



Cape Breton Regional Municipality

Committee of the Whole Addendum

Tuesday, June 3, 2025

10:00 a.m.

Council Chambers

Second Floor, City Hall

320 Esplanade, Sydney, Nova Scotia

4.10 Correspondence

- c) **Transition of Budget Administration for Glace Bay Volunteer Fire Department:** Glace Bay Volunteer Fire Department (See page 3)

4.11 Fire and Emergency Services Discussion – Various Topics

- a) **Councillor Discussion Request:** Councillor Gordon MacDonald (See page 5)
- b) **Fire and Emergency Services Update:** Mark Bettens, Fire Chief and Director of Fire and Emergency Services (See page 6)

GLACE BAY VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT

87 Reserve Street, Glace Bay, Nova Scotia B1A 4W3

TELEPHONE (902) 849 – 9758



May 27, 2025

Mark Bettens

Chief Director of Fire and Emergency Services

Cape Breton Regional Municipality

380 George Street

Sydney, NS B1P 1K2

Subject: Transition of Budget Administration for the Glace Bay Volunteer Fire Department

Dear Chief Bettens,

It has been my honour and privilege to serve as Chief of the Glace Bay Volunteer Fire Department for over a decade. Throughout these ten years, we have faced continuous financial challenges in meeting the demands of one of the busiest volunteer fire departments in the Cape Breton Regional Municipality (CBRM).

Repeated requests for increased funding to support the volunteer operations of our department were often left unanswered. This created unnecessary pressure to stay within strict financial limits, making it increasingly difficult to maintain operational readiness and ensure the safety of both our firefighters and the community.

Our first significant increase came only in 2024 — nine years after I assumed the role of Chief — when our equipment budget saw a 15% boost. While that increase was welcomed, it did not keep pace with the exponential rise in equipment costs over the past decade. For example, the cost of turnout gear and SCBA (self-contained breathing apparatus) has risen by more than 275%, not to mention numerous other essential pieces of equipment that are used daily in fire service.

In 2024, Glace Bay took on additional responsibility by assuming fire protection for the Tower Road community. We did so without hesitation. Since then, we've expanded our automatic response coverage to include structure fires in Donkin, Port Morien, and Birch Grove. Most recently, we added automatic response coverage for the Cape Breton University (CBU) campus with our ladder truck. These additions were made to help strengthen fire service coverage across the region — and we were proud to step up to meet those needs.

This most recent budget cycle finally included a change that could have allowed us to operate not just adequately within our own community, but also continue supporting our neighboring communities that have turned to us for assistance. Importantly, this funding increase came not from expanding the overall CBRM fire budget, but from reallocating resources following the closure of a nearby station.

This was a long-overdue step in the right direction.

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Unfortunately, because the increase to Glace Bay's budget was greater than what other departments received, it sparked frustration and accusations of favoritism. As a result, the increase was reversed — and with that decision, we were once again left underfunded and overburdened.

We cannot continue to operate under these conditions. The additional responsibilities we've assumed have stretched our resources to the limit, and the financial strain is unsustainable. The commitment of our volunteer firefighters remains unwavering — but they deserve to be properly equipped and supported.

This is not just a budget issue. It's a matter of fairness, safety, and responsibility. Our community — and the communities we assist — deserve better.

After careful consideration, the Glace Bay Volunteer Fire Department has no other choice but to transfer administration of its operating budget to the Cape Breton Regional Municipality, effective immediately. This decision has been driven by the unsustainable nature of the current budget, which has not kept pace with the significant cost increases experienced over the past several years.

For many years, we have worked tirelessly to provide essential services to our community despite operating under an insufficient budget. Unfortunately, continuing to do so is no longer viable. To meet the safety standards required to protect our firefighters and the public, we must acknowledge that the current financial resources are inadequate.

Going forward, we expect that all future expenditures of the Glace Bay Volunteer Fire Department will be made in full collaboration with our leadership. We request that clear guidelines be established jointly to ensure transparency, accountability, and that the operational needs of the department are fully understood and supported by the administration.

Please be assured that our dedicated volunteers remain committed to responding to the needs of our community. However, given the current financial constraints, we cannot continue to bear the fiscal responsibility for operations.

This decision was not made lightly. Our sole objective remains providing the highest standard of service to the residents we serve. We look forward to working closely with the municipality as you assume operational and fiscal oversight, and to continuing our shared commitment to public safety.

