



CITY OF
ST. CATHARINES

Corporate Report

Report from Fire and Emergency Management Services, Deputy Fire Chief

Date of Report: March 11, 2013

Date of Meeting: March 25, 2013

Report Number: FS-076-2013

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Subject: Level of Service – Boat Response

Recommendation

Fire Services recommends that Council define the current Level of Service of our boat program to mirror the “standardized practices and timelines” of the Canadian Coast Guard and Niagara Regional Police in restricting the response of our personnel onto Lake Ontario throughout the winter months. FORTHWITH

Summary

Due to the inherent danger associated with water rescue and recovery in Lake Ontario throughout the winter season, Fire Services is recommending adopting a change in current protocols to reflect our abilities as a sole source Emergency Response Agency.

Background

St Catharines Fire Services is currently the only emergency service that responds to incidents on Lake Ontario during the winter months. The Canadian Coast Guard resides at a base station (located below Lock One on the west side of the canal) throughout the Spring, Summer and Fall and then remove their boats and personnel for the winter season. Niagara Regional Police (NRP) follow the same model due to the conditions and demographics of dealing with emergencies in cold weather conditions. Fire Services is the only agency available to assume sole responsibility for any/all incidents that may arise on the lake.

Recent incidents involving emergencies on the lake that have required response from our department have proven to be false alarms (balloons floating on the lake mistaken for people or a log rolling on the lake with a branch attached that appeared to be a person waving for help, etc). Responding onto the lake in treacherous conditions like these places undo risk on our personnel without adequate backup in the event of an unforeseen occurrence. Two of the three boats in our fleet are not designed to provide assistance to our largest response boat if assistance was ever required. They are designed to provide rescue in moderate conditions only. As a result, CFB Trenton would be our closest resource to effect rescue for our personnel. In an emergency, rescue of our personnel may become recovery of our personnel due to the timelines required to provide response to our area.

As a result, Fire Services is recommending that Council adopt the same policies as the Coast Guard and the NRP and suspend our boating response onto Lake Ontario throughout the winter months.

Report

Historically, very few incidents occur on Lake Ontario during the winter due to inconsistent weather and conditions that place unnecessary risk for anyone attempting to access the lake. Unexpected storms, the rapid development of ice and the unpredictability of the lake places anyone on the lake in potential life threatening situations.

Fire Services, although certified to operate our vessels and perform various types of rescues, are not adequately trained to provide highly skilled maneuvers required to effect rescue on Lake Ontario in extreme conditions. Both agencies employ staff that are dedicated to training on their vessels on a fulltime basis. As a result, their skills and experience are far superior to that of the fire department.

Placing undo risk on our personnel when we are not adequately trained or supported for this type of response creates an enormous liability in the event of a tragic incident. The management team must also be diligent in recommending our level of service based on our capabilities.

In 2011, Fire Services purchased a new boat to provide better protection for our staff and enable our personnel to enhance our response capabilities. It was determined through correspondence with the Coast Guard and the NRP that we would be better served for training and response if our boat more closely mirrored the style and relative size of their craft. As a result, Fire Services has exchanged their boat at no cost to a boat that closely resembles the NRP and Toronto Police Marine Services boats. This now enables our department to practice maneuvers and procedures more closely aligned with our emergency service partners. As a result, we better prepare our staff to provide greater assistance for incidents on the lake when they occur.

Although the quality of our equipment has improved, there are still limitations and restrictions in trying to raise our response levels for emergencies on the lake. Regardless of our training, responding as a standalone agency in the winter months does not make sense from a “risk” perspective. If the Coast Guard and NRP have determined the seriousness of providing protection throughout the winter months, it does not make sense that Fire Services should continue to endeavor in this practice either.

Ice Water Rescue and Shore Based Rescue however would continue to be provided by our staff as inner water ways (Twelve Mile Creek, The Welland Canal etc.) still attract people for skating, fishing and other activities. Inconsistent conditions create serious hazards for people who venture onto the ice. Fire Services personnel are trained and certified to confidently and competently rescue someone in trouble in this type of situation. Training, experience, backup of personnel and equipment combine to create a safe and effective means of providing this type of rescue and service.

Responding out onto the Lake alone exceeds our abilities and acceptable level of risk. Fire Services will continue to maintain the highest level of training and response in our Water Rescue programs but must work within the financial limitations and availability of time in determining our response capabilities.

Financial Implications

Not Applicable

Conclusion

Fire Services recommends aligning our level of response for boat rescue to that of the Canadian Coast Guard and Niagara Regional Police.

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