

DATE: June 6, 2016

TO: MAYOR AND COUNCIL

NAME AND TITLE: Dave Dyer, General Manager, Engineering and Public Works

SUBJECT: Wildland-Urban Interface Wildfire Management

ATTACHMENT(S): None

RECOMMENDATION(S):

1. That Council receive this report.

PURPOSE:

At the May 9, 2016 Council meeting, concern for wildfires and its impacts on communities was discussed. This report is an update to the work that has been completed with respect to wildland-urban interface wildfire management and a discussion of future considerations.

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES:

Wildland-urban interface wildfire management planning and implementation relates to Council's vision of protecting the air, water, and terrestrial environments with goals related to 'Green City, Green Practices' and 'Adapting to Climate Change' and creating corporate values that stress strong leadership by creating sustainable infrastructure and effective governance with respect to strategic wildfire prevention initiatives.

BACKGROUND:

The last update that was made to Council with respect to wildland-urban interface wildfire management was in 2013. Information and decisions were made with respect to the Community Forest Agreement occurred in 2014.

Wildland-Urban Interface Wildfire Management

From 1994 to 2002, the City worked with the BC Ministry of Forests to eradicate 100% of the beetle infested trees to keep ahead of the growing mountain pine beetle infestation. This removal of infested trees was seen as a way of reducing the rate of spread of the mountain pine beetle. However, by 2002 with sustained warmer winters, the infestation of the mountain pine beetle overwhelmed the interior of BC and Prince George. By the winter of 2002/2003, 80 logging trucks of beetle attacked trees were removed from City and school sites. The infestation continued its severe and aggressive spread, so that by the 2004/2005 winter over 220 truckloads of dead pine were removed.

By 2004, the City focused more attention to addressing the growing wildfire hazards stemming from the dead pine trees, and began securing grant funding through the Union of BC Municipalities' (UBCM) newly established Fire Fuel Treatment Funding program, funded by Federal mountain pine beetle grant funds transferred to the Province. A Wildland/Urban Interface Wildfire Management Strategy (also known as the City's Community Wildfire Protection Plan) was completed for the City in June 2005 and the City's Mountain Pine Beetle and Community Wildfire Protection programs were launched.

In 2005 the City of Prince George Wildland/Urban Interface Wildfire Management Strategy was completed. This focused on assessing wildfire hazards in and around Prince George and made recommendations on how to prescribe and prioritize treatments to reduce the hazards. Based on this report, City staff have progressed in treating municipal and CFA lands.

In 2008, the City of Prince George retained B.A. Blackwell & Associates to undertake landscape scale fire behaviour modelling in order to assess the current wildfire hazard for Prince George. We know that treating high and very high wildfire hazard sites by reducing fuel loads generally reduces the hazard rating of those sites to moderate or low. However we need to understand how a large landscape level fire would behave (the intensity, the spread rate, the type of crown fire) as a result of the City's work in treating individual sites. This is particularly important in areas outside of the City bowl, where municipal and CFA parcels of land are a small proportion of the overall landscape: i.e. the proportion of treated lands is small compared to untreated lands.

The consultant's analysis and report focuses on identifying wildfire fuels that are further away from the interface zones (where current fuel treatments are being conducted) but that could endanger the city during a landscape level fire event. The report identifies the current wildfire hazards and recommendations for treatments that would reduce the hazards.

The Strategy/Plan provided the guidance to identify the highest priority areas for focusing the resources of the wildfire hazard reduction work. The highest priority areas were those that had the highest amounts of pine trees, were operationally feasible and posed the greatest hazard for public safety, property, infrastructure, and livelihoods. The initial highest priority sites were also estimated, collectively, to be of a reasonable scale that could be addressed within a 5-6 year time frame. By November 2006, a 5-year Probationary Community Forest Agreement (CFA) was put in place to streamline the removal of dead pine and reduce wildfire hazards on Crown land within the City. The overall community wildfire protection program has successfully reduced wildfire hazards in the interface zones between urban and forested areas as well as in parks, greenbelts and in the Community Forest within the City.

