

## Issue Brief: Regional Fire Services

**Subject:** A briefing on the decision to move to enter into a contract for regional fire services.

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### Background

The Onoway Council has decided to end its contract with the current town fire provider and switch to a larger regional fire department. The key considerations include firefighting ability, cost, positive regional relationships, and the administrative workload currently shouldered by Onoway's staff. The current provider offers established community trust, local control, and tailored services but is limited by resources and imposes a significant administrative burden. In contrast, a regional fire department promises cost efficiency, enhanced response times, access to specialized teams, and reduced administrative responsibilities. However, there are concerns about loss of local control and community resistance to change.

### Regional Fire Department Considerations

1. **Cost Efficiency:**
  - **Shared Resources:** Regional departments can pool resources, reducing duplication and lowering costs.
  - **Economies of Scale:** Larger departments can negotiate better prices for equipment and supplies.
2. **Improved Services:**
  - **Specialized Teams:** Access to specialized units (e.g., hazmat, water rescue) that smaller departments might lack.
  - Alberta emergency preparedness has warned the town that its fire department would not be able to manage a large-scale disaster in the industrial area or a large-scale fire in an apartment building.
  - Concerns were also raised about the challenge of volunteerism for smaller town volunteer fire departments. The Lac St. Anne fire department would be required to lead any large-scale incidents in the town of Onoway.
  - The Lac St. Anne Fire department currently has over 100 volunteers. Northwest fire has 8 volunteers.
  - The Lac St. Anne fire department has both the human and equipment resources required to meet any disaster or fire challenge that could occur in the town of Onoway.
3. **Advanced Training:**
  - Better training programs due to larger budgets and more diverse training needs.
4. **Enhanced Response Times:**
  - **Mutual Aid:** Faster response times due to the ability to dispatch units from multiple locations.
  - **Standardized Procedures:** Consistent protocols across regions improve coordination during emergencies.

- Oneway will want to ensure a fire resource presence is guaranteed to meet negotiated response times.
- 5. **Increased Funding Opportunities:**
  - **Grants and Subsidies:** Larger departments are often more eligible for federal and provincial grants.
  - **Budget Stability:** More stable and predictable funding from regional budgets.
- 6. **Improved Workforce Management:**
  - **Staffing Flexibility:** Easier to manage staffing levels and rotations to avoid burnout. Volunteerism is difficult in smaller departments. The Lac St. Anne County fire department has over 100 volunteers

## Regional Fire Department Considerations

It is recommended that the town consider developing a comparative analysis to provide a proper rationale for the decision to switch fire service providers.

1. **Financial Analysis:**
  - **Cost Comparison:** Compare the current cost of the for-profit department with the projected cost of joining the regional department.
  - **Budget Impact:** Analyze the impact on the municipality's budget and funding sources.
2. **Service Quality Metrics:**
  - **Response Times:** Compare the average response times for both options.
  - **Incident Outcomes:** Evaluate the success rates and outcomes of emergency responses.
3. **Resource Availability:**
  - **Equipment and Technology:** Assess the quality and availability of equipment and technology in both scenarios.
  - **Personnel Training and Expertise:** Compare the training programs and expertise levels.
4. **Community Impact:**
  - **Public Perception:** Conduct surveys or focus groups to gauge community trust and satisfaction with current and proposed services.
  - **Coverage Area:** Ensure that the regional department can cover the entire area effectively.
5. **Operational Efficiency:**
  - **Standardization of Procedures:** Evaluate the efficiency of standardized procedures and protocols in regional departments.
  - **Coordination and Communication:** Assess the effectiveness of coordination and communication mechanisms.
6. **Legal and Regulatory Considerations:**
  - **Compliance:** Ensure that both options comply with state and provincial regulations.
  - **Contractual Obligations:** Review any existing contracts and obligations with the for-profit department and potential agreements with the regional department.

By systematically comparing these factors, you can make a more informed decision about whether to keep the for-profit fire department or join a regional fire department.

## Final Comments

Studies consistently validate the regional fire department model as the optimal way of delivering fire services. The vast majority of Municipalities in Canada have moved towards a regional fire department model.