

Move to upload fire services won't help King

By Mark Pavilons

As municipalities work through their budgets, some in York have expressed a desire to offload the costs of fire services to York Region.

But the move won't help municipalities like King Township, which provides efficient, innovative and inexpensive fire and emergency services.

Aurora passed a motion recently, requesting York Region consider amalgamating regional fire services into one large, York service. Aurora and Newmarket consolidated their services into the Central York Fire Services, which has resulted in efficiencies through enhanced levels of fire service and cost efficiencies.

They argue that a regional fire service may achieve further operating efficiencies, improved department structure, increased service level(s), and cost avoidance opportunities.

They're asking that regional staff work with the nine York municipalities and report back on the possibility of a regional fire service. King Mayor Steve Pellegrini said it may become "a huge debate" at regional council in February, when the matter is slated to be on the table.

Other municipalities, he said, find themselves lagging behind in terms of personnel and equipment, preferring to upload the responsibility, and the cost, to the upper-tier government.

"Where are efficiencies?" he asked. "I don't see any cost savings for King."

If a regional service were to be implemented, the drawback locally is that King personnel would be responding to calls in nearby Vaughan, taking them away from their community. In this scenario, there's no benefit for King at all. In fact, it would hinder local service delivery and response times.

Local response, the mayor said, is huge and almost instant.

As well, King Fire and Emergency Services provides modern, comprehensive fire protection at a fraction of the cost of other municipalities. In many ways, King's serviced is the envy of many other services throughout the GTA.

In terms of cost, King's fire department operates on an annual budget of upwards of \$3 million (net). But the 130 dedicated firefighters cost only \$1.1 million.

King's personnel are an "incredible brotherhood/sisterhood whose members love their community," the mayor observed.

By comparison, Aurora contributes \$11.8 million annually to the Central York Fire Services. Aurora has a population of roughly 56,000.