

Amalgamated York Region fire service back in focus

By Brock Weir

In the aftermath of Good Friday's fire tragedy in Sharon which claimed four members of the Dunsmuir Family, focus has been increasingly put on the time it took East Gwillimbury volunteer fire fighters to respond to the blaze.

The fire broke out just days after Aurora Council debated a motion signing off on York Region municipalities to investigate the possibility of amalgamating their fire services into one body that would serve the entire Region of York. Since then, that too has become part of the focus, with some wondering whether an amalgamated service would benefit smaller communities served by volunteers.

‘Anything that would provide a better level of fire protection for the residents and the fire fighters would be something we would need to really look at,’ says Chief Ian Laing of the Central York Fire Services (CYFS), the amalgamated service governed by Aurora and Newmarket.

‘Central York is, in my opinion, a success story and if a similar type of exercise could be undertaken to look at what the advantages or disadvantages would be for a consolidated fire service on a larger scale that is something we would have to look at. How could we not do that?’

Since the Good Friday fire, Chief Laing says it has put things into focus but has also instigated a balancing act in seeking answers while avoiding ‘rubbing at the wound.’

‘It is a nasty thing for the community and it is a nasty thing for the residents, and it is a nasty thing for the fire services to deal with stuff like this and they have to work hard,’ he said. ‘The fire service up there works hard and they are volunteers, or paid on call, but they give up their own time to go in and train, and they are trained to the level that they can provide adequate levels of protection. They give up a lot for their neighbours.’

Too much time has been spent on saying that a Newmarket station was closer and Newmarket should have gone, but that points to a fundamental misunderstanding about how the local service works, he adds.

All fire services in York Region have a mutual aid agreement whereby there is a ‘home department’ in each municipality that has overall jurisdiction when they get the call. If they feel they need more manpower or don't have enough people on call whether it is staff or frontline workers, or even equipment, they call on other fire departments in York Region to provide the backup.

Other configurations between York Region Municipalities have automatic aid agreements that would allow fire fighters to cross borders without getting a call from the home department.

The Central York Fire Services has such agreements in place with King Township and Whitchurch-Stouffville, and each municipality pays for the services required, but no such agreement exists between Central York and East Gwillimbury.

‘It is interesting to note that nobody wants to talk about this until there is a tragedy because it all focuses back,’ says Chief Laing. ‘I prefer not to speak at all to what is going on up the road because it is not my jurisdiction and I do not have jurisdiction.’ Discussion, however, did recently spill over to the last meeting of Aurora Council with Councillor Evelyn Buck demanding to know where the failure lay.

‘The fire hall was five minutes away from that house and we need to know what the failure was that the full-time fire department wasn't there,’ she said. ‘Even without a contract there was a mutual aid agreement that if you get the call, you know that you might be needed. I think we need to know, as operators of a joint fire department. I think there are some very serious questions that have not been answered by the Ontario Fire Marshall. It is a joint fire department and I think we share joint responsibility.’