

2015 Mount Washington Fire Protection Study

Phase 1: Backgrounder & Study Context

Client:	Comox Valley Regional District (CVRD)
CVRD Contact:	Mr. James Bast, Manager of Fire Services
Consultant Team:	Sarah Morden of Defero-West Consulting Sherry Hurst of Leftside Partners Inc.
Steering Committee:	Representatives of Mount Washington Alpine Resort; Tourism Mount Washington; private land and strata owners; and, other community stakeholders.
Date:	May 22, 2015

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to establish a facts and information framework for the Mount Washington Fire Protection Study by clearly setting out the consultants' understanding of the current situation based on a review of the documents provided; discussions with Mr. James Bast, CVRD Manager of Fire Services; and, initial consultation with the Steering Committee during the Project Launch meeting of May 15, 2015.

The report contains three sections:

1. Project Context - includes a brief historical overview, a summary of local challenges, and key learning outcomes from the Project Launch meeting.
2. Information Gaps - highlights information and data that the consultants either require or request (prioritized accordingly) to complete the study.
3. Next Steps – outlines the next steps and key tasks according to the work plan for the study.

Section 1 – Context

1.1 Historical Overview / Chronology

- A detailed feasibility study completed by the Regional District in 2003 “highly recommended” establishment of a ‘recognized’ and ‘fully protected’ fire protection service with tax rate estimates falling between \$3.00 to \$3.75 per \$1000 of assessed value. Insurance rate reductions were estimated to decrease as much as 65% for some classes of property. Electoral approval was subsequently sought through a petition

process. At the time, the *Local Government Act* required support from 67% of property owners representing at least 50% of the area's total assessment in order for a petition to pass. Voter participation fell short at 39%.

- In 2005, the Mount Washington Community Association and the Regional District revisited the issue of fire protection through a review of the 2003 study and petition process, including lessons learned. An independent consultant was engaged to review alternatives to a full-time, professional department (including a part-time force and volunteer society) and provide recommendations for establishing a fire service program. The report was completed and received in June, 2005, but did not result in a fire service.
- On March 28, 2009 a structure fire at the resort destroyed a rental chalet. Following the incident, the Mount Washington Alpine Resort requested that the CVRD explore options for expanding regional fire protection coverage to the Mount Washington Area. Staff met with the CAOs and Fire Chiefs of Courtenay, Comox, Cumberland and the CVRD to discuss options. A three-phase, incremental approach to fire protection was proposed beginning with the Mount Washington community engaging the services of a part-time fire chief/fire prevention officer and a focus on strata bylaws & regulations to mitigate loss by fire – the plan was presented to the community and was generally supported, but ultimately did not result in any significant service changes.
- In 2013, the Regional District developed an integrated resort community plan (IRCP) with and for the Mount Washington community. The purpose of the plan is to provide policies and guidelines for growth, development and environmental protection that are consistent with the regional growth strategy. The IRCP recognizes and supports the need for fire protection. It includes a stated objective of developing, over time and using a phased approach, adequate fire protection to all the permanent and seasonal population, visitors, and employees, and to the buildings and structures within the resort community. The IRCP implementation strategy includes a commitment to initiate discussions with the community aimed at determining if public consensus can be reached regarding establishment of a fire protection service. According to the Plan, discussions were to be initiated within three years after the adoption of the IRCP, so by 2017 – this study is directly aligned with that commitment.
- A major fire incident in February, 2015 resulted in the loss of 3 chalets, once again bringing the issue to the forefront. Representatives of Mount Washington Alpine Resort and the CVRD met in March to discuss the incident and options for moving forward. Since then, the CVRD staff has assembled a “steering group” that includes participation by the CVRD, Mount Washington ownership group, local strata representatives, residential property owners and other user groups to re-examine the opportunities for establishing a fire

protection service. The consultants have been engaged as part of that process and have been tasked with the following:

- *a review/summary of the history and background information;*
- *a detailed discussion and analysis of current service options;*
- *consideration of the legislative rules and requirements pertaining to electoral assent;*
- *preparation of a report including service recommendation(s) and an implementation plan;*
- *consultation with the steering group and broader Mount Washington community engagement on the service options and report recommendations; and,*
- *summary presentation to the Electoral Area Services Committee.*

1.2 Local Challenges

The Mount Washington Alpine Resort is a 644 ha privately-owned tourism resort located within electoral area 'C' of the CVRD. The resort area is bounded by Strathcona Provincial Park to the south and on the remaining three sides by private managed forest lands. There are several unique challenges and circumstances that impact the feasibility and sustainability of a local fire protection service, including the following:

- the community population fluctuates significantly on a seasonal basis with a very small number of permanent, year-round residents;
- a limited tax base exists to pay for a fire protection service;
- the population from which to draw firefighters from is very small;
- the majority of the land base is privately owned by the Mount Washington Alpine Resort. *(Note - since 2003, the majority of strata ownership has changed over from leasehold to fee-simple with 99-year leases. This may open up other options for obtaining electoral assent for any future proposed service.);*
- local areas and buildings within the community vary to a significant degree in terms of fire risk - some of the newer multi-unit buildings have sprinklers and are inspected regularly, while most of the older multi-unit buildings and wood-frame chalets do not. Similarly, when snow accumulates, vehicle access to some areas of the community is limited and/or unavailable; and,

the closest established fire department is approximately 35 - 40 minutes away by vehicle in good weather conditions.

