

**EFFECTIVE CRISIS MANAGEMENT: THE RESPONSE OF THE VILLAGE
OF CHASE TO THE MCGILLIVRAY FIRE**

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Executive Summary

The McGillivray Fire that burned adjacent to the Village of Chase in late August 2003 presented numerous management challenges for the Village. A Provincial State of Emergency, the broad powers assumed by the Fire Commissioner, the unprecedented fire behaviour, the escalating scale of the response effort and the awareness of the catastrophic impact of the North Thompson fires combined to create a tense and unique environment in which the Village was to operate.

The Administrator, recognizing the need for appropriate and effective decision-making in such circumstances and in keeping with a planned division of duties, turned operational control of the Village over to his Deputy who had been hired partly because of his experience under similar circumstances. The crisis management team also included the Mayor, who fulfilled a vital communications role with residents and the media.

An existing comprehensive municipal emergency plan provided guidance and performance objectives for the response. This allowed management to focus on additional issues such as the role of elected officials, how to sustain a twenty-four hour per day Emergency Operations Centre, fulfillment of the role of a sub-regional information centre for First Nations and rural residents, proactivity in fulfilling the information needs of residents and the media, liaison with multiple agencies, service delivery/infrastructure maintenance, and financial control. Some refinement of the existing evacuation plan was also necessary.

Unanticipated elements of the response to this unique event included hosting over 800 firefighters, being affected by a change of management system from incident command to unified command within the Provincially controlled portion of the response, and, as a result of that change, maintaining operational support for RCMP and structural firefighting components of the response.

Many lessons can be taken away from this experience. They include having an emergency response plan in place with preset response objectives, anticipating an

overload of information and developing an effective management system, remaining as a customer service oriented organization, ensuring an adaptable and flexible organization, maintaining liaison with all parties, planning for the media, and ensuring the security of sensitive information. Through all of this, strong leadership can be identified as the vital element.

I. CONTEXT

On the evening of August 15th, 2003 a bolt of lightning struck a tree near the west end of Niskonlith Lake igniting what would become known as the McGillivray Fire. By the time the fire was 100% contained on September 15th, it had consumed 11,400 hectares and 10 structures despite the efforts of 825 personnel, 142 pieces of heavy equipment, 13 helicopters, and dozens of sorties by waterbombers and airtankers. In the process, the fire came within metres of an imaginary line that would have triggered the evacuation of 2,500 residents of the Village of Chase.

The Village of Chase employs just two professionals. Therefore, these two individuals must be conversant in the entire spectrum of municipal management. One of the responsibilities assigned to the Deputy is the task of Emergency Program Coordinator.

Two well-written emergency plans that covered water purveyance and flooding had served the community well for many years. Staff identified the need for a comprehensive, all-hazards *emergency plan in 1999 and put one into place in about eighteen months. The Village Council made available the support and resources to complete the plan after they were made aware of the risk exposure associated with a range of potential emergencies. For several years thereafter, the community took solace in the fact that the response to, and management of, a major emergency had been anticipated in a thorough and realistic, yet basic and practical, plan.*

Due to extreme fire conditions in the province, the Premier declared a Provincial State of Emergency in early August. A rash of new fires in mid-August necessitated the extension of that State of Emergency. Prior to the start of the McGillivray Fire, the Office of the Fire Commissioner had exercised the power to dissolve fire protection boundaries and form a "provincial fire department" under the direct control of that office. In addition, two thousand military personnel were in the province assisting Ministry of Forests crews. In order to coordinate the overall response to this rapidly escalating situation, the Provincial Emergency Program had established a coordination centre in Kamloops. Thus, by the

time the McGillivray Fire forced the Village into action, a formidable structure of external organizations was already in place.

By August 15th the McLure Fire in the adjacent North Thompson River valley had burned 21,500 hectares and had reportedly destroyed the unincorporated town of Barriere. In addition, the large Strawberry Hills Fire was burning on the outskirts of Kamloops. Both contributed to a profound sense of dread when it was reported that lightning had ignited a fire three kilometres from the village.

Given the unprecedented and explosive behaviour of fires in the region, the village was immediately placed on evacuation alert. The Village established a full-time Emergency Operations Centre to prepare for a potential evacuation. The rapid growth of the fire in full view of the village contributed a sense of urgency to the early moments of the response.

While the Village emergency plan anticipated the Emergency Program Coordinator would support the normal decision-making hierarchy within the corporate structure, the rapid onset of the situation, the severity of the potential impact, and the need for quick decisions necessitated a hasty restructuring of the organization. A manager experienced in such matters would be better able to guide the response activities of the Village.

