I say this wouldn't be a success?' Chief Laing told The Auroran. 'It certainly would be a much bigger project, but I think we could probably turn the fire service into a bigger, stronger, faster fire service for the residents of York Region.'

If momentum for a truly amalgamated York Region Fire Service continues to build, Chief Laing says that undertaking a study from the Fire Services side to ensure that all aspects of fire services are met 'far beyond the simple operation of emergency vehicles.

It is much more than coordinating driving between the municipalities. There is the potential consolidation of their individual communication and training centres, ensuring their education, training and operating procedures are uniform across the board, and 'getting everyone on the same page.'

'While the number of bureaucracies would diminish, the size of the bureaucracy would have to increase to take on all the responsibilities of a much greater area and fire service,' he cautions. 'I came from a department that covered 1,100 square miles with 600 fire fighters so there were 30 crews on duty in 20 fire stations.'

Ottawa and Hamilton have shown that consolidation of fire services, whether they are similar to Central York, more volunteer in nature, or somewhere in between, work. The question then becomes, he says, where does the amalgamation stop? Would it continue to be water where the Region controls the water supply rather than merely acting as wholesaler?

‘It is time in our history for everybody to be looking at ways to be more efficient because taxpayers get tired of paying high taxes, but it is not going to be any cheaper,’ he says. ‘It is just going to be funded differently.’

Chief Laing arrived in Aurora and Newmarket in the winter of 2010 after serving for 34 years in the Mississauga Fire Service. Having grown up in the small town of Atikokan, ON, he didn't initially have an interest in firefighting. But after initially pursuing a career in the police force, meeting people on the other side prompted the shift.

The change may have been inevitable. His wife is an Emergency Communications Officer in the City and his son has grown up to become an Advanced Care Paramedic with Halton EMS.

Before his arrival at the CYFS, the crew put together a master fire plan which essentially served as a road map to the future. Looking at the larger picture of this ‘road map’ and how the community continues to be served, one of the things he says he would like to spearhead is a fifth fire station in Aurora, ideally on St. John's Sideroad between Bayview Avenue and Yonge Street.

Before that can happen, however, Chief Laing says the CYFS needs to resolve the thorny issue of ownership of the fire stations. Although the two towns amalgamated their services, they each retained ownership of the stations, so a capital project within Aurora or Newmarket would need to be paid for by their respective towns. Costs should be shared between the two communities as both sides would benefit, he says.

Details aside, it hasn't all been growing pains. During his time in the community so far, he highlights last year's wish day in honour of young Auroran Owen Veloso, who was named Honourary Firefighter in a special ‘Wish Day’ put together by the Make a Wish Foundation and the CYFS.

‘That is certainly a highlight of my career,’ he says. ‘I look at those pictures and I just tingle because of a very special young man, a great program put on by some awesome people that truly have the children's wish at heart.’

‘I actually saw Owen at our open house in Aurora and he showed up with his helmet and gear on and he is quite the young man and I have to say it made an impact on me. He's a special young fellow.’

Another highlight undoubtedly took place last month when members of the JCC, presented Chief Laing with the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal for his services to the community.

‘To be recognized by staff and members of Council for my contributions was really special,’ he says. ‘We're just doing our job and we kind of fall short on the accolade part. It was a surprise and very much appreciated. It was certainly an event I will remember for a long, long time.’