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THE FUTURE OF THE FIRE SERVICE IN SASKATCHEWAN

The purpose of this booklet is to provide the reader with an overview of the priority issues concerning the fire service in Saskatchewan. It recommends actions that should be acted upon. It is imperative for the Government of Saskatchewan to commit to ensuring the safety of all residents of Saskatchewan and that all necessary elements are in place and functioning well before any further decay of the fire service occurs. Further delay in the development and implementation within these identified areas could prove costly or even deadly.

ABOUT THE SASKATCHEWAN FIRE SERVICE

The fire service in Saskatchewan faces many challenges similar to those being faced by services such as education, health care and others. In the fire service, additional stressors are present because a significant portion of the service is delivered through part-time and/or volunteer personnel. Additional factors that include the demographic shift from rural to urban, aging population, increased levels of population working in more than one career (agriculture and second employment) are also putting stresses on much of the Saskatchewan fire service. These challenges and stressors are at an all-time high in the province's history.

To better understand the make-up of the fire service within Saskatchewan, it is vital to grasp and appreciate that the fire service reflects the province's unique and diverse population distribution. Part-time and volunteer fire services are provided by approximately five hundred departments comprised of 6500 volunteer firefighters in areas with a relatively small population base. The remainder of the province is serviced through either combination (career/part-

time/volunteer) or full career departments. There are approximately seven hundred career fire service personnel currently at work within Saskatchewan. Saskatchewan fire service demographics are provided below:

Type of Department	Number of Departments	Number of Personnel
Full Time	4	650
*Composite	10	150
Volunteer	494	6,500
Total	508	>7,200

*Composite fire departments are staffed by a combination of full-time and volunteer personnel.

In the past, the role of the fire service was overwhelmingly focused on fire prevention and fire protection. Over time that role has evolved significantly. It is estimated that about two-thirds to three-quarters of the incidents to which fire departments respond do not involve fire.

Traditional responsibilities of fire prevention and fire protection have been expanded to include: rescue response of every description (air, rail, highway, construction, domestic, etc.); health response (day-to-day medical, SARS, etc.); natural disasters (floods, tornadoes, ice storms, etc.); rescues on land and water (building collapses, highway and rail disasters, etc.); and hazardous materials issues (highway, rail, storage, etc.).

ABOUT THE SASKATCHEWAN ASSOCIATION OF FIRE CHIEFS

The Saskatchewan Association of Fire Chiefs has considered the existing challenges facing the fire service in Saskatchewan and believes the solutions required can best be achieved through a shared commitment between the provincial and

the capability to communicate internally within their own agency and to be able to switch to a common interoperable channel when needed for multi-agency incidents.

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For more information about issues affecting the Saskatchewan Fire Service, contact the Saskatchewan Association of Fire Chiefs' President Garth Palmer at (306) 692-2792 or email GPalmer@mifire.ca

OR

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The SAFC is affiliated with The Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs and The International Association of Fire Chiefs.

1. Municipal fire departments were led away from FleetNet in favour of the provincial fire frequency during the early days of FleetNet and were only directed toward FleetNet when the provincial 911 system became a reality.
2. There is a need for a province-wide radio system capable of allowing fire departments to communicate with their dispatch agencies from anywhere in the province.
3. Emergency response agencies regularly need to communicate with each other when responding to and operating at emergencies such as motor vehicle collisions, train derailments, natural disasters and major fires.
4. Fire departments are often the first response agency for major emergencies and need to call upon other agencies at municipal, provincial and federal levels to assist in mitigating the effects of the emergency. They must be able to communicate their current needs, changing situations and future needs while these agencies are responding.
5. Large emergency events can easily involve multiple jurisdictions or move rapidly from one jurisdiction to another requiring coordination between jurisdictions throughout the event and this requires the ability to communicate between jurisdictions.

A governance model for the new system must include all users of the system including fire, police, ambulance, utilities, and provincial response agencies.

The Government of Saskatchewan must ensure all emergency response agencies, (fire, police, ambulance, utilities and public works,), have an affordable and reliable communications system with

the municipal governments. In this regard, the SAFC proposes solutions for your consideration in the following five areas:

- 1. Provincial Government Funding of Fire Service Initiatives**
- 2. Presumptive Legislation for Part-Time and Volunteer Firefighters**
- 3. The Role of the Fire Commissioner**
- 4. Mandatory Fire Protection**
- 5. Communications**

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PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT FUNDING OF FIRE SERVICE INITIATIVES – TAX PREMIUMS

There is an expectation when a call is made for a fire related emergency, that properly trained and equipped firefighters will respond to mitigate the situation. In many areas throughout this province, this is simply not the case. Training and education for Emergency Services in the province have not been given the attention they deserve. Currently, no agency or facility exists that can meet the needs for firefighter training for life safety, emergency response. To further complicate the mix, many jurisdictions lack the basic equipment to respond to and mitigate emergencies.

