

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS CRUCIAL

United Voice, Message, Needed for Change

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The fire service of Nova Scotia is not in a crisis state ~ yet ~ but we need to create and experience better support and partnerships to address the numerous issues facing the fire service in this province.

It is wrong to believe that any single level of government, individual or group is going to fix our problems or that large amounts of funding will straighten things out. Foremost, the fire services of Nova Scotia have to address the internal issues (you all know what they are) that have mired the service for decades.

It's time to cut to the chase: as firefighters, do you believe that Nova Scotia's fire services are fairly funded compared to the other emergency service providers?

There is not one fire service in Nova Scotia that does not have challenges. Is it not time to start building for the future? Have we not heard enough empty promises – MLAs at banquets with lots of stories, thanks and praise but little else? Have we had enough of being left out of any long-term funding support? Are we tired of feeling that the safety of firefighters in Nova Scotia does not seem to matter to our politicians? Over time, every element of fire service operations needs to be supported and modified. This can be achieved through the many opportunities for partnerships that are out there, as long as we (the leaders) create the business plans that are required to sell our service capabilities.

There are numerous laws/standards and guidelines to help support our fire services. Because there is a cost connected to most of these initiatives, most politicians choose not to attach themselves to the fire service. Will it take a future court decision or a line-of-duty death to change this way of thinking? When is enough, enough? We have witnessed tragedies in other Canadian cities such as Yellowknife and Winnipeg, where line-of-duty deaths were at least partially blamed on lack of training because of insufficient funding. Does this have to happen here to initiate change?

The fire services of Nova Scotia need to start making noise so the residents (our customers, the taxpayers) start to better understand the true status of our fire services. Yes, we have fire services in Nova Scotia that have lots of equipment, funding and personnel but they are the minority.

A public awakening to the issues facing the fire services is long overdue. The fire services have failed to make taxpayer and politicians aware of our internal and external issues. We need to come out from underneath our individual departments and start building a stronger united fire service. If we don't, our survival is in question.

There is no doubt that there will be some fire services that will close due to issues such as lack of funding, lack of human resources, less than acceptable equipment, outdated and/or unsafe apparatus, lack of insurance coverage for the department and individual firefighters, etc. That said, some departments will be smart enough to amalgamate before they are forced to close. Witnessing the closure of rural fire service, without a vision for the future, will leave us in a bigger mess than we are now. If we think we have problems now, let's just keep building our individual empires and then see what issues we face.

We should all be fed up with hearing about all the other emergency services in Nova Scotia receiving millions each year from businesses and all levels of government to help them address their operational and resource requirements. Where is the support for the fire service? Sure, we have received bits and pieces from time to time but that's all – pacifiers to keep us happy to some extent. We need to wake up and realize that we are providing numerous resources every day to many other agencies that are receiving all kinds of funding from the municipal, provincial and federal governments as well as other support, while we receive little or nothing.

All of us have responded to alarms that were the responsibility of other agencies – DOT, RCMP, EHS, DNR, NSPI, Coast Guard and many others – because those agencies don't have the personnel to address the situations. Is it time for the fire service to start considering saying no – that we will not respond to other agencies' emergency situations that do not have life saving issues, protection of property or a fire or threat?

Let's wake up and start fighting for our piece of the pie. We need to use the technology available to us, and the strong leadership, partnerships, vision and communication that we possess to work for the required changes. The fire service can only create positive results when we realize we need to build and implement a strong, realistic business plan approach to address these issues.

The firefighters of Nova Scotia can create change by making the public aware of our plight. We need their help to make the politicians from all levels of government take notice and understand what is necessary to provide protection and safety to the public, their properties and our firefighters.

It is time for the firefighters and the public to call, in a united voice, for change. Once we get inside the heads of the taxpayers and the politicians, watch and see what happens. All we need is one supportive politician who will carry the torch for the fire service and its needs. Only then we will begin to enjoy the committed partnerships that are so badly needed.

Until that happens, we need to be united and relentless in our approach for change.