

**RESORT MUNICIPALITY OF WHISTLER**

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## STAFF REPORT TO COUNCIL

**PRESENTED:** January 23, 2024  
**REPORT:** 24-011  
**FROM:** Corporate Services and Public Safety  
**FILE:** 7200  
**SUBJECT:** WHISTLER FIRE RESCUE SERVICE RESPONSE ANALYSIS AND  
RESOURCING REQUEST

### RECOMMENDATION FROM THE CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

**That** the recommendation of the General Manager of Corporate Services and Public Safety be endorsed.

### RECOMMENDATION(S)

**That** Council direct staff to initiate seven day a week daytime staffing at the Spring Creek Fire Hall #3 as soon as is practicable; and

**That** Council direct staff to include the associated increases in Whistler Fire Rescue Services operating costs into the next amendment of “Five-Year Financial Plan 2024- 2028 Bylaw No. 2424, 2024”, to be considered by Council later this year.

### PURPOSE OF REPORT

The purpose of this report is to provide Council with an update on the outcomes and implications of recent and ongoing reviews of the Whistler Fire Rescue Service response operations and to provide context and background for proposed changes to Whistler Fire Rescue Services (WFRS) staffing levels at Hall #3.

☐ Information Report

☒ Administrative Report (Decision or Direction)

### DISCUSSION

#### Background

Whistler’s population continues to grow. According to B.C. Stats, the Resort Municipality of Whistler (RMOW) permanent population increased by 2,420 (>20 per cent) between 2015 and 2020 (2023 reporting data is pending).

Furthermore, Whistler’s population equivalent, which includes second homeowners, seasonal staff, commuters and day visitors, has increased to an estimated annualized average daily population of over 42,000 in 2023 with more than 20,000 estimated to be ‘resident’ on any given day – either permanent, seasonal or second homeowner.

While the few remaining properties in existing neighbourhoods continue to be developed, the primary area for new settlement has been concentrated in the south of the community, especially within what are referred to as Community Land Bank lands within and around the Cheakamus Crossing neighbourhood.

Over this period of community growth, the WFRS operating model has remained generally static. The current staffing model is founded on the following general staffing structure for each Fire Hall:

- Fire Hall #1 (Whistler Village): 24 hour/day career staff over two shifts and Paid on Call (POC) team paged out as needed
- Fire Hall #2 (Alpine): POC team paged out as needed
- Fire Hall #3 (Spring Creek): POC team paged out as needed

Each Fire Hall, whether POC or career-based continues to maintain a complement of required apparatus and equipment suitable to equip the full complement of approximately 60 POC staff, and the current 23 career firefighters.

### **Analysis**

Staff continue to review and assess community patterns of growth and public safety call patterns as they relate to the emergency response readiness and response posture of the WFRS operating structure. A foundational principal of these assessments is to ensure that response times across the community are consistent, balanced and responsive to the areas of highest need.

Internal analysis suggests that there is a need to consider expanding the WFRS operating model to initiate a career-based staffing model for the south end of the community. The primary rationale for the proposed expansion of service include:

1. **Significant recent, ongoing and forecasted growth in the south end of the community.** There is an increasing need to provide additional emergency response service to the fastest growing area of the community (i.e., the Hall #3 service area).
2. **Increased call volumes and response readiness in the south end of the community.** All call types (motor vehicle, medical, wildland/brush and structure fire) are growing faster in the south end of the community than the rest of the community.
3. **Opportunity to decrease fire insurance costs across the community.** Phased integration of full-time career-based firefighters at Hall #3 will have a significant, positive impact on the community Fire Underwriters Service (FUS) rating(s) for the community with consequent reductions in collective insurance premiums.
4. **Improvement in the community's wildfire defense posture.** Emergency response time matters in all emergency response scenarios, but this is especially true in wildfire response scenarios. Moreover, the recently completed [Wildfire Defense Plan](#) highlights the wildfire protection benefits of staffing both Hall #2 and Hall #3 in the future.
5. **Staffing Hall #3 has the ability to meaningfully improve emergency response activities for the entire community.** Hall #3 staffing will decrease response time to structure fires, motor vehicle accidents, medical calls, search and rescue responses in the south of the community

but can also provide significantly improved secondary team response to emergencies located throughout the community.