On December 4, 1997, the Occupational Health and Safety Regulations adopted the Code of Practice for firefighters at which time it became mandatory for firefighters to be trained to safely carry out any emergency operations they would be expected to perform. It also mandated standards for personal protective equipment and apparatus maintenance. At about this same time the Office of the Fire Commissioner (OFC) started to cut back on the provision of training in the province, changing its mandate to one of

certifying the training provided by other agencies – typically fire departments. These training costs are onerous for some departments and are not helpful to enhancing the fire service. Many volunteer departments are getting no training while others are being forced to hire private companies to provide their training needs. Career fire departments provide their own in-house training, with the OFC providing certification, or they send members to the colleges in Manitoba and Alberta for training.

The Government of Saskatchewan collects a 1% tax on fire insurance premiums from companies transacting the business of issuing fire insurance in the province. This tax generates approximately three and one-half million dollars in revenue annually, which is currently deposited to the provincial government's general revenue fund. Redirecting this fire tax revenue to the Office of the Fire Commissioner for it to administer in the form of a Financial Incentives Program will provide more effective emergency services province-wide, which was the reason the funds were originally collected.

It is the responsibility of the provincial government to ensure public safety issues are addressed in all jurisdictions in this province. A Financial Incentives Program could use the fire tax collected to proactively address the needs of the fire service, with a focus in the area of fire prevention as well as training and equipping regional emergency response teams. This initiative would ensure emergency responders are properly trained and equipped to provide the services their residents expect.

The Saskatchewan Association of Fire Chiefs proposes the following:

- I. The tax collected from fire insurance premiums should be directed to the fire service through the Office of the Fire Commissioner to provide a higher level of training and thereby protection throughout the province.

DEVELOPMENT OF A LONG TERM INTEROPERABILITY COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

In the early 1990's, SaskTel Mobility put the FleetNet 800 system online and touted it as the communications system of the future with the capability of allowing all emergency services to operate on separate channels and join together when needed for specific incidents. A few mid-sized cities put their police and fire departments on the system but there was no support from Saskatchewan Emergency Planning for the move to FleetNet; in fact JEPP applications for FleetNet radio systems were flatly denied in favour of the Provincial Fire and Emergency channels.

When the province-wide 911 system was adopted, a province-wide communications system was needed and the province, recognizing this need and the costs of equipment, set up the Telecommunications Program to subsidize the cost of equipment purchased by municipalities for fire departments. By 2004, most municipal fire departments had at least one FleetNet radio to communicate with their dispatchers. Then SaskTel announced the shutdown of the FleetNet system by the end of 2006. Subsequently this was delayed while the province pursued a replacement system.

Fire departments are still using the old provincial fire frequency for on-site command and control and the FleetNet system for communications to their dispatch agencies. The RCMP is operating its own system with SaskPower piggybacked on its towers. The ambulance service is still using FleetNet with cell phones as backup and in some places, the old provincial ambulance frequency. The Department of Highways and SaskEnergy are still using FleetNet backed up with cell phones. Currently, there is no common strategy for emergency communication that would allow all response agencies to communicate with each other:

protection are generally not compatible with public expectation. It is also reasonable to assume there are gaps between the level of service provided and the risks faced by the community.

In order to improve delivery of protective services to the citizens of Saskatchewan, financial commitments from both the province and municipalities need to be enhanced. Opportunities to optimize existing resources should be sought, rather than pursuing a solution through increased taxation.

Municipalities determine the levels of service and this autonomy of service level determination is paramount to them. The taxpayers desire that the cost of these services be affordable. Therefore, incentives for regional cooperation in the delivery of fire protection must be part of the solution.

The public (residents and travelers) expect there will be a response to their emergency. They further expect that this response will be timely and effective. Changes are required to improve the fire service and to allow municipalities to be better prepared to deal with emergencies occurring within their communities and region.

