

Fire costs set to rise \$8 million over next five years

By Brock Weir

An ounce of fire prevention is worth a pound of fire protection for the Central York Fire Services, but the people to make that happen are a significant cost to taxpayers.

Council received the 2016 budget last week from the Central York Fire Services (CYFS), the joint fire department serving the needs of Aurora and Newmarket.

Next year's fire budget is expected to clock in at just under \$24 million, which is 3.8 per cent (or \$855,769) above the 2015 budget. While significant portions of this budget will be funded from development charges for new growth including a \$4.5 million line item for land for a new fire station and training centre proposed to ideally be close to straddling the Aurora-Newmarket border other items are not; chief among them a \$586,027 increase in salaries and benefits.

This represents a three per cent increase for association workers and two per cent for Town Staff, said Chief Laing.

Four additional firefighters are also expected to be brought on board by May of 2016 at an estimated cost of \$247,195.

When we bring fire fighters on, they take three or four years to progress through the ranks, said Chief Laing. We have also requested four additional fire fighters and it is part of our long-term strategy to provide another fire apparatus in this central area of town to provide much-needed timely protection to the residents in those new areas, and we have eliminated one full-time position. Our total just for the wages and benefits portion is \$833,000 of the total allocation.

We have come up with a program that will allow us to smooth out the swings in the prices in the allocations to each community. Aurora and Newmarket share the cost of this fire service and it is based on criteria of number of calls and the assessed value of the homes. There were several years where there were \$100,000 swings because of call volumes and assessment [but this year] Aurora's share has gone from 40.23 per cent to 40.2.

In addition to finding the perfect location for a new fire station serving northern Aurora and southern Newmarket, additional big ticket items being tackled by the CYFS this year include \$3 million for the design and construction of the station in question, \$800,000 for the replacement of a fire truck, \$900,000 for replacing all breathing apparatus, and replacing bunker gear, equipment, and helmets across the board.

One of the capital projects we will be looking to work on in 2016 includes a public fire safety education trailer, said Chief Laing. The Office of the Fire Marshall outlines what kinds of work we will be doing and the public education and fire prevention are the number one and two things a fire service should provide. Obviously, emergency services follows close behind but the thought process is the more that you prevent, the less emergency work you will have to do.

There are many studies related to fire fighter cancer and one of the serious issues we have to deal with are all the carcinogens attached to our bunker gear, gear that you have to wear when you go inside a burning building. What we're doing from a health and safety perspective is putting one of these extractors in each fire station and making sure the gear is cleaned regularly to keep our staff safe.

But, every piece of bunker gear has a certain shelf life and some serving the CYFS have reached the end of the line. Fire helmets have also been presenting a significant problem, raising minor complaints from fire fighters over their weight and the strain placed on the neck.

A traditional fire helmet has a large bill on the back and we recently had a fire fighter who fell down and the only thing that saved his neck was the fact the helmet popped off and the bill didn't drive his neck forward and injure him more seriously, said Chief

Laing. ?We're looking at this very closely and working in conjunction with the joint health and safety committee and we will be looking at a replacement helmet that is lighter and withstand the impacts and the fire damage they are subjected to.?