

Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Fire Services

Pre budget Consultation - February 1, 2010

Minister Tom Marshall – Minister of Finance

Honorable Minister:

I am Fire Chief Vince Mackenzie and I am the President of the Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Fire Services. On behalf of our membership of six thousand firefighters, most of whom are volunteer, I would first and foremost like to thank you for this opportunity to consult as you prepare the provincial budget.

The Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Fire Services is the provincial association representing the province's fire departments and firefighters situated in most municipalities and local service districts. We are the all-inclusive voice for the Fire Chiefs and Firefighters in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Mr. Minister, the fire service of this province has many issues. We have issues surrounding, training, recruitment and retention, municipal relationships, and financial challenges. I could sit before you here today and spend many hours discussing these issues.

Obviously, I won't be doing that this evening but our Association has elected to bring to you a single major issue as it relates to the provinces fire departments. Unfortunately, this issue alone stands as one of the most difficult challenges to continuing good quality fire protection in

our communities. This issue alone stands to collectively bring the province's fire service to its knees more so than any other issue.

I am here to talk to you today about fire trucks, very plain and very simple; our fleet of fire trucks in the province is old and in need of a strategy of replacement.

Your government's current budget allocation for the replacement program for fire trucks is approximately 1.7 million dollars annually. With the inclusion of the cost shared amount from within municipal budgets and the various formulas based on population, the current budget of 1.7 million dollars facilitates for the replacement of only 7 to 10 vehicles per year.

A fire pumper truck cost in today's dollars in the range of 240 to 270 thousand dollars.

How many vehicles are we talking about?

There are over 500 fire emergency vehicles in our entire vast province used by approximately 300 fire departments outside of St. John's. These vehicles are pumpers, tankers, rescue units, utility trucks, and 5 aerial units. These numbers seem high, but with the large geographic area and over 300 communities it takes a lot to service the citizens. Quite simply, when the public has an emergency, they require a fire truck and crew to respond in an appropriate short amount of time.

The primary response vehicle in a fire department is a pumper truck. There are over 300 of these vehicles currently in use. A pumper truck is a fire truck that has a powerful fire pump and water tank and during a large fire can be expected to run stationary at full throttle for hours on

end during fires. Most fire trucks work their hardest while pumping at fires; consequently this is when we depend on them the most in sometimes life threatening situations. I give this very basic information to stress the importance of a reliable pumper truck to our fire department operations.

The problem:

We here in Newfoundland have not adopted any formal replacement standard for the age of fire trucks. I can tell you that most North American standards and guidelines do suggest that the primary first response pumper in any fire district should be not over 15 years old. It is assumed by these standards that most fire trucks operate and perform as specified and designed up until that age. This is before wear and tear and age start to have effect on their performance and reliability. Also, at 20 years old, fire trucks are considered obsolete, and at 30 years fire trucks are considered antique.

Having emergency vehicles age beyond 20 years greatly increases the risk of breakdown when it is pressed into service. One might argue that our communities are small and don't have very many fires, while this is true, it is also recognized that lack of use of these vehicles does not work to advantage and prolong life and condition. In fact, more often than not, it is recognized that time - is as bad as use on fire apparatus. As trucks age the availability of parts is a major problem, for example I challenge anyone to quickly find brake parts for a 1978 truck. Also maintaining old vehicles is simply a case of throwing good money after bad, and these trucks start to nickel and dime a fire department to death with surprise maintenance costs.

Many of our small communities depend on one industry for their economy, adequate fire protection is essential not only for safety but to protect the economy and jobs. An up to date fire truck is essential when it is the only one around.

Honorable Minister, as we sit here today, over 45 % of the fleet of fire trucks in fire departments the province of Newfoundland and Labrador are over 20 years old. Approximately 15% more poised to reach that age in the next 3 to 4 years.

Many fire departments are one pumper departments consisting of a pumper truck as the flagship. Some provide service with a pumper truck and rescue unit. There are also 5 fire departments outside the city of St. John's which operate with aerial ladder apparatus in larger municipalities due to the size and risk in their respective communities. Fire departments in the larger municipalities usually service with two pumpers due to their size and risk. Almost all of these municipalities operate with trucks over 15 years old. The Aerial ladder trucks in Carbonear, Gander, and Grand Falls- Windsor are nearing 30 years of age and these communities require an aerial ladder replacement now.

It is simple case of mathematics, at the present rate of funding which allows for the purchase of only 7 to 10 fire pumpers per year it will be some 15 years before all our municipalities can replace the back log of vehicles that are over 20 years old as of today. This is not taking into consideration the vehicles that will age in that time frame or replacing the aerial ladders or rescue trucks.

The Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Fire Services is here to sound the alarm (excuse the pun) that the province's communities are

against an unwinnable challenge at present funding levels. Government must consider a replacement program with appropriate levels and funding with studied foresight into the future.

To that end, the Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Fire Services requests that the provincial government increase funding levels. We recommend the program for the replacement of the province's fire trucks be increased from 1.7 million to a minimum of 5 million dollars annually or about 30 to 35 fire trucks a year.

This action will certainly place municipalities in a healing position, and will still take several years to strengthen the deteriorating fleet. We need a large enough increase and effort to stop this deterioration and reverse the trend back the other way and take into account the trucks that will age in that time frame as well. If left unaddressed at this time, this problem will further compound in the upcoming years.

Our province's citizens deserve fire and life safety protection for their communities, their families, and their economy and jobs. Investing in the fire service is investing in a community's future and sustainability by protecting the schools, hospitals, fish plants, industries, and where ever else we live and work from devastating fires. Our firefighters deserve and have a right to reliable equipment for their Occupational Health and Safety.

We need to ensure that the infrastructure of vital service vehicles is up to the task. Our ambulances, police vehicles, snow ploughs, and fire trucks must be kept up to date and to a reliable level of operation.

We ask that you strongly consider this funding request in your deliberations. We feel the public safety depends on it.

Thank you for your time and we remain committed to assist your government in any way possible.