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Item No. 8
Halifax Regional Council
November 14, 2023

TO: Mayor Savage and Members of Halifax Regional Council

Original Signed

SUBMITTED BY:

John Traves, K.C., Acting Chief Administrative Officer

DATE: October 12, 2023

SUBJECT: 2023/24 Wildfire Budgeted Initiatives

INFORMATION REPORT

ORIGIN

June 20, 2023 Halifax Regional Council, Item 15.3.1:

MOVED by Councillor Lovelace, seconded by Councillor Stoddard

THAT Halifax Regional Council direct the Chief Administrative Officer to:

1. Develop a staff report outlining and prioritizing budgeted and non-budgeted initiatives within the 2023/24 Budget and Business Plan that will help mitigate and manage wildfire risk to communities...

MOTION PUT AND PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.

LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

Halifax Regional Municipality Charter, SNS 2008 c 39:

7A The purposes of the Municipality are to (a) provide good government; (b) provide services, facilities and other things that, in the opinion of the Council, are necessary or desirable for all or part of the Municipality; and (c) develop and maintain safe and viable communities.

35 (1) The Chief Administrative Officer shall...(b) ensure that the annual operating and capital budgets are prepared and submitted to the Council;

79A(1) Subject to subsections (2) to (4), the Municipality may only spend money for municipal purposes if (a) the expenditure is included in the Municipality's operating budget or capital budget or is otherwise authorized by the Municipality; (b) the expenditure is in respect of an emergency under the Emergency Management Act; or (c) the expenditure is legally required to be paid.

93 (1) The Council shall make estimates of the sums that are required by the Municipality for the fiscal year.

120(6)The Municipality may maintain other reserve funds for such purposes as the Council may determine.

BACKGROUND

On May 28, 2023, a wildfire broke out in the Tantallon community which ultimately resulted in the loss of 151 homes and other properties. Over 16,000 residents were forced to evacuate the area for several days as the municipality attempted to deal with the wildfire and its impacts. Work continued for well over a week to control the spread of the Wildfire, with multiple evacuation orders in place to ensure the safety of residents. Firefighting efforts continued for well over a week, followed by efforts to clean up and facilitate a safe return for those residents that had been evacuated.

DISCUSSION

There were no initiatives identified in the 2023/24 budget directly related to the mitigation and fighting of wildfires, however there were initiatives in the Business Plan identified that would have been indirectly tied to the response to an emergency such as the wildfire.

Public Works had two emergency related business plan objectives for 23/24, that would be indirectly related to wildfire mitigation, as follows:

PW 07.06 - Emergency Response Plan - Traffic Management

Traffic Management will develop a documented Emergency Response Plan that defines processes, procedures, and personnel requirements.

PW 06.04 - Emergency Response Plan - Solid Waste Resources

To improve readiness for major weather events, Solid Waste Resources will complete a jurisdictional scan and review service provider contingency plans to identify gaps to be addressed for curbside collection and operations of municipal Solid Waste facilities.

Additionally, there were some unbudgeted initiatives that were undertaken as part of the response to the wildfires. Included in this were two gated emergency egress roads built by Public Works on lands owned by HRM during the State of Emergency, on Buckingham Drive to Highway 103 and Sylvania Terrace to Hammonds Plains Road

Halifax Regional Fire & Emergency (HRFE) had the following 2023/24 deliverable:

HRFE 04.02 Wildland Urban Interface Strategy

In recognition of the increased risk of wildland fires due to climate change, in order to assist the municipality in building its climate resilience, HRFE will develop a comprehensive Wildland Urban Interface Strategy, with tactics to include education for crews on property risk assessments, critical infrastructure protection, as well as focus on public education on inspection programs and neighbourhood collaboration. HRFE will work with stakeholders at the provincial and federal level as well as educational groups such as FireSmart Canada on ensuring all opportunities for collaboration are leveraged.

Additionally, HRFE conducts ongoing training programs, procures equipment, responds to emergencies, and provides risk reduction activities related to the mitigation and fighting of wildfires. These activities and initiatives are funded from the existing HRFE budget and represent an increasing cost pressure.

Training

- Select officers are trained in mid-level strategy and command for wildfires, such as the S215 “Wildland Urban Interface” training course. This training is provided by external agencies and requires a fee to attend.
- All new career and volunteer firefighters are trained to meet or exceed the requirements of the Nova Scotia Basic Forest Fire Suppression Course as promulgated by the NS Department of Natural Resources and Renewables.
- All firefighting crews conduct regular refresher training sessions throughout the year, with special emphasis in March & April in preparation for wildfire season.

Equipment

- HRFE procures, distributes and maintains a large inventory of specialized equipment for wildfire mitigation. This includes personal protective equipment, uniforms, hand tool, forestry hose lines, fixed and portable pumps, and other items. Considerable effort and expense are related to annual testing and maintenance of these items.
- Via Corporate Fleet, HRFE operates numerous light vehicles (e.g., pick-up trucks). While wildfire mitigation is not the exclusive use of these vehicles, they are critical in HRFE’s ability to quickly move specialized wildfire equipment into position for use by crews.
- HRFE, via capital project CE190001, installs new equipment and maintains 120 dry hydrants and cisterns. These are not used exclusively for wildfire mitigation but provide a critical source of water for firefighting in many rural communities. Project planning, supervision, procurement and research for additional locations are all conducted by HRFE Operations Division Chief Officers without assigned human resources.

Emergency Response

- HRFE responded to 122 brush, grass, or forest fires in FY 2022-23.

Risk Reduction

- In 2023/24, HRFE initiated “FireSmart” Advanced Home Inspections. To date, HRFE has trained 20 Assessors and has completed approximately 150 assessments.

Hazard Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (HRVA)

- Emergency Management is completing a HRVA for the entirety of HRM that will assess all risks, hazards and vulnerabilities that will produce a risk assessment by HRVA focus areas. This assessment will include fire risks that have been identified by DNRR in communities where the FireSmart program has been completed. A detailed risk assessment with mitigation factors to reduce risk will be presented to Regional Council and Communities. The HRVA has a staff person assigned and is presently underway with community meetings and online surveys.

Parks & Recreation

- Under the business plan deliverables of (1) park management, (2) trail maintenance and (3) works control & service delivery, Parks & Recreation responds to tree damage or downed trees/branches through the service request process. A key component to preserving ecological integrity is to leave native organic materials ‘as-is’ where possible. Where a specific hazard has been identified, and the risk of this hazard is determined to be high, HRM may conduct targeted fuel reduction, including removal of material from site.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial implications included in this information report.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

No community engagement was required.

ATTACHMENTS

No attachments

A copy of this report can be obtained online at halifax.ca or by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 902.490.4210.

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