

Government of Ontario passes two-hatter legislation

Written By JOSHUA SANTOS

Firefighters are now able to work for their department while volunteering their extra time in their home communities.

Bill 57 received royal assent in the legislature on Thursday, Dec. 6. It enables firefighters to now 'double hat' through amendments in the Fire Protection and Prevention, 1997.

'Caledon relies heavily on its volunteer firefighters to keep the community safe, said Fire Chief Darryl Bailey in an email statement. The Town, council, Ontario Association of Fire Chiefs and Association of Municipalities of Ontario have been strong advocates for double-hatters for quite some time.'

'We are pleased that Bill 57 now includes a number of key amendments to the Fire Protection and Prevention Act, that will help protect the volunteer firefighter community. Volunteer firefighters will now be able to serve their community, without fear of being penalized.'

Bailey said the legislation is in the best interest of all volunteer firefighters both in Caledon and in fire services across the Province. The amendments were proposed in the Province's 2018 Ontario Economic Outlook and Fiscal Review early November. Dufferin and Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones and Mayor Allan Thompson have been vocal advocates of volunteer firefighters in the community.

The Town has been assisting double haters pledging financial support and lobbying government officials to allow the practice when seven double-hatters were found in violation of rules by the International Association of Firefighters (IAFF) Local 1068 Brampton in a union tribunal.

The union however has not given up on the fight to have their full-time firefighters only work for their department.

'We are obviously disappointed as there was no meaningful consultation on this issue as we had under previous PC governments, who after such consultation decided not to move forward with legislation, said Fred LeBlanc, 13th district vice president. We made it clear in the short meetings we did have that we were prepared to discuss this issue with any and all stakeholders and participate in striving for a provincial solution.'

He said the organization believes the Bill is an intrusion on their right as an organization to democratically establish rules and consequences for violating rules by their members.

'Political parties have constitutions with rules and I am confident they have consequences for violating their rules which are set by their members, said LeBlanc. 'I don't think it is fair for a separate entity to interfere with that internal process.'

He said when they have a member that works in one municipality and then works for a secondary one where there is an IAFF Local established, it undermines and devalues the profession and can impact the ability of the secondary IAFF Local to advance working conditions for their members.

'We as many other trade unions refer to that as moonlighting, said LeBlanc. What needs to be made clear is we are not dealing with volunteers in the sense of the word. In fact, the two hatters in the areas where concerns have been raised are paid, in some cases very well and many volunteers across Ontario are actually organized by other trade unions or organizations and have their own collective agreements, hardly volunteering.

'Not only this but there is a personal health and safety issue at play here. This is an emergency service so no way to plan when those emergencies occur thus leaving the potential for our members to be physically and mentally exhausted when reporting to their

full-time job. We have numerous cancers and PTSD recognized as workplace injuries and two hatting obviously increases a fire fighter's exposures thus increasing their chances of contracting one of these diseases. This now puts a greater WSIB (Workplace Safety and Insurance Board) liability on their full-time employer because generally the secondary employer has not had to pay any cost, which is simply not fair.

?In fact, Mayor Thompson said last week during the Committee hearings in response to questions from the Committee that If anything happens within our municipality as a volunteer, they are covered as a volunteer. What does that mean for our two hatter members? I am not sure and they should find out if they do in fact get covered as a volunteer what that means for benefit coverage for themselves and their families.?

LeBlanc said the organization will continue to educate their members of the impacts of two-hatting, on themselves and their families, their colleagues and the fire service while educating employers and politicians

?We witnessed how things can change very quickly in politics so we never rule anything out going forward, said Leblanc.