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Colwood, View Royal fire departments split from Langford dispatch

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Colwood and View Royal fire departments are breaking away from Langford's fire dispatch system after nearly 25 years, and will hire the call centre run by the Saanich fire department.

The move underscores what fire chiefs at View Royal and Colwood say is growing frustration and "historical dissatisfaction" with the existing fire dispatch system under the purview of the Capital Regional District.

The move also further cements the close relationship between Colwood and View Royal fire departments, which includes an automatic aid agreement. For serious emergencies, both departments effectively work as a single unit.

View Royal and Colwood councils have agreed on a five year contract with Saanich, to begin later this year, under what is called a "full dispatch service." Saanich dispatch will cost taxpayers more each year, but both fire chiefs say the service is worth the money, and offers critical safety benefits for the community.

"Saanich has done a great job building infrastructure. It's got the technology, it's got the staffing, it's in a purpose-built post-disaster building," said View Royal fire Chief Paul Hurst. "Saanich has clearly demonstrated its ability to deliver a cost-effective, robust dispatch model."

Hurst and Colwood fire Chief Russ Cameron say the existing CRD-Langford contract lacks a dispute resolution mechanism and isn't clear on future expenses for technology upgrades, such as the aging console at Langford.

"With Saanich, we know what the costs will be today and for the next five years," Cameron said. "With Langford and the CRD, that is all unknown."

"I'm not blaming Langford. This is a service negotiated with the CRD."

Langford has dispatched for 18 communities in the south Island since 1989, including the Gulf Islands, the West Shore, Sooke and Juan de Fuca electoral area.

View Royal pays about \$37,000 per year and Colwood about \$63,000 for fire dispatch. For Saanich dispatch, that would rise to \$45,000 and \$76,000 respectively.

The cost increase is worth it, the fire chiefs say. Saanich dispatch has detailed automated digital record keeping of all calls, dispatchers constantly

monitor radio chatter of scene commanders for redundant safety, and the system will allow both departments to free firefighters from manning the fire hall radio room.

Moreover, Saanich dispatch is backed up by the larger E-Comm dispatch in Metro Vancouver should Saanich go down. Langford dispatch has a backup through a laptop computer, should the fire hall lose power and its generator backups fail, which happened in 2009 for about 30 minutes.

"Saanich has spent a lot of money on their (dispatch) infrastructure. Russ and I have a level of comfort that they will deliver quality service," Hurst said. "The key is redundancy and backup. If Saanich goes down, in the flick of a switch E-Comm will go live."

Last year a CRD review of fire dispatch in Greater Victoria indicated the volunteer departments were "very pleased" with the level of service, although composite departments - such as View Royal and Colwood - were "somewhat more critical" of Langford dispatch.

Langford dispatch is currently going through its own review process, a deep look at its technology, governance and level of service.

Langford fire Chief Bob Beckett said it's the "prerogative" of Colwood and View Royal to break off from the group to serve their communities as they see fit.

"I'm proud of the work our people are doing. The vast majority of our clients are very happy with the work we are doing," Beckett said. "My responsibility is to make sure we have a high functioning dispatch to serve our clients. I have no hesitation in saying we have an excellent, excellent centre."

Langford dispatch operates on a non-profit approach, splitting costs proportionally between 18 departments, soon to be 16.

Beckett couldn't say if the remaining fire halls would pay more when Colwood and View Royal opt out.

The current contract between CRD-Langford and the 18 fire departments expires May 31.

Beckett said Langford is seeking to renew the contract and that the review will address questions of costs, governance and operating models for fire officials to take back to their respective councils or area directors.

"Our review process looks at the needs for today and

tomorrow," he said. "Our report will run the gamut of options and opportunities."

Colwood and View Royal, meanwhile, argue the Capital Region should only have one fire dispatch service, not four as it has now. Victoria, Langford, Saanich and CFB Esquimalt each have fire dispatch call centres.

"In my opinion, the region shouldn't have and can't afford four fire dispatch centres," Cameron said. "We need to have one. (Colwood) moving to Saanich is part of that solution."

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