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PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release

Reorganization of the Sutton First Responders Service

Sutton, March 4, 2022 — The municipal council of the Town of Sutton announced at its last meeting on March 2nd a reorganization of the first responders service (PR), already integrated into the public security service of the Municipality. Indeed, it was deemed necessary to review its operation given the shortcomings noted in the recruitment and availability of personnel. The first responders are now called upon to work under the orders of the director of the public security service, Don Mireault, and in collaboration with the Sutton firefighters, who already have a very efficient organization.

“The quality of the health care service to the population of Sutton is a priority for the council and the municipal administration,” declared Mayor Robert Benoît. “The role of first responders is crucial in the case of life-threatening medical emergencies. That is why our first objective is to ensure a constant on-call service 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, which is not the case at the moment.”

10–20% of shifts not filled

For the past several months, an average of 10–20% of on-call shifts cannot be filled due to lack of availability of first responders. As a result, calls to 9-1-1 are not being answered by the PRs in these cases. “Town administrators have a fiduciary role to protect the interests of the public and make decisions to ensure their well-being. Anything less than 100% PR attendance is unacceptable,” said the Mayor. Since our arrival, this issue has been the subject of several discussions to analyze different options and find a permanent solution to this situation.”

The same problem elsewhere

Many municipalities in Quebec are experiencing the same situation. In Montérégie, only 55 municipalities out of 180 have a first responder service and, in the majority of these municipalities, a hybrid firefighter-first responder system has been put in place to ensure the maximization of the human resources available on their territory. This system works very well.

A regional approach would certainly be necessary to optimize the efficiency of our services to the population, given the very limited budgets of rural towns. Let us recall that the Sutton Fire Department offers its services to the towns of Abercorn and Brome as well as to Brome Lake. The Municipality of Brome Lake supports 50% of the costs of the two managers of the Sutton Fire Department, Don Mireault and Marc-Antoine Fortier. This management is entirely satisfactory for both Brome Lake and Sutton.

“In passing, I would like to underline the performance of the Sutton Fire Department,” added the mayor, “31 of the 32 volunteer firefighters reside in Sutton; their average years of service are 14 years; the response time for the exit of 5 firefighters is 5 minutes during interventions. The reputation of excellence of the firefighters, as well as the first responders, indicates that it is certainly possible in the short term to improve the performance of our services to the population. The municipal administration has indicated its openness to discuss accommodations to further the process.”

Some challenges to overcome

- The coexistence of firefighters and first responders and two pay systems is a constraint that the Town has taken into account. Changes to PR pay have already been passed at the March 2 Council meeting and administration is evaluating further actions.
- Unfortunately, thirteen volunteers have chosen, without notice, to end their involvement since the information meeting they were invited to on March 1. Four others are on hiatus and considering their options. Instead of improving the quality of their service to the public, these actions will result in a reduction in on-call time. However, the Town was able to maintain PR service over the weekend with fire department resources already certified at PR3 (the highest level of response), but will have to re-evaluate the level of service to be provided in the long term (PR3 or PR2).
- The first responders sent an email to the mayor requesting that they continue to provide PR3 services, that they no longer report to the Director of Emergency Preparedness “who they feel is biased, disrespectful and inconsiderate of PRs”, and that their coordination team return. In response to these demands, the Town has already indicated that it will maintain the PR3 level of service over the weekend and that it will undertake discussions with regional health authorities to obtain advice on the desirable level of service (PR3 or PR2). On the other hand, the decision to integrate the first responders under the authority of the Director of Public Security is not negotiable: Don Mireault’s competence and expertise are recognized throughout the MRC and by the administrators of the municipalities he serves. Marc-Antoine Fortier, who has just been appointed assistant director of the department and is the next generation of the department, is also recognized for his efficiency. The Town of Sutton can thus count on two extremely competent resources who will be able to effectively manage this transition in the interest of the population. In no case does the Town envisage the return of the former coordination team whose work contracts have not been renewed and whose coordinator has resigned and refused to continue her involvement as a volunteer first responder.

In conclusion

The Town of Sutton is making a change in organizational culture based on teamwork, management indicators and results. It does not want to go back to management in silos considering, moreover, that the firefighters already assume the functions of first responders as they masterfully demonstrated during the rescues last weekend at Round Top and Plein Air Sutton.

Sutton deserves a first class first responder service. The municipal administration does not wish to degrade this service, but on the contrary to ensure not only its quality, but also its durability. This is its commitment to the population of Sutton.