Because the Deputy had been hired in part because of his experience in this area and his aptitude for crisis management, it was logical that he assumed operational control of the Village. The Mayor and Administrator performed vital supporting roles. This impromptu reorganization enabled a high degree of efficiency that, when combined with a sound emergency plan, fulfilled every need of the Village, its residents, external organizations, and close to 1,000 firefighters deployed to the village.

U. MANAGEMENT CHALLENGE

In a very brief period a situation had developed that could not have been further from the normal state of affairs: the Province was under a state of emergency; the Fire Commissioner had instituted sweeping powers; the management structure of the Village had been

reorganized in order to enhance its response effectiveness; and the entire village was facing evacuation. Given these circumstances, the manager leading the response had a number of challenges laid before him.

The first challenge faced by local government managers in times of crisis is how to deal with the elected officials. The role of council members other than the Mayor is quite limited under circumstances where no state of local emergency needs to be considered and performance objectives have been identified in the emergency plan. Timely and accurate information must be supplied to the Councillors yet they must be tactfully restrained from interfering in staff functions. The Mayor, as the top elected official, occupies a unique public relations role, and must remain highly visible throughout the emergency, keeping residents informed and reassuring them that competent professionals are leading the response effort.

The needs of the staff working in the Emergency Operations Centre must also be addressed. They need to be made aware of who will be providing direction in order to clarify accountability. In this case, the modified organizational structure was the basis for this. In addition, shift work, sufficient resources to execute their tasks, and their physical and mental well-being are other important issues not to be overlooked. These elements sustained the twenty-four hour operation that was required throughout the first week of the fire.

While information management is a daily responsibility for busy professionals, the speed, volume and scope with which critical information came in, and the unfamiliar technical nature of some of it, made this task particularly challenging. In addition to keeping residents of the village informed, the Village office became a sub-regional information centre for the surrounding unincorporated areas and First Nations lands.

This latter role evolved as a result of the broadcast media reporting old or conflicting information. As a result, there was the potential that all the time of the Village staff would be spent addressing individual concerns. What had been lacking early in the emergency,

was the provision of accurate and timely information to the media. This was quickly rectified. Direct contact with media outlets and the posting of bulletins in a foyer addressed the issue of accuracy, while anticipating the needs of residents satisfied the timeliness of the information.

Staff anticipated media would arrive with demands that would have to be satisfied. Managers must accept that they have a job to do and are generally reliant on interviews as primary sources, and it is better to fulfil these needs rather than to ignore them. This can become a mutually beneficial situation if the public information issue is approached proactively as previously noted.

When operating under such unique circumstances, effective leadership is critical. The environment generates fatigue and stress which must be recognized and addressed. Failure to do so results in a degradation in performance as a leader which in turn decreases the overall performance of the entire organization. While staff members generally do put in an additional effort under such conditions, attempting to go too far beyond one's limits is irresponsible and unacceptable when the safety of an entire community is at stake. Shift work at all levels, and a thorough briefing at the time of change, ensures the continuity of effective leadership and an effective staff.

Many agencies become involved in large-scale emergencies and either establish a presence in the community or in the Emergency Operations Centre. Inter-agency liaison becomes an important activity that helps to sustain an efficient and effective response. In the case of the McGillivray Fire, large contingents from the RCMP, Ministry of Forests, and Canadian Military were present in the community. The latter two agencies established large camps in the community, while the RCMP coordinated evacuations from the Village office. Each provided a liaison officer to the Village Emergency Operations Centre as did several First Nations whose traditional lands were under an evacuation order. In addition, the Provincial Emergency Program coordination centre in Kamloops was in constant contact seeking current information, and close contact was maintained with the regional district operations centre to keep them apprised of activity in the unincorporated areas.

Close liaison with the Ministry of Forests and the Military was also important from a service delivery perspective as each had established large camps that required various municipal services. This was in addition to an attempt to maintain basic routine service delivery throughout the village where possible. Fundamental aspects of municipal service delivery and maintenance cannot be overlooked or neglected and become important management issues during a protracted emergency such as this. In addition to ensuring the continued functioning of lift stations, treatment plants, water pumps and reservoirs, the Village's public works crew provided a great deal of support to RCMP roadblocks and during the establishment of the two camps. The camps, for example, required special connections to the water and sewer systems, and garbage collection was a constant requirement.