By 2011, the initial highest priority wildfire hazard mitigation work identified in the 2005 Strategy/Plan had been completed. In 2012, staff assessed and completed the next highest priority wildfire hazard sites that were within the Community Forest.

From 2005 to 2012, Council began approving City funds annually to lever Federal funds through a partnership with Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) assisting city residents in removing the abundant slash and woody debris from dead pines on their private properties. This program, which evolved into the Job Creation Program, through Service Canada, has assisted 1,368 residential properties with beetle tree debris removal and completed debris removal and wildfire reduction projects in a number of City parks, greenbelts and alleys. The City has received close to \$9 million in grants for both municipal and CFA wildfire hazard mitigation work.

In addition to the on-the-ground work, Staff has ensured that development within the urban-forest interface zones is dealt with through the review and input to the major Official Community Plan update process, and in particular the guidance under the Wildfire Development Permit Areas.

Community Forest Agreement

The City of Prince George was granted a five-year “Probationary” Community Forest Agreement (CFA) license in 2006 covering 3,880 hectares of undeveloped Crown land within the municipal boundary. The CFA was established in order to expedite the removal of dead pine resulting from the mountain pine-beetle epidemic, and to reduce wildfire hazards on the Crown lands.

In October 2011, the City’s CFA was renewed for an additional five years as a ‘Probationary” CFA in order to allow sufficient time to complete the wildfire hazard mitigation work.

In 2014, Staff recommended that the City of Prince George surrender the CFA tenure back to the Province of BC for the following reasons:

1. Since the proposed CFA expansion encompasses lands for agriculture development, it was critical for its success to have general support from the agriculture community. This was not achieved to the extent needed;
2. The license is due to expire in less than three years;
3. The highest priority high wildfire hazard areas have been treated, and it is unlikely that additional sites would receive wildfire hazard mitigation based on current grant funding criteria;
4. The CFA costs the City \$4,400 per year in “rent” taxes to the Provincial government, and;
5. Maintaining a tenure, even if there is no operational activity, still means administrative work for the City.

At the February 3, 2014 Council meeting, Council resolved that staff be authorized to work with the BC Provincial government to surrender the City of Prince George Probationary Community Forest Agreement.

DISCUSSION:

With the wildfires in Fort McMurray and the identification by experts that Prince George is on the list of high risk communities for wildfire damage, there is a renewed focus on wildland/urban interface wildfire management and community protection.

Since forests do change and grow over time, and new forest health issues can occur, Staff commits to a review and assessment of the recommendations in past strategies and plans. The assessment will involve retaining external forestry consultants to update the City’s Community Wildfire Protection Plan including a review and consolidation of past strategies and plans and to assess existing levels of wildfire hazards. This work will begin in the 2017 budget year pending approval of the project in the City’s Financial Plan.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS:

There is the opportunity to apply through the UBCM funding for strategic wildfire planning and projects including such areas as:

- Community Wildfire Protection Plans & Updates
- Fuel Management Prescriptions
- Fuel Management Demonstration Projects
- Operational Fuel Treatments & Maintenance Treatments

Staff will review the eligibility for the different areas and return to Council with recommendations for the Fall of 2016 intake of applications.

SUMMARY & CONCLUSION:

The City cannot eliminate wildfire hazards within the City of Prince George, or from adjacent areas around the City, because we live within an abundance of forests. However, the City has completed significant work since 2005 to help reduce the severity, rate of spread, and impact from a wildfire, if one were to occur within our forests.

The substantial work that has been completed puts the City in a good position to examine those other areas of wildfire risk, integrate existing Provincial programs, such as FireSmart, into public outreach and education programs, and seek funding for these programs and projects. This work can be accomplished through partnerships within City departments and external agencies/organizations.

City staff will include a project in the 2017 Financial Plan to update the City's Community Wildfire Protection Plan.

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED:



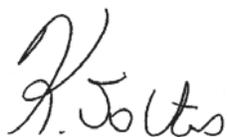
Dave Dyer, General Manager, Engineering and Public Works



Gina Layte Liston, Director, Public Works

Report written by Gina Layte Liston, Director, Public Works

APPROVED:



Kathleen Soltis, City Manager
Meeting date: June 13, 2016