



**Claresholm**

# REQUEST FOR DECISION

Meeting: November 21, 2024

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## FIREFIGHTER RECRUITMENT & RETENTION INCENTIVE

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### DESCRIPTION/BACKGROUND:

Recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters has become increasingly difficult over the past number of years. Traditionally, recruitment has been by word-of-mouth, open houses, and more recently social media / traditional media. However, where the department is used to having between 2-5 potential members "in the queue" waiting for an opportunity, we are currently running with zero to one.

Additionally, we are now in a position, due to resignations, and inability to recruit new members, that we have had to consolidate four partial crews into three full crews. Essentially, we are now doing the work of 26 members with only 23; and our projected call volume for 2023-24 is at OVER **300** (based on responses year to date).

This is not a problem that is unique to the Claresholm Department, in fact, recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters is a North America wide issue. The Chief is proposing a Recruitment and Retention tax incentive program will provide the kick-start needed to fill out our roster, and hopefully have a pool of applicants available to backfill vacancies and retirements.

### DISCUSSION/OPTIONS:

This Recruitment & Retention Incentive was discussed at both the June and September Emergency Services Committee meetings and was motioned to be forwarded to Council.

As there is potential budgetary implications, the Director of Corporate Services requested this be brought to the attention of the Audit & Finance Committee.

As mentioned, traditional sources of recruitment and retention do not result in an adequate pool of candidates to meet the department's needs, leaving us with vacant positions, often for months at a time. These vacancies, coupled with increasing call volume is leading to response fatigue from those members that remain.

#### **Option 1:**

The Towns of Coaldale and Picture Butte have come up with a unique solution to member retention; they offer up to a \$1000 tax rebate to their volunteer firefighters who own & occupy a home in the Town. In addition, they each offer up to a \$2000 tax rebate to businesses who employ a volunteer firefighter and allow them to respond to calls during working hours without loss of hourly pay. This would be a taxable benefit to the members, and there is no option to make it otherwise. Some businesses may not make use of the program as they have other means to lower their taxes (i.e. writing off property taxes at tax time), this would end up being a savings to the program overall if some chose this path.

Both Coaldale and Picture Butte have reported a great interest in this program, and it has resulted in increased interest and applications to the departments – especially Picture Butte. It should be noted that Lethbridge County does *not* participate in this program for their residents who are volunteer firefighters at either of these respective halls.

These rebates are provided on a sliding scale outlined below

- Based on comparative populations and call volumes, the Chief proposes a property tax rebate incentive of \$1000 for volunteer firefighters of the Claresholm department who own & occupy a home in the Town of Claresholm. The qualifying conditions would be:
  - Rebate **NOT** to be in excess of 75% of assessed municipal taxes
  - Program to start January 1, 2025, to eligible members who completed service in 2024
  - Eligible **after** one (1) full year of service to the department
  - Log **129** or more hours of service per year. Hours recognized for this incentive would be:
    - Responding to calls / events – 1 hour per hour attended
    - Training events and monthly apparatus checks – 0.5 hours per hour attended

**Personal Tax Rebate**

Hours of Service	Tax Rebate
129+	\$1000
100 – 128.99	\$750
75.0 – 99.99	\$500
50.0 – 74.99	\$250
< 50.0	\$0

**Business Tax Rebate**

Hours of Service	Tax Rebate
129+	\$2000
100 – 128.99	\$1750
75.0 – 99.99	\$1500
50.0 – 74.99	\$1250
<50.0	\$0

- Members enrolled in the 1001 professional firefighting training program would not have those training hours applied to their yearly service hours, as it currently has its own incentive program.
- The Property Tax Rebate would also be made available to businesses who own a building located within the corporate limits of the Town of Claresholm, and who employ a volunteer firefighter and allow them to respond to calls during business hours. The rebate program would also extend to volunteer firefighters who are self-employed business owners in the Town of Claresholm, provided they meet the above requirements.

**Budgetary Impact:** Based on the 2023 Fiscal Year, it is estimated that implementing this program would affect the tax base in the following manner:

- Personal Property Taxes: \$11,250 (accounting for removal of MD members, and non-homeowners)
- Business Property Taxes: \$0.00 (applicable businesses were *below* cutoff threshold)
  - Total Impact \$11,250.00

To offset this impact to tax revenue, the fire department will cover a portion of this program to a *maximum of \$15000 per annum*, by way of reducing transfer to capital reserves in an equal amount.

**Option 2:**

Explore reducing the level of service of the fire department; some of the ways this could be accomplished include:

- Not responding to alarm bell calls that are automatically dispatched by an alarm company. Rather, these events would be the responsibility of the home/business/institution to confirm the veracity of the alarm and then make a secondary call to 911 dispatch
- Decrease our participation in the medical first response program. Currently the department has a defined level of response based either on the acuity of call, time-dependent-factor as established at program outset, or automatically dispatched based on predetermined need for fire resources. We would instead change our responses to only those life critical events that are identified as Delta and Echo determinants. This would have to be passed through both Town council as well as the Fire Chief-CAO committee as participation in the MFR program is outlined in the Inter-Collaboration Framework Fire Services Agreement (ICF-FSA)
- Amend our Quality Management Plan (QMP) level of service for the Fire Discipline to extend to the maximum allowable interval between demand/routine inspections from annual to 24months. Inspections as the result of a complaint would be initiated as soon as practical. All fires would still have to be investigated as per the QMP / Office of the Fire Commissioner (OFC).

**Option 3:**

Status Quo, or alternative recruitment and retention option proposed by Committee and/or Council.

The Fire Chief and CAO have reached out to their respective counterparts at the MD of Willow Creek to advise that this incentive has been approved by our Emergency Services Committee and will be forwarded to Council for decision. At this time, the MD of Willow Creek has *declined* to commit to a similar program, therefore, members who reside in the MD of Willow Creek will be ineligible for this program. Similarly, those who reside in Claresholm, but do not own property will also be ineligible.

**PROPOSED RESOLUTIONS:**

Moved by Councilor \_\_\_\_\_ to adopt Policy 5.1.25, the Volunteer Firefighter Tax Credit Policy.

**COSTS/ SOURCE OF FUNDING (if applicable):**

- Reduction in transfer to Fire Department Reserves to a maximum of \$15000.00 per annum to offset program costs.
- Reduction in income from property owner taxes for any amount in excess of Fire Department reserve transfer.

**ATTACHMENTS:**

- 1.) DRAFT Poly 5.X.X.XX – Volunteer Firefighter Tax Credit

**APPLICABLE LEGISLATION:**

- 1.) Section 347(1) - MGA

PREPARED BY: Craig White – Fire Chief

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APPROVED BY: Abe Tinney - CAO

DATE: November 22, 2024

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