The following five sections provide additional detail on each of the above noted items, and collectively lead to the proposed recommendations included in this report.

### **1. Significant recent, ongoing and forecasted growth in the south end of the community.**

There is an increasing need to provide additional emergency response service to the fastest growing area of the community (i.e., the Hall #3 service area) that is more consistent with response in other areas of the community. This rationale is premised on the fact that there has been significant recent, and planned development in the south end of the community, and emergency services needs to be bolstered to pace alongside this growth.

The development of the Cheakamus Crossing neighbourhood as an important legacy of the 2010 Olympic Winter Games brought approximately 500 new units to the southern most neighbourhood in Whistler plus a high-performance recreation centre and associated athletes lodging. Since the Games, there have been hundreds of additional units (both market and employee-restricted developed in the Phase One area of the neighbourhood (including three Whistler Housing Authority rental buildings, a new Whistler Sports Legacies rental building and a number of market projects – both multi-family projects and a variety of detached single-family homes).

More recently, with the initiation of the development of the Cheakamus Crossing Phase 2 (Upper Lands), there has been even further growth in this area. Cheakamus Crossing Phase 2 includes:

- 100 resident restricted ownership units on Lot One;
- 78 employee restricted rental units currently in construction on Lot Two;
- 23 market residential properties in various stages of development on Lot Four;
- Up to 104 new rental units proposed for Lot Five;
- Approximately 50 employee-restricted units in concept for Lot Three; and
- additional development potential on the remaining Lot Six.

In addition to the growth summarized above, development of the lands at 1000 Alpha Lake Road (across Highway 99 from the Cheakamus neighbourhood) is currently approved for 48 employee restricted residential units, a gas station as well as additional commercial space across the three new buildings.

Finally, significant development potential exists on the remainder of the Community Land Bank Lands in the Cheakamus Crossing area, with a series of concepts presented to the community in 2019 ranging from 500 to more than 800 potential units depending on the configuration.

It is clear from above that significant residential (as well as new commercial, light industrial) development has already occurred in the southern part of the community, and that there is more growth potential in the years ahead. Staff believe that there is a strong rationale for phasing in an improved emergency response posture at the Hall #3 location given the ongoing concentration of growth in the southern area of the community as summarized above.

## **2. Increased call volumes and response readiness in the south end of the community.**

All call types (motor vehicle, medical, wildland/brush, and structure fire) are increasing across the community. This is particularly true in the south where call volume most recently increased 7.8 per cent over 2022 levels, and by 39.6 per cent between 2009 and 2017 (approximately five per cent per year).

### Number of Calls

Call volumes for WFRS have continued to increase over the past five years by as much as 10 per cent across the community with the highest call volumes in the Hall #1 area. Hall #3 in the south services the second busiest area. With continued community growth of residential, commercial and industrial developments in the south end of Whistler, call volumes are forecasted to continue to increase in the Hall #3 area faster than within the rest of the community. In 2023, Hall #3 response area also saw the highest per cent of wildfire/brush fires at 36 per cent of all wildfire/brush fire incidents, followed by 35 per cent in Hall #1 response area and 29 per cent in Hall #2 area.

It is important to note that at the same time as the Hall #3 call volumes are increasing, current response times to the south of the community are comparatively longer than much of the rest of the community.

### Motor Vehicle Incident Call Volumes and Response Readiness

With extremely high traffic volumes along the Sea to Sky corridor, and at times difficult road conditions, serious motor vehicle incidents are a regular occurrence with the highest percentage of accidents occurring south of the Village. 51 per cent of all motor vehicle incidents occur south of the Village in Hall #3 response area.