1.3 Project Launch Meeting – Key Learning Outcomes

The consultants met with representatives of the CVRD and the Steering Committee for a Project Launch meeting on May 15, 2015. The following is a list of the consultants' key learning outcomes directly related to the study:

- All members of the Steering Committee are committed to the process and expressed interest in pursuing a fire protection service with a general preference for a service that would start small and perhaps evolve over time.
- Steering Committee members felt that the 2003 process failed to gain support because a) the proposed service far outweighed the needs of the community especially in terms of infrastructure; b) the proposed service did not provide an equitable (and in some cases even adequate) level of service, but required all property owners to pay the same rate; and, c) the fact that under the *Local Government Act* (at least at that time), abstention from petitions had the same affect as a “No” vote, and 201 of the 450 petitions were not returned.
- Representatives of Strata 799 reported they are in the early (consultation) stages of pursuing a solution for a private defensive fire protection service for their own strata development. Other Steering Committee members expressed interest in the approach being considered by Strata 799. While Strata 799 is currently focused on its own initiative, representatives indicated that, depending on the outcome, there may be opportunities to expand the service to the broader community. Strata representatives will keep the consultants and Steering Committee informed on their progress and lessons learned.
- Steering Committee members generally recognized a need for terrain/weather-appropriate vehicles (eg. sleds, quads, snow cats, etc.) and equipment storage on the hill, and representatives of the Resort indicated a willingness to provide storage.
- Representatives of the Resort also confirmed there are 45 working fire hydrants within the community that are tested and maintained annually. Strata 799 had shared with the Resort information about “snorkels” – a winter firefighting appliance that can be attached to hydrants to maintain access during heavy snowfalls/accumulation.
- According to the Steering Committee, a reduction in insurance rates is not the motivating factor behind the community's interest in a fire protection service (this would require a ‘recognized’ service offering full protection, similar to the one proposed in 2003), but rather the priority is fire suppression and defensive firefighting. It is the spread of fire to adjacent buildings and forest that appears to be the community's greatest concern.

Section 2 - Information Gaps

Item	Comments
HIGH Priority – information <u>required</u> by the consultants:	
Assessment data	J. Bast to provide
Population data + projections	Consultants to follow up with G. Trousdell
Building stock/occupancy	Consultants to follow up with G. Trousdell
Strata ownership (% on 99-year lease)	Consultants to follow up with G. Trousdell
Map of community showing approximately location of each strata, fire hydrants and water system	Consultants to follow up with G. Trousdell
Information on any development plans	Consultants to follow up with G. Trousdell
Options for obtaining elector assent (once strata ownership is determined)	Consultants to confirm with the Local Government Branch in the Ministry of Community, Sport & Cultural Development
MEDIUM Priority – information <u>requested</u> by the consultants:	
Sample service contracts	J. Bast to provide
Map showing regional fire service areas and department details	Consultants to request from J. Bast

Section 3 – Next Steps

The completion of the Current Situation Assessment concludes Phase 1 of the work plan. Moving into Phase 2 (Research & Analysis), the consultants will be working to schedule interviews with the CAOs and/or Fire Chiefs for the Cumberland, Courtenay and Oyster River over the coming weeks. The consultants will also be interviewing Fire Chiefs for Comox and Campbell River, as well as a representative(s) from North Island 911. Successful service models in other jurisdictions and any applicable legislation (for electoral assent and/or pertaining to service options) will also be researched. The information gathered will be used to develop service options for initial review by the Steering Committee in August.

From there, a draft report will be developed in September, at which time the consultants will also begin preparing for community consultation scheduled for Friday, October 9th. This event is planned to coincide with Thanksgiving weekend, when it is understood that a significant number of property owners spend the weekend at the Resort to prepare for the beginning of the ski season.

A presentation to the Electoral Area Services Committee is scheduled for mid-October, the purpose of which is to review the draft report and results of the community consultation. Delivery of the final report and recommendations by the end of October. Any new service would need to be established within the Financial Plan, which is adopted annually by or before March 31st. Accordingly, if a new service is to be established, implementation (including work such as drafting any applicable service agreements and administering the elector assent process) would proceed in late 2015/early 2016.