The Saskatchewan Association of Fire Chiefs believe that every citizen of Saskatchewan has a legitimate expectation of receiving some reasonable level of fire protection and that municipalities, without loss of their autonomy, shall provide this protection and inform their rate payers of this level of service.

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2. Members of the fire service in Saskatchewan must have training available locally to allow them to safely serve their community and to advance them through their career from firefighter to officer to chief officer.
3. A system to provide training in Saskatchewan must meet the needs of all stakeholders including rural, urban, first nations, and industrial sectors.
4. We believe that emergency preparedness is uppermost in the minds of municipal councils and they need leadership from the provincial government to establish the necessary strategy, education, training and equipment base for emergency services in the province.
5. The high cost of specialized rescue equipment, hazardous materials response equipment and technical rescue equipment coupled with the limited number of these types of emergencies, indicates that this service is best delivered on a regional basis with members of various municipalities trained to use the equipment and a central location for storage and maintenance of the equipment.
6. The Office of the Fire Commissioner would be the appropriate agency to coordinate this initiative and to ensure all monies collected are directed toward municipal fire services and actually spent on enhancing fire protection services, and not used to offset existing costs of service.
7. A system of benchmarks must be set to determine how funding is directed to municipal fire services for training, equipment and regional operations to ensure optimum use of limited funds.
8. The OFC is under-funded and simply unable to provide any service of value to municipalities given its current limited resources.

9. The intent of Insurance Regulations made pursuant to the Fire Prevention Act was to use the tax on premiums for the enhancement of the fire service.

10. Many municipalities are struggling to deliver fire protection services.

The Government of Saskatchewan should allocate to the Office of the Fire Commissioner the fire tax revenue currently collected to establish an on-going Financial Incentive Program for training. The government should as well provide an additional source of funding that would immediately address the essential necessary training, education and equipment required for the fire service to effectively provide life safety, emergency response and emergency management on a municipal and/or regional basis.

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PRESUMPTIVE LEGISLATION FOR VOLUNTEER AND PART-TIME FIREFIGHTERS

In Saskatchewan, the provision of fire protection and emergency services follows a model where the responsibility for service delivery falls on local government, and the Province supports this delivery through a role of coordination, control and technical assistance. Provision of this service in Saskatchewan requires approximately five hundred fire departments, and over seven thousand firefighters, of which, approximately four hundred and ninety four departments are staffed by sixty-four hundred volunteer firefighters. Currently, the approximately seven hundred full-time career firefighters in Saskatchewan are protected by presumptive legislation recognizing that certain types of cancers are connected with firefighting, as well as heart

MANDATORY FIRE PROTECTION

The Fire Prevention Act, 1992, is outdated and no longer reflects what the fire service represents and the services it provides to a community. Services such as fire suppression, rescue, dangerous goods, EMS, fire prevention and public education, etc. are all part of the modern day fire service.

Current legislation leaves municipalities free to offer the level of fire protection they feel is appropriate and that they are willing and able to pay for. They may establish their own fire department, contract fire protection services from a nearby municipality, or offer no fire protection solution at all to their ratepayers. Consequently, through a community risk assessment and master fire planning process, a municipality's role *must be defined* to mandate the provision of fire protection to their citizens and to inform their ratepayers of the level of service provided them; thereby leaving *only* the determination of the *method of delivery of these services* to the municipality.

The current provincial government organizational structure, through the Office of the Fire Commissioner, is not supporting the delivery of fire protection and emergency services at the level the citizens of Saskatchewan expect, require and deserve. Changes are required to improve the fire service and to mandate municipalities to be better prepared to deal with emergencies occurring within their communities. Financing and support of regional fire protection zones could allocate the necessary resources for both the delivery and coordination of these essential services.

The challenge is to maintain effective, affordable fire protection and avoid duplication of services. Risks change, budgets are reduced, and huge gaps in service delivery exist within our province. Significant disparities exist in levels of service between municipalities and these unequal levels of

6. It must be expanded to include all services provided by fire departments such as vehicle extrication, rope rescue, confined space rescue, water rescue, hazardous materials and various other services as directed by municipal governments.
7. And finally it must provide the tools needed by the fire service to provide training of firefighters, inspection services, investigation services, certification testing, and fire prevention programs.

We can gain some of our insights from our neighboring provinces. British Columbia and Manitoba have strong and viable Fire Commissioners. Alberta on the other hand is one of the provinces where the Fire Commissioner seems to hardly exist. Saskatchewan is a province that appears to be walking the middle ground.