Financial control is easily overlooked in the frenzy of response activities when the acquisition of resources seems justified. Usually the financial situation gets attention late in an emergency, and possibly not until afterwards, and then consumes a disproportionate amount of time trying to reconstruct the expenditure approvals. Anticipating this, it is wise to have a finance person on staff in the Emergency Operations Centre to monitor and appropriately track all expenditures and the acquisition and distribution of resources. Not only is this effective emergency management, it ensures responsible expenditure of public funds and is prudent forethought with regard to effective use of staff time.

In a similar vein, opportunities will occasionally arise that a quick-thinking manager can use to improve a situation. In this case, several First Nations who were evacuated from their traditional lands were looking to the Village as a source of information. Past relationships have varied with the neighbouring First Nations, so it was thought that this opportunity could be used to improve these. Various approaches were employed such as bringing in Forestry staff to conduct daily briefings to which each Chief and Band

Administrator were invited. Also, inviting a liaison member from each First Nation to sit in the Village's Emergency Operations Centre successfully moved relationships ahead in ways that otherwise may have taken much longer.

Other areas where the Village benefited from the occurrence of the fire was in extensive aerial photography and mapping of the surrounding terrain. A great deal of high technology and very expensive resources beyond the means of the Village were brought to bear on this fire by the Ministry of Forests. Very useful maps of the area with superimposed aerial photographs were produced and generously shared with the Village.

Also, the fact that the fire was located between Chase and the Sun Peaks ski resort highlighted the lack of access in the area. The Village has advocated for some time that this could be remedied by an all-weather road connecting the two. Such a road would have tourism implications for both locations in addition to the obvious benefit in time of emergency. This issue continues to be pursued by the Village now that its strategic importance has been displayed to the senior levels of government.

III. RESPONSE

Response objectives, as approved by the Council, had been identified in the emergency plan written several years prior to this event. With the rapid onset of the fire, it was reassuring to see that these proved to be relevant and achievable. During the planning process, a determined effort was made to keep the various objectives simple and realistic, so that under the adverse circumstances of an actual emergency, the performance measures would be immediately known and allow actions to be directed towards achieving an identifiable outcome. As a result, moving the Village to a special operations mode, keeping residents informed, fulfilling the needs of the media and supporting the actual response efforts all occurred quickly and efficiently.

Similarly, flexibility in the organizational structure permitted the realignment of duties referred to earlier as a means of better attaining those objectives. With the newly clarified roles, the two management professionals on staff, in consultation with the Mayor, worked

closely as the management team. The Mayor, as the chief executive, must be seen to be informed and in charge. This was achieved by the Mayor being the sole spokesman for the municipality while the staff focused on response activities.

Early in the response, inter-agency cooperation quickly emerged as a vital element. Its importance was obvious, but was fraught with problems due to the lack of familiarity and regular interaction. An unfortunate incident that highlights this point was when the military was first deployed to the village with a contingent of approximately 400 soldiers. The Ministry of Forests initially declined to become involved, stating that the military was there at the suggestion of the Federal Government and that the matter of satisfying their needs was between the Village and the Provincial Emergency Program. The reluctance to cooperate was baffling, given that these troops would be an intimate part of the firefighting operation. With the establishment of the military camp promptly facilitated by the Village, the Ministry eventually saw the importance of providing a liaison officer to ease the integration. This proved highly successful and prevented further delay.

The initial stance taken by the Ministry with respect to the military was surprising, because the Ministry had made it quite clear to the Village early in the emergency that a sound relationship between the two organizations was a priority, and had immediately provided a liaison officer. Likewise, the RCMP provided a liaison officer to the Village's Emergency Operations Centre, as did some of the local First Nations. This then allowed for the rapid sharing of accurate information and the prompt fulfilment of various resource and support requests.

This support took many forms but largely involved soft services coordinated by the Village's Emergency Social Services section. This included coordinating meals and accommodation for a large contingent, such as an RCMP tactical troop and many out-of-town structural firefighters, that was not staying in either the Ministry of Forests or military camps. For a small community with limited physical resources, this proved to be a significant problem. Every available guest accommodation in the vicinity was booked and food suppliers put in great effort fulfilling large and unusual requests.

Service clubs within the community provided many volunteers, and community spirit was very noticeable in the early stages. However, as days turned into weeks, the strain on the volunteers became apparent and required close monitoring by the Emergency Operations Centre in order to prevent the collapse of the important support services being provided. Acknowledgement of the important role they were playing and some suggestions from the Village staff on how to sustain their operations was greatly appreciated and ensured their continued participation.