The patterns noted above demonstrate that call volumes are increasing fastest in the area of the community where response readiness is the most challenged. In the case of traumatic injuries often associated with motor vehicle incidents, it is critical for patients to reach a trauma centre within the “golden hour”. The “golden hour” is the term often used in trauma or emergency care to suggest that an injured or sick person must receive definitive treatment within the first 60 minutes from the time of injury or appearance of symptoms. Once this time has lapsed, the risk of death or long-term complications significantly increases. Rapid response to these incidents will improve patient outcomes by ensuring patients are extricated from the vehicles as quickly as possible in a safe manner with adequate resources.

The same can be said for pre-hospital medical response. WFRS participates in the Provincial First Responder Program and responds to certain high priority medical calls across the community when requested by BC Ambulance. With higher call volumes and BC Ambulance resource challenges, longer wait times for ambulances has been a topic in the media for several years. Often the fire service can respond to these situations quickly and provide essential pre-hospital care until BC Ambulance paramedics arrive. As the community of Whistler expands and densifies in the south, it is important that service levels also improve and grow to ensure that timely responses to these emergencies in the south can be achieved.

Improving response times to the area of the community with the fastest growth in call volumes provides further rationale for shifting to a permanent, career-based firefighting and emergency response team being stationed at Hall #3.

### 3. Opportunity to decrease fire insurance costs across the community.

Phased integration of full-time career-based firefighters at Hall #3 will have meaningful positive impact on the community FUS rating(s) for the community and consequent reductions in collective insurance premiums.

#### Changes in Insurance Ratings:

Current Public Fire Protection Classification (PFPC) insurance rating for Whistler is a rating of 4 (on a scale of 1 to 10, 1 representing the highest level of fire protection, and 10 representing the absence of any effective public fire protection). Should the RMOW implement full time career-based firefighters at Hall #3, the PFPC insurance grade across the community will improve from a rating of 4 to a rating of 3, resulting in avoided insurance costs to commercial and multifamily residential owners across the community.

In addition to the improvement in the FUS PFPC rating, full-time staffing of Hall #3 would also improve the Dwelling Protection Grade (DPG) from 3A to 2 (on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 representing highest level of fire protection, and 5 representing the absence of any effective public fire protection). Improvements in DPG ratings have a positive impact on fire insurance premiums for one- and two-family detached family properties.

#### Changes in Premiums associated with FUS classification:

Information from FUS further suggests that a shift from a PFPC rating of 4 to 3 is typically associated with a drop in fire insurance premiums of six to eight per cent for all commercial and multifamily residential properties.

Moreover, improvements in DPG rating are expected to lead to two to three per cent reduction in associated fire insurance premiums for one- and two-family detached dwellings with an effective area (all storeys excluding basements) not exceeding 334 sq m (3,600 sq ft).

According to the Fire Chiefs Association of British Columbia, in 2021, the collective cost of fire insurance premiums across all properties in Whistler was estimated to be \$15Mm. Assuming even a two per cent annual increase in premiums between 2021 and 2026 (when 24-hour full-time staffing is proposed), the collective cost of community-wide fire insurance premiums would be approximately \$16.5Mm.

Staff do not have an accurate breakdown of the properties expected to experience the six to eight per cent savings versus the two to three per cent savings described above. However, the following table provides a range of possible reductions for context and consideration. It should be noted that these potential savings do not begin to take effect until such time as the staffing at Hall #3 becomes 24 hour/day (i.e., planned for 2026).

Potential 'blended' community wide avoided insurance level	Associated estimated community-wide savings potential
-2.0%	\$ (331,224)
-2.5%	\$ (414,030)
-3.0%	\$ (496,836)
-3.5%	\$ (579,642)
-4.0%	\$ (662,448)
-4.5%	\$ (745,255)
-5.0%	\$ (828,061)

Presented at the individual property level, the Fire Chiefs Association of BC 2021 Comparative Analysis further suggests that:

- Improvements in the community's PFPC rating from 4 to 3 (in 2026 in proposed phasing):
  - Would avoid fire insurance premium costs of approximately \$100-\$120 for each million dollars of assessed improvement value on a property.
  - PFPC ratings affect all commercial and multifamily residential properties.
- Improvements in the community's DPG rating from 3A to 2 as described in the report:
  - Would avoid fire insurance premium cost of approximately \$30-\$50 per million dollars of assessed improvement value.
  - DPG ratings affect all one and two family detached dwellings with an effective area (all storeys excluding basements) not exceeding 334 sq m (3600 sq ft)

#### 4. Improvement in the community's wildfire defense posture.

Wildfire is the biggest climate change related to risk for the Whistler community. The recently developed Wildfire Defence Plan highlighted significant risk of wildfire in the community, and the wildfire specialists involved with the associated review, assessment and planning work highlighted the wildfire protection benefits of staffing both Hall #2 and Hall #3 in the future.

Whistler is unique in that many homes are located within an 'intermix' zone. Intermix is a term to describe homes and neighborhoods that are effectively located within the forest from a fire behaviour perspective. Intermix can be compared to 'interface' zone which refers to areas where homes and neighborhoods border the forest.

The importance of a rapid response to wildfire is extremely important in being able to contain a fire when it is still relatively small, and before it becomes a large event of significant destructive power. Moving from a full-time staffing approach premised on a single response team located in Whistler Village (Hall #1) to two teams (Hall #1, plus a two-person team at Hall #3) has the potential to reduce response times by up to 50 per cent for wildfire incidents in the southern portion of the community. As noted above, over the last year, the Hall #3 response area experienced the highest per cent of wildfire/brush fire call outs in the community.

Decreasing response times (and increasing the availability of trained firefighting response teams) reduces the chance that a local wildfire will become established near the Whistler community and would provide important improvements in first line defence for future wildfire threat response. Many



factors contribute to the spread of wildfire including but not limited to forest fuels, wind conditions, topography, temperature and humidity and of course the time it takes to apply water to the fire. Hall #3 has the largest wildfire response area of all three fire hall response zones, extending down to Brandywine Falls. Response to the farthest southern edge of the community can take upwards of 18 to 20 minutes under the current staffing model. Staffing at Hall #3 should reduce these wildfire response times by up to 50 per cent (depending on specific proximity).

**5. Staffing Hall #3 has the ability to meaningfully improve emergency response activities for the entire community.**

Hall #3 staffing will decrease response time to motor vehicle accidents, medical calls, and future search and rescue responses in the south of the community. Further, any time the Hall #3 team is responding to an emergency in the southern portion of the community that the Hall #1 team is not required to attend, the fact that the Hall #1 team is still centrally positioned at Hall #1 will ensure that subsequent, concurrent emergency responses elsewhere in the community will be responded to more quickly. Additionally, the Hall #3 team will also provide significantly improved 'secondary team' response to structure fire emergencies throughout the whole community.

Secondary team response is important from a WorkSafeBC Regulatory perspective. WorkSafeBC Regulation 31.23 includes a requirement related to firefighter resources for entry into buildings. Additional staffing at Hall #3 would increase WFRS's ability to maintain an initial attack within the response window set out in the Regulation. Therefore, having an additional two person staffed crew at Hall #3 would eliminate the risk of the initial attack crew having to terminate the interior attack or rescue operation subject to this Regulation.

**Proposed WFRS Staffing Plan**

As noted in the preceding sections, response time is an important determinant of emergency response outcomes. Furthermore, if the resident community continues to grow at near, but less than, the average rate of the previous 10 years, staff forecast a further resident population increase of around 18 per cent over the next decade (approx. two per cent per year). As noted, a significant amount of this residential growth for the community is very likely to be located in the Hall #3 response area in general, and the lands around Cheakamus Crossing neighbourhood, as well as Function Junction, in particular. As such, consideration of strategies to improve emergency response to this area becomes increasingly important.

In order to bring emergency response service in the growing southern sections of the community in line with service in the rest of the community, expanding Hall #3 from a POC-only model to a staffed model becomes a necessary consideration.

