



FIRE SERVICES

TO: Council
DATE: February 21, 2023
FILE: N/A
SUBJECT: Rocky View County Fire Guardian Program

DIVISION: All
APPLICATION: N/A

POLICY DIRECTION:

In accordance with Fire Services Bylaw C-7886-2019 section 13, each year before the first of March, Rocky View County shall appoint a sufficient number of Fire Guardians to enforce the provisions of the Forest and Prairie Protection Act and the Bylaw within the boundaries of the County.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

On December 14, 2022 Council directed Administration to bring back a report on the Fire Guardians program and provide additional information on the status of the program continuing forward.

In November of 2022 the Fire Chief's office issued a letter to the remaining RVC appointed Fire Guardians thanking them for their service to the community, and providing notification that the program was being discontinued in 2023, with a focus of moving to an online permitting process. Fire Services received feedback from Council and Fire Guardians asking to revisit the decision.

This report provides an overview of the Rocky View County Fire Guardian program, some of the challenges related to the program, and proposed improvements to the administrative deficiencies of the current delivery model.

ADMINISTRATION RECOMMENDATION:

Administration recommends approval in accordance with Option #1.

BACKGROUND:

It is the goal of the Rocky View County Fire Service to minimize the number of responses to non-permitted open burning, and to provide residents with an efficient and effective system for the control and safe use of fire for legitimate purposes. In accordance with Fire Services Bylaw C-7886-2019 section 13, each year before the first of March, Rocky View County appoints a sufficient number of Fire Guardians to enforce the provisions of the Forest and Prairie Protection Act (FPPA) and Fire Services Bylaw C-7886-2019 within the boundaries of the County.

In 2022, 59 Fire Guardians were appointed throughout the seven electoral divisions. The majority were employed or contracted with Rocky View County, with three volunteer Fire Guardians in Divisions 4 and 5.

Under the authority and powers prescribed by the FPPA, Fire Guardians may issue fire permits in accordance with Fire Services Bylaw C-7886-2019 in the following ways:

- Unconditionally, or impose any conditions on the permit that is considered appropriate, given the nature of the fire and prevailing circumstances, location, and environmental conditions;

Administration Resources

Ken Hubbard, Fire Services



- Suspend or cancel a fire permit at any time, or;
- Refuse to issue a fire permit where there is risk to the public in relation to the proposed fire.

Historically preceding each fire season appointment, annual training would be completed to provide an overview for Fire Guardians of their duties under legislation and bylaws, guidelines for issuing permits, and records management. Over recent years, partially due to COVID-19 restrictions, in-service training has not been completed, and replaced with informal review of Fire Guardian training materials. Communications with Fire Guardians are mainly through Fire Services Administrative Coordinators for the return of permit books annually, to issue new permit books, communicate guideline updates, or identify a change in fire status moving to an advisory or ban.

In the fall of 2022, Fire Services reviewed the status of the Fire Guardian program, considering identified administrative challenges and burn permit infractions. The most significant challenge is an incomplete record of permits not recorded in our fire management database for reference and follow-up from incident responses, reported neighbour complaints, and bylaw infractions. These fall into four categories:

- 1) Burning without a permit;
- 2) Burning piles larger than permitted;
- 3) Burning prohibited debris and materials, and;
- 4) Burning without a person on site, regardless of permit.

Volunteer Fire Guardians paper permit records are not recorded until permit books are returned annually. Unfortunately, post-COVID, many have not been returned at all. This is problematic, given emergency response calls for smoke investigations must be initiated. Without a registered fire permit with Calgary Fire Dispatch within the reported area, more engines and tenders are allocated to the smoke investigation fire response. Rocky View County issued 961 burn permits in 2022. Fire Services directly issued 786 burn permits, with 175 issued by volunteer Fire Guardians in the north divisions, amounting to approximately 18% of annual fire permits.

Going forward, the desired method is to move to a paperless, online permit process where the applicant's information would be entered into a database and issued to the applicant electronically. Tracking indicates that 75% of permits are issued by Fire Services in this manner currently, and Fire Guardians report that several applicants have been advised since November of 2022 to complete a permit application online via the Rocky View County website. This format would enable the timely capture of all permits issued for administrative review and follow up from complaints or permit infraction enforcement, and would remove the duplication required to manually enter returned paper permits annually.

Fire Services has heard and understands there is still some technology hurdles to overcome before a paperless fire permit model can be initiated. We have engaged our Information Technology department and our database provider for assistance with mobile solutions for our volunteer Fire Guardians that may enhance permit data collection. Fire Services understands this work will take more time to complete in 2023 before an electronic fire permit can be adopted and tested, and training provided. Also being investigated, as part of this initiative, is the adoption of annual permits to enhance the permit process for repeat applicants. For these reasons, Fire Services is respectfully recommending that the Fire Guardian Program continue for 2023.



BUDGET IMPLICATIONS:

Funding for potential mobile fire permit application and technology support may require a budget adjustment and will be considered as part of the 2024 Operating Budget.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES:

The Fire Guardian program falls under the Service Excellence strategic objective that continues the County's commitment to listening to customers and reviewing policies and procedures to enable customers to navigate our process easily and efficiently.

OPTIONS:

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| Option #1: | Motion 1 | THAT the Fire Guardian Program continue in 2023 under the current format, including appointed volunteer Fire Guardians. |
| | Motion 2 | THAT Administration be directed to continue development of annual fire permits and explore mobile data collection solutions for the 2024 permit season. |
| Option #2: | THAT alternative direction be provided. | |

Respectfully submitted,

Concurrence,

"Kent Robinson"

"Dorian Wandzura"

Executive Director
Corporate Services

Chief Administrative Officer

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ATTACHMENTS:

ATTACHMENT 'A': Fire Services Bylaw C-7886-2019