Hosting a variety of organizations in the community and endeavouring to provide the highest level of support to them was a challenge that was fulfilled very successfully. However, one of the issues that did not go so well was coordinating the array of diverse and independent organizations toward the common goal. As resources and organizations were being added in the early stages of the fire, it was the Village who scrambled to meet the various needs as they arose.

Anticipating the complexity of the operation and the different operating methods of various agencies, the coordination centre in Kamloops ordered that the management system (for everyone other than the local government emergency operation centres) shift from the individual agencies use of incident command, to a unified command that brought all agencies under the same command structure. In doing so, the *ad hoc* nature of what had been pieced together by the Village (e.g. meals, accommodation, resources requests) as an unofficial sub-regional coordination centre was rationalized through the logistics section of what had now become one large fire camp.

This would have worked smoothly if all parties were undertaking work of the same nature. However, the structural firefighting resources and the RCMP security detail conducted fundamentally different types of work that did not conform to the plans of the provincial level coordinators. The Village office then found themselves observing a change in the management system that was not working for all elements, specifically the RCMP and the structural firefighting contingent. So, after what seemed to be a relatively quiet day with

only village-related issues to attend to, the Village was requested to resume the provision of support services to those groups, because we could provide the flexibility in delivery that conformed to their needs.

The preparation for the possible evacuation of the village took precedence over the sub-regional coordination role that the Village once again had. An evacuation plan had been written as part of the comprehensive emergency plan developed some years earlier. Because it was based on sound assumptions and realistic forethought, the evacuation plan was thought to be sufficiently detailed to be effective. However, given that one of the agencies identified in the plan to perform a vital role, namely the RCMP, was already fully committed with other security tasks, the details of the evacuation required additional thought. Additional volunteers would be required to go door-to-door delivering evacuation notices. The local search and rescue group was put on standby to fulfill this role.

A fundamental assumption of the plan was that the majority of residents would be able to transport themselves to predetermined reception centres out of the area. Medical patients confined to their homes proved to require additional detailed planning. The original vision in the evacuation plan proved to be viable, but the details of actually securing the use of school buses, having a trained driver, fitting stretchers through those doors and then securing them for transport, proved necessary to anticipate. Upon reflection, this issue raises the question as to what degree of detail is required of a plan that must be efficacious, yet may require refined technical detail in its execution. From this experience it could be concluded that sufficient detail was present to make the concept viable, and the unanticipated details could be determined in short order when the plan is called upon.

IV. LESSONS LEARNED

Preparation Priorities

Although the village was not evacuated, the confidence with which it proceeded under the evacuation alert was largely due to a well-reasoned and thorough plan being in place. Several years previously, the Council was made aware of its obligations under the

Emergency Program Act and ordered that a comprehensive emergency plan promptly be written. An emergency program planning committee chaired by a council member and consisting of senior managers and response officials fulfilled this directive by convening many meetings and consulting experts where necessary.

The result of this effort was a comprehensive emergency plan that identified simple performance objectives in a number of response areas that would fulfill basic needs of both the residents and the corporation. Thus, when the emergency occurs, some comfort can be taken in the knowledge that, at the very least, the fundamental aspects of the response and management have been anticipated. This then forms a basis for variance if it is necessary to adapt to a particular situation.

Information Management

A general conclusion about emergency situations is that more information is better than a dearth of information. However, the Village Emergency Operations Centre received a nearly non-stop flow of facsimiles and emails providing a host of information that was not always relevant or useful. In addition to providing current information to its citizens, the Village office also took on the additional role of providing information for rural residents in the east end of the South Thompson River valley. Therefore, the information that arrived in the office had to be carefully reviewed to sort out irrelevant press releases, situation reports and evacuation orders that were pertinent to other fires which came as part of "broadcast" facsimiles and email. A strong sense of local knowledge proved to be important in understanding the descriptions of neighbouring areas that were being affected by the fire. Early in the Village's response, an effective information management system evolved out of necessity. This system could have been refined and made more efficient if anticipated and planned for.

Customer Service

A customer service focus is even more important during a time of crisis because residents will have specific information needs that must be fulfilled. Residents will inevitably be emotional and answers to their queries may not be available. This has the potential for

needless unpleasant encounters. Anticipating the needs of residents will result in useful and timely information being on hand. Such enquiries cannot be viewed as a distraction from other important emergency management duties. Rather, time taken to be proactive in this regard makes the customer service interaction more effective and efficient because the required staff time per transaction is minimized. Sustaining such service for prolonged periods is difficult on frontline staff, so it necessitates a more rapid turn over of shifts.