POC firefighters are an invaluable part of the community's hybrid fire service model. The POCs are well trained, committed and passionate emergency responders. That said, the POC framework is simply not structured to produce the same response readiness that a career-model provides.

Review of the current WFRS operating model, a detailed review of call volumes by time of day, and by type of emergency suggests the most efficient phasing in of a permanent staffing model to the Hall #3 facility would likely begin with stationing two firefighters at Hall #3 12 hours per day (daytime shift) and expanding to 24 hours/day in three years time. A summary of the proposed approach is shown below.

## Proposed Phase in of Hall #3 Staffing Levels

Year	Staffing Level	Anticipated Coverage Hours	Date Range
2024	2 firefighters	7:00am – 7:00pm	May 01 – Dec 31
2025	2 firefighters	7:00am – 7:00pm	Jan 01 – Dec 31
2026	2 firefighters	24 hr	Jan 01 – Dec 31
onward...	2 firefighters	24 hr	Jan 01 – Dec 31

## Estimated annual costs associated with the proposed phase in of Hall #3 career staff

Year	Payroll	Estimated Ancillary Operating Costs	Total
2024	\$480,000	up to \$75,000	up to \$555,000
2025	\$824,000	up to \$247,200	up to \$1,071,200
2026	\$1,697,440	up to \$509,232	up to \$2,206,672
onward...	\$1,748,363	up to \$524,509	up to \$2,272,872

**Summary of Staffing Co-benefits**

As noted above, moving toward a staffed model for Hall #3 does come with material increases to the municipal operating budget. It is the intent of this report to share staff rationale for why consideration of this change is warranted. In addition to the importance of achieving more timely emergency response to all Whistler neighbourhoods, a staffed Hall #3 also creates some ancillary benefits to wildfire emergency response posture throughout the rest of the community. These benefits include:

1. Improves response times to the highest growth area of the community.
2. Improves the WFRS ability to respond to concurrent emergencies within the community.
3. Provides important improvement to wildfire response times, especially to areas in the south of the community.
4. Improves WFRS ability to meet WorkSafe BC regulations for expedited entry into buildings throughout the community.
5. Expected improvements to overall community PFPC and DPG insurance grades resulting in avoided insurance costs across the community.
6. Improves the ability of WFRS team to respond to motor vehicle accidents on Hwy 99 south of the community.
7. Provides more timely access to larger teams for significant emergency events.

**POLICY CONSIDERATIONS****Relevant Council Authority/Previous Decisions**

Council has the authority to adjust service levels annually through the “Five-Year Financial Plan 2024-2028 Bylaw No. 2424, 2024” and associated amendments to same.

[December 19, 2023: Administrative Report No. 23-127 – 2024 Budget Guidelines Administrative Report](#) and in particular the resolutions to:

That Council direct staff to:

- Remove the \$600,000 increase in Whistler Fire Rescue Service (WFRS) staffing at Spring Creek Fire Hall # 3 (Hall #3) from the proposed 2024 Budget Guidelines, and



- Return to a Regular Council Meeting with a detailed report for future consideration on the proposed changes to WFRS staffing levels for Hall #3 in January 2024;
- Increase the planned 2024 contribution to the General Operating Reserve to \$2.4Mm to maintain the proposed tax rate increase at 8.18%.

[December 19, 2023: Administrative Report No. 23-130](#) – Community Wildfire Defence Plan Report

### **2023-2026 Strategic Plan**

The 2023-2026 Strategic Plan outlines the high-level direction of the RMOW to help shape community progress during this term of Council. The Strategic Plan contains four priority areas with various associated initiatives that support them. This section identifies how this report links to the Strategic Plan.