It is well-recognized that this province is in a poor position to help itself in the event of a major emergency. It is further recognized that the Fire Service is the first line of defense to virtually all emergencies. In order to address these concerns, the province *must* become involved. Assistance in the coordination of departments to provide higher levels of service to *all* of our population is crucial.

The Government of Saskatchewan should expand the role of the Office of the Fire Commissioner to reflect the Fire Prevention Act and the activities of the modern day fire service. Increasing capacity hinges on two fundamentals, the ability to provide training and the ability to coordinate and support the delivery of emergency services to communities in Saskatchewan.

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attacks within twenty-four hours of emergency responses. This benefit has also been awarded retroactively to surviving spouses of firefighters who succumb to these health conditions.

Volunteerism plays a critical role in the Saskatchewan fire service and in almost every rural, and some urban communities in terms of public safety, the protection of people, property and the environment. Therefore the proposal for the basic protection of presumptive legislation for **part-time and volunteer firefighters** should be given priority. The ability of local Governments to sustain the delivery of protective services to communities in Saskatchewan is becoming more difficult every year and the differential treatment has heightened our concern.

The needs of the people of Saskatchewan, in terms of fire and emergency response, have not changed over the years, but expectations have. People expect that the buildings in which they live, work and play are safe, that risks to them will be minimized/eliminated, and that if needed, there will be a quick and effective response to their emergencies. This will not be the case if the volunteer firefighters are treated differently than the paid career firefighters.

The fire service in Saskatchewan is already facing recruitment and retention issues due to the impact of the population shift from the rural to urban and the aging baby boomer generation. Municipalities are in a similar situation, where responsibilities have not changed, however, budget pressures (in some cases brought on by municipal re-alignment), have caused significant challenges in meeting these increased public expectations.

Manitoba made amendments to their Workers' Compensation Act in 2002 that reflected the findings of medical and scientific studies which illustrate a strong association between the working conditions experienced by full-time firefighters and the occurrence of certain diseases so

in 2005, this coverage was extended to part-time and volunteer firefighters.

Along with the full-time career firefighters, our part-time and volunteer firefighters represent a unique group of highly dedicated men and women who routinely place the safety and needs of others before their own. It is unacceptable to the Saskatchewan Association of Fire Chiefs that part-time and volunteer firefighters are treated differently than the full-time paid career firefighters. Fires and emergencies responded to by a part-time or volunteer are no different than those responded to by the paid career firefighter therefore the basic coverage of presumptive legislation covering some types of cancers and heart attacks within twenty-four hours of an emergency response should be extended to Saskatchewan part-time and volunteer firefighters.

The Government of Saskatchewan should expand the current presumptive legislation for full-time career firefighters to include part-time and volunteer firefighters.

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ROLE OF THE OFFICE OF THE FIRE COMMISSIONER

While the legislative requirements of the Fire Prevention Act, 1992, set out parameters in which municipalities must function, there is no requirement to deliver fire protection services in their municipality; nor is there significant provincial support to assist or encourage them in the area of fire protection service delivery. They are forced to develop their own expertise or contract from others who possess the expertise and resources. To many municipalities these are significant and/or overwhelming challenges.

The Office of the Fire Commissioner (OFC) currently has withdrawn from its responsibilities under the Fire Prevention

Act, 1992, to a position of offering advisory services on a request basis. Many services once provided by the OFC are no longer available, leaving municipalities, fire chiefs and firefighters on their own to develop and maintain service levels. The re-organization of the Department of Corrections and Public Safety has not provided the support and direction needed by the OFC and the provincial fire service. Additionally the budget for the Office of the Fire Commissioner is not sufficient to provide service over an entire province.

In order for these issues to be suitably addressed, the Office of the Fire Commissioner must be expanded to pre-1990 levels. The Office of the Fire Commissioner is the only agency that has the ability to harmonize the fire service throughout the province. To this end, the role of the Office of the Fire Commissioner must become more reflective of today's reality in the fire service by providing the following:

1. It must perform an assessment of each of the province's fire departments.
2. It must determine the needs of the fire service in order to provide adequate protection throughout the province.
3. It must take a leadership role to fill in the gaps and voids in the fire service throughout our province. This should be in the form of regions being established throughout the province that would have fire departments working together and helping one another.
4. It must be the liaison between the government and the fire departments.
5. It must set goals for the fire service that are attainable, affordable and reasonable and must monitor the progress in each region.