

STAFF REPORT: FIRE DEPARTMENT



REPORT TO: Finance and Administration
Committee

MEETING DATE: March 18, 2007

REPORT NO.: FD.08.02

SUBJECT: False Alarm Billing

PREPARED BY: Deputy Chief Rob Collins

A. Recommendations

THAT the committee does receive Staff Report FD.08.02.

B. Background

The committee has received correspondence from two property owners expressing dissatisfaction with user fees assessed for false fire alarm calls at their respective properties. The Fire Department has been asked to respond to these letters; copies of the letters of reply are attached. We have also been asked to prepare this report to provide additional background information regarding these situations.

The first case involves a residence on Cameron St. On two separate occasions, the fire department was dispatched to the residence for smoke alarm activations. In both cases, the alarm had been triggered by a large quantity of drywall dust exhausted from a shop vac. The alarm monitoring company had attempted to verify the alarms, but when they were unable to reach anyone at the home by telephone, they reported the alarms.

The homeowner states in her letter that the alarms were attended only by a command vehicle; in reality, both calls were full-scale emergency responses involving four vehicles and 13 firefighters in each case. This fact was noted in our letter.

Unfortunately, the property owner in this case has elected to discontinue monitoring of her home fire alarm system. This is not the desired effect as it is to our advantage to receive early warning in the case of a fire, particularly when the residence is vacant. The issue could probably have been handled through changing the alarm company's verification procedures or better communication with the contractors involved. Be that as it may, these user fees are legitimate applications of the user fee By-law and, in our opinion, should not be reversed.

The second case involves a condominium at the Chateau Ridge complex. This property has seen fifty nuisance alarm calls since November of 2006. The alarm system at this property is mandated under a Building Code Commission ruling issued in 1995. The ruling also required the alarm system to be monitored

by an off-site agency, although this requirement was not adequately enforced until 2006. Once the site became properly monitored, the issue of repeated false alarms began to surface. The Fire Department recommended certain changes be made to the system in order to solve the problem, although the system did meet all relevant building code requirements.

Initially, our concerns, along with the user fees related to these false alarms, were directed to the property managers working for the condominium corporation. From the beginning, the management company refused to take responsibility for these charges, eventually appearing before this committee twice in 2007. They also resisted the suggestions for changes to the system, citing an estimated cost of around \$5000.00 to make the changes. (It should be noted that the total user fees assessed now total \$15,000.00). The condominium corporation also denied responsibility for the charges, so all user fees have now been directed to the individual unit owners.

Some of the letters from unit owners, like the one submitted by Mr. Fleming, express frustration at the delay between the incident and the notification of the charge. This delay has been caused by the long period of time during which we attempted to hold the property manager responsible. Mr. Fleming also expresses his belief that the fire department should have done something to rectify the situation; it should be stressed that we did all we could, working with the property manager to identify the problem. Because the alarm system was compliant with all relevant codes, we could not compel the owners to make the recommended changes. The decision to delay making the recommended changes is a matter to be worked out between the owners, the condominium corporation and the property managers. The attached letter of reply to Mr. Fleming is an example of our response to the many inquiries we have received concerning the user fees at Chateau Ridge.

The intent of false alarm user fees is two-fold; to recover the costs of responding to these alarms as well as to provide a deterrent to property owners who fail to maintain their alarm systems so as to prevent nuisance calls. In the case of the situation at Chateau Ridge, the actual costs to the municipality have been considerable. We have also documented specific cases where residents of the complex ignored the alarm's evacuation signal; some residents even disabled the alarm equipment in their units so as not to be disturbed by the frequent alarms. Our only remedy in this case has been to continue assessing user fees for each occurrence in hopes that someone would take the necessary actions to make the false alarms stop.

Late in 2007, the requested changes were finally made to the system at Chateau Ridge. As a result, the number of false alarms at the complex has been greatly reduced. So far in 2008, we have responded to only four false alarms there, all of them caused by occupants failing to follow the procedures recommended in the fire safety plan. This compares to 23 responses during the same time period in 2007. We believe that the continued false alarm billing is the main reason that the recommended changes to the alarm system were eventually made. We do not believe that any of the charges should be reversed.

The Fire Department is currently working on a false alarm billing policy which would outline, among other things, exactly what constitutes a false alarm.

While we will be recommending certain changes to the current policy, situations like the two currently before the committee will continue to be considered billable calls under our proposed new policy.

C. The Blue Mountains' Strategic Plan (Statement(s) identifying how actions further the goals of the Strategic Plan)

D. Budget Impact (cc: Treasury if required)

E. Attached (Relevant documentation not personal information about an identifiable person)

Copies of letters of reply (2) re: false alarm billing

Respectfully submitted,

Signature