Sincerely,



City Hall
320 Esplanade
Sydney, NS B1P 7B9

Councillor Discussion Request

Date of Meeting: June 3, 2025

Subject: Various - Fire

Outcome sought or other details: Discussion/Reponses

GRANTS - how are grants allocated to each department and are They use for specific Fire Department items or resources. Does CBRM fire services review the financials at the end of each fiscal year for what that money was used for?

FLEET CLAWBACKS- There are some departments that are being asked to give up some of their fleet, and they seem kind of disturbed At CBRM fire services are suggesting this. I'm wondering what the rationale for reaching out to these departments and what are you seeing as the end game by doing so. Has anybody been in discussions with these departments before any of these decisions were made?

STIPENDS- what is the policy around stipends for volunteer fire departments and what is the criteria to receive it? Do all departments give out stipends and if not, why?

MFRs - I understand that some Fire Departments, volunteer, and career Do medical first responder calls, and I believe those that do it feel it is important to what they do as fire service. My question, that I have been asking for a while is, if we are going to be doing provincial EHS work because these are calls that should be going to our paramedics, and not to fire services. Why are we not pursuing the provincial government for a discussion on the costs of these calls that we are required to take because of the shortages, and I would like to ask that this be investigated and brought back to council with an answer as to why the cost falls to CBRM taxpayers?

Automatic callouts for Cape Breton Regional Fire Service -

Recently in areas surrounding Sydney career fire department, they are being automatically called out to areas outside their jurisdiction when there are other volunteer fire departments within those areas. My question is, how is this come about? Why is it happening and why are we not collaborating with the other volunteer fire departments in the area? Who is going to be responsible for the extra costs of these calls when it is our trucks and firefighters rolling out?

Date

Received by Gordon MacDonald



Mark Bettens, Director/Chief
Cape Breton Regional Fire & Emergency Services
mhbettens@cbrm.ns.ca

362 George Street
Sydney, Nova Scotia
B1P 1K1
Phone: 902-563-5130

To: Committee of the Whole
Subject: Fire and Emergency Services Update
Date: June 3, 2025

Dear Members of Committee,

There has been a submission for Council discussion on which I have been asked to provide immediate response as part of my overall updates. The questions in the submission can lend to a lot of well-needed discussion and I am looking forward to delving in further.

Question on Grants:

How are grants allocated to each department and are They use for specific Fire Department items or resources. Does CBRM fire services review the financials at the end of each fiscal year for what that money was used for?

Response:

The county and former towns are both treated differently. However the County grants are motion of council and reviewed for actuals every election year and cost of living on non-election years.

County (Former)

In the former county they are based on a base rate, number of roofs protected and then so much for a pumper, tanker & administration. The money is supposed to be used for equipment, but no receipts are required for ongoing release of funds so therefore under the current program there is no way of knowing what equipment is purchased. The number of responses or services provided is not considered in the funding formula.

Towns are all different. They are line-item budgets and based on pre-amalgamation budgets. As with the former county departments the number of responses or services provided is not considered or taken into account. However, the approval of all purchases related to the budget are authorized and approved by Deputy MacNeil the volunteer coordinator. Council sees Town budgets every year as they are in the budget. Deputy Chief MacNeil can elaborate if you wish.

As for financials, no we don't as all that is provided by some is a document that shows inflows and outflows with no substantiating of purchases. I would suggest that Fire Admin and the CFO review the document in Policy F.005 and come back to council with a requirement that follows and is more representative of general accepted accounting practices.



CBRM

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Cape Breton Regional Municipality**Question: Fleet Clawbacks**

There are some departments that are being asked to give up some of their fleet, and they seem kind of disturbed. At CBRM fire services are suggesting this. I'm wondering what the rationale for reaching out to these departments and what are you seeing as the endgame by doing so. Have anybody been in discussions with these departments before any of these decisions were made?

Response:

There is no plan on fleet claw backs. We have a large ask in front of council today to fund the status quo. I believe it is our responsibility to provide council with other options other than status quo. A plan B if you will. We have several departments that have 2-person cab tankers. We were merely asking them if they would in fact consider a new tanker that would be a 5 person cab that would enable them to transport more firefighters to the scene safely. We are only attempting to transport more people to the scene in a safe manner and provide the necessary pumping and water capacity on scene.