Adaptable Organization

Flexibility is the most important factor in an effective emergency response. Each local government has its organizational hierarchy, standard operating procedures and emergency plans. While these form the basis for initiating a response, they should not be rigidly adhered to where circumstances demand otherwise. An organization willing to be adaptable in its response stands a greater likelihood of success even where little or no planning has been done.

Events do not always unfold as anticipated and adaptability enables an organization to meet new challenges. Egos and titles are a part of what must be left behind for the sake of community. In this case, a good example of exercising such flexibility was the Administrator and Deputy's realization that a realignment of duties was necessary to maximize the response effectiveness of the Village. This act allowed a higher level of operating efficiency and effectiveness to be attained than could have been under the normal operating paradigm.

Liaison

Liaison officers proved to be very effective in facilitating the necessary inter-agency cooperation. In these multiple agency situations, highly efficient individual organizations are brought together for a common purpose. Each has its peculiar operating methods, jargon, command structure, and organizational culture. With the local government staff occupied with information management, response and support planning, customer service issues, and routine services to maintain, little time is available to understand the peculiarities of several other organizations. Liaison officers provide this valuable interface

and should be part of every Emergency Operations Centre. Their assistance in integrating resources should not be underestimated or overlooked as they can avoid or resolve potential problems that inevitably will arise.

Opportunities

As previously noted, occasionally unexpected opportunities will arise which a local government may wish to exploit for the benefit all parties involved. The improved communication with, and between, First Nations of the area is particularly gratifying and important. Four First Nations were extensively affected by the fire and were left with no formal means of participation. It had been a long-standing goal of the Village to enhance its relationship with the various First Nations, so the opportunity presenting itself was timely. Although some First Nations participated more than others, it was considered to be a success with new relationships forged that will benefit both parties for the foreseeable future.

Media

It is a near certainty that the media, in one form or another, will make an appearance in your community during an emergency. A proactive and cooperative approach can ensure that your needs and those of the media are fulfilled. Anticipating their needs enhances the efficiency of the interaction and ensures that both parties are satisfied. Backgrounders, maps, biographies or other explanatory notes assist the media in quickly understanding the situation from your perspective and ensure that critical information is accurately conveyed. The relationship during an emergency should be truly reciprocal as they have a need to file stories and the local government will have a need to inform their residents. A cooperative rather than antagonistic relationship will make these two aspects of response management function smoothly and effectively.

Physical and Information Security

Finally, consideration must be given to physical and information security. Generally physical security of the Emergency Operations Centre is provided for in the local government's emergency plan. Small communities do not have the ability to provide

security staff and in light of the twenty-four hour operation, caution must be exercised in respect of staff safety and the security of assets. The physical interface between the public and the closed portions of the office where decisions are being made must also be maintained in order to prevent anticipatory information from inadvertently being leaked. Information security applies to anticipatory measures in preparation for a worsening scenario, trigger points for evacuation, or data on the impact of an event such as the number of deaths, homes destroyed or other such sensitive information.

An illustrative example from this event involved the reproduction of evacuation instructions that would be delivered to every house in the village should the evacuation order be issued. It was thought that the preparation of this notice would be prudent given the threatening position of the fire and the lengthy details about locating a reception centre in Salmon Arm or Kamloops. Staff decided to outsource the printing of this large job to a local business with explicit instructions about security. Apparently a copy was removed from the photocopier at that business and reproduced as it was passed around. The inadvertent release of the document caused some excitement as it spread around the village with astonishing speed. After involvement of the RCMP and some very quick action on the part of the Village staff, the spread of the information was quelled. Such a situation could have had far reaching consequences if 2,500 people had attempted to flee on a narrow highway and the reception centres designated to receive them were still occupied with other evacuees.

V. Conclusion

The McGillivray Fire presented some unique challenges, not only for the corporation, but also for those administering the response. As management professionals, we pride ourselves on our breadth of knowledge, adaptability, commitment, and foresight, which are routinely called upon in our duties of managing a local government. This particular emergency stretched the application of those and every other attribute a Chief Administrative Officer possesses. In particular, leadership emerged as the crucial element in an effective and efficient response. A strong and competent manager is needed throughout these events, but leadership emerges at certain crucial junctures when bold

and decisive action is required to prevent an operation from faltering and perhaps failing. Successfully fulfilling this role enabled the municipal administration to meet the challenges posed by these extraordinary circumstances and resulted in the Village of Chase providing highly effective crisis management.