#### **Strategic Priorities**

☐ Housing

*Expedite the delivery of and longer-term planning for employee housing*

☒ Climate Action

*Mobilize municipal resources toward the implementation of the Big Moves Climate Action Plan*

☐ Community Engagement

*Strive to connect locals to each other and to the RMOW*

☐ Smart Tourism

*Preserve and protect Whistler's unique culture, natural assets and infrastructure*

☒ Not Applicable

*Aligns with core municipal work that falls outside the strategic priorities but improves, maintains, updates and/or protects existing and essential community infrastructure or programs*

Longer, hotter and drier summers will continue to be more likely in a changing climate. Wildfire and structure fire responses have increased importance in a changing climate and shift towards higher service levels for fire response is aligned with the 'adaption' realities of the Big Moves Implementation Plan, and the emergent Wildfire Defence Plan.

### **Community Vision and Official Community Plan**

The Official Community Plan (OCP) is the RMOW's most important guiding document that sets the community vision and long-term community direction. This section identifies how this report applies to the OCP.

The report recommendation is aligned with the following key sections of the OCP:

8.7.1. Objective: Maintain a safe and secure resort community through effective law enforcement and good design practices.

8.7.2. Objective: Maintain a safe community through the provision of sufficient fire, rescue and emergency services.

8.7.2.1 Policy: Review and maintain Whistler Fire Rescue facilities in appropriate locations to ensure effective service delivery.

8.7.2.2 Policy: Provide effective response to fires and support provincial resources for emergency medical situations including swiftwater, confined space and high angle rope rescue.

8.7.2.3 Policy: Review the existing fire service delivery model and develop innovative approaches that provide an acceptable level of public safety in the most cost-effective manner possible.

8.7.2.11 Policy: Review fire and safety considerations for all significant development.

Further, Chapter 6 Economic Viability notes that: Investments undergo scrutiny to maximize benefit to the resort community and minimize taxpayer impact, ensuring the highest and best use of limited financial, social and natural resources in the long-term.

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## BUDGET CONSIDERATIONS

As noted above, a phased-in staffing approach as outlined in the report incurs estimated increases in operating costs as described in the table below:

Year	Payroll	Estimated Ancillary Ops Costs	Total
2024	\$480,000	up to \$75,000	up to \$555,000
2025	\$824,000	up to \$247,200	up to \$1,071,200
2026	\$1,697,440	up to \$509,232	up to \$2,206,672
onward...	\$1,748,363	up to \$524,509	up to \$2,272,872

There are no revenues associated with the proposed changes. As such these costs will need to be funded fully through property taxes. On a standalone basis, the estimated operating costs associated with the staffing changes as proposed translate to a required increase in the property tax requisition of +1.17% in 2024, +1.00% in 2025, +2.06% in 2026, and +0.11% in 2027.

Because it is not possible at this stage to adjust the tax requisition for 2024, the funding in this year would be sourced from the RMOW's reserve funds, which over time will need to be replaced. The value of this reserves draw amounts to approximately \$15 per million dollars of assessed home value. In order to estimate the cost (per million dollars of assessed value) for years 2025 through 2027, a number of assumptions need to be made including the relative change in value between commercial and residential properties in the community (here assumed to be nil), and the relative change in an individual property assessment relative to the community/class overall (here assumed to be nil). With those conditions in mind, the approximate estimated value per million in property value for this change would be \$13.75 in 2025, \$30.24 in 2026 and \$1.64 in 2027.

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## LÍLWAT NATION & SQUAMISH NATION CONSIDERATIONS

The RMOW is committed to working with the Lílwat People, known in their language as *L'il'wat7úl* and the Squamish People, known in their language as the *Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw* to: create an enduring relationship; establish collaborative processes for Crown land planning; achieve mutual objectives; and enable participation in Whistler's resort economy.

There are no specific considerations to include in this report.

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## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Level of community engagement commitment for this project:

☒ Inform    ☐ Consult    ☐ Involve    ☐ Collaborate    ☐ Empower

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## SUMMARY

This report provides a summary of the relevant issues, associated analysis, and ultimately options associated with recently updated fire response insights for the community. The report relates population growth, community layout and response time implications in order to provide context and background for Council's consideration of proposed changes to WFRS staffing levels at Hall #3 (Spring Creek).

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## SIGN-OFFS

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