Question: Stipends

What is the policy around stipends, for volunteer fire departments and what is the criteria to receive it? Do all departments give out stipends and if not, why?

Response:

There is no policy on stipends. Every Town department receive stipends based on what they received prior to CBRM amalgamation. We only see the total amount going to a department and have no knowledge of how it is distributed (Grants to Org).

Question: MFRs

I understand that some Fire Departments, volunteer, and career do medical first responder calls, and I believe those that do it feel it is important to what they do as fire service. My question, that I have been asking for a while is, if we are going to be doing provincial EHS work because these are calls should be going to our paramedics, and not to fire services. Why are we not pursuing the provincial government for a discussion on the costs of these calls that we are required to take because of the shortages, and I would like to ask that this be investigated and brought back to council with an answer as to why the cost falls to CBRM taxpayers?

Response:

All these calls go to EHS. No CBRM Fire Department is transporting patients. The MFR program is voluntary and supports treatment to our residents prior to EHS arrival. Fire Departments around the world are providing this service. In CBRM it should be noted that in both urban and rural areas of our community we have had many positive outcomes. All equipment and costs around equipment is provided to MFR departments by EHS/Province of NS. We are currently following a Council motion to provide the service. Council further supported the MFR program by having the career staff trainer also train any or all volunteer departments in the CBRM so as they will not encounter any cost to participate in the program.

Deputy MacNeil can elaborate on CBRM rollout cost.

I'm not aware of any Province paying Fire Departments for service but I would be pleased to reach out to the CAFC for a jurisdictional scan of the Country.



CBRM

A Community of Communities

Cape Breton Regional Municipality

Question: Automatic callouts for Cape Breton Regional Fire Service

Recently in areas surrounding Sydney career fire department, they are being automatically called out to areas outside their jurisdiction when there are other volunteer fire departments within those areas. My question is, how is this come about? Why is it happening and why are we not collaborating with the other volunteer fire departments in the area? Who is going to be responsible for the extra costs of these calls when it is our trucks and firefighters rolling out?

Great question because I think it prompts further discussion on many items.

So I'll provide a bit of background first..

Since I've been hired, which coincides with CBRM Amalgamation the Career service has supported Volunteer Departments outside of Sydney. Sydney has sent an aerial ladder to Sydney River (former CB Hospital) since I understand the 1960's. Since before amalgamation again Sydney former Station #3 Whitney Pier has supported South Bar Volunteer Fire Department on all structure and MVC's requiring extrication. Sydney also supported in the same fashion Grand Lake Road Volunteer Fire Department in the same way. Back when I started the Sydney stations went everywhere in the rural area to support MVC's where Sydney River didn't go in the Central area. The career core also started responding to all reports of a structure fire in Sydney River for approximately the last 12 years. So, I would say there is a long history of the former City of Sydney and now CB Regional Fire Service supporting those Department/Chiefs that have ask for response support to their area where they are the authority having jurisdiction (AHJ)

So jurisdictionally they are being called by the Chief that is the AHJ in the district that is responsible and has the authority to make the request. I'm not going to question the Chief as to why they have or have not asked other volunteer departments. They have responsibility to act for their community and I have a duty to answer them.

I believe I've answered how it came about in the background and the two attached documents from the chiefs. We are working with all departments in the region. However, I believe that core career does have the ability to support the additional responses in the surrounding area as they have been doing for a long time. I will agree that with diminishing volunteer resources the career component is being required to support the regional service in an ever-increasing way meeting minimum response capability.

Is there a cost? Yes, sometimes there is. But I also believe there is a cost for our city in not doing it. If at one of these calls, they become committed to a structure fire we backfill the career station as to maintain an arbitrated minimum staffing in Sydney. At present as in the many years of the past, the taxpayers of Sydney pay for this backfill. This is why I say it's a good time for council to look at and address the fact that 29 years later in the CBRM we have 10 fire tax rates. It is my belief that the time has come for (CBRM) to establish a service delivery model that reflects our support for the fire service and minimum levels of response needed and expected. With councils' consideration we should look at going from 10 tax rates to 3. Councils might consider and urban, suburban and rural fire tax rate. So that for example, to more evenly and properly fund the CBRM Fire service.

Mark Bettens, Director/Chief
Cape Breton Regional Fire and Emergency Services

