

Peel Paramedics host information session in Caledon East

Written By KIRA WRONSKA DORWARD

Concerned Caledon residents met with Peter Dundas, Chief of Paramedics, Nancy Polsinelli, Commissioner of Peel Health Services, and paramedics themselves at the Caledon East Community Centre on Saturday Jan. 12

A divisional model was adopted as of Monday, Jan. 14. From this date forward, all paramedics servicing the Caledon area will report directly to the Fern Forest station in Brampton, West of Brampton Civic Hospital on 1600 Bovaird Drive East. At this location, paramedics will be briefed by their superintendent, being unavailable for the first twenty minutes at the beginning of their shift, and they will return thirty minutes prior to the end of their shift. In addition, ambulances will be stocked and cleaned by a logistics team rather than the paramedics themselves.

This is in contrast to the system that had been in place beforehand for Caledon, where a station-based model had paramedics reporting to and from four locations within Caledon, where they would wash, clean, and stock their own vehicles if not answering a call.

Dundas, when interviewed, stated that this plan had been approved by Council in 2007, when a ten-year capital plan had then been implemented. The changes, according to him, are designed to address population growth in Peel Region, and an eight to nine percent increase in call volume.

All these changes, he stated, were implemented after a report was conducted by Health Analytics, USA, a Florida-based company which included a team of experts from across North America, which took into account all factors in a pre-hospital setting. These changes, said Dundas, "will continue to improve that process. We will continue to review the process, making tweaks and adjustments. This allows [paramedics] to be part of a bigger group and supports comradery." The divisional model started in 2007 supports trucks in the system, a logistics group to stock trucks, which saves time in the field. Polsinelli added that "even though this model is launching, we will continue to plan through a variety of factors. No one wants to put the safety of the community at risk. No one wants that to happen."

When asked about the spike in the last decade of 911 calls made to paramedics within Caledon, a more than 200% increase, Polsinelli answered that "while the percentage is high, the call numbers [in Caledon] are below the 10, 000 mark. We have to look at the numbers as well as the percentage."

"We've been moving this model forward for a few years now," added Dundas. "We don't stop assessing the system. What happens today won't change tomorrow. The service they are receiving today will not change. The paramedics of Peel are exceptional professionals and give a top level of care."

New Amendments

A new revision to this plan was announced on Friday, Jan. 11, wherein immediately after reporting to the Fern Forest location, two ambulances will remain out of service and drive directly to Caledon in order to be available for calls at two of the four stand-alone

stations that currently exist in Bolton, Caledon East, Valleywood, and Caledon Village.

Dundas went on to say that paramedics provide "a seamless service", and that the current system of triage, where the dispatch centre is operated by the Ministry of Health, which manages four district areas in Peel, "was created by the province to ensure that no matter where, the closest vehicle takes the call- especially for those life-threatening calls. This provides the appropriate coverage while moving coverage around, and remains a fluid deployment plan.

"The health and safety of the entire community remains paramount to all of us, and that's something we want to continue to reiterate. Caledon has always been and will continue to be a priority post for coverage," we restate it almost annually to Council," said Polsinelli.

"The community can engage in information sharing. We're here to try and answer their questions," Dundas concluded, eyeing the protesters outside who it should be noted he made no effort to engage with, and who were also not allowed to come into the building.

Peel Paramedics not in favour of the plan

Also present for questions at the meeting were executives of the Peel Paramedic Union, Mike Speers and Carol Murray. Murray, with twenty-seven years of experience serving Caledon and who herself has family in the area, was especially concerned about these changes, concerns she said she has been voicing for years with local politicians, along with Mike Speers. The recent revision to the plan, where two ambulances will be deployed at 5:30 am to Caledon, "was not put through the Deployment Committee, so it was quite a surprise to them," stated Murray. "We haven't had a chance to even speculate on it." This is just the first item in a long list of concerns paramedics and the union have been voicing for years about the shift to the divisional model.

Another significant issue the Union and the people of Caledon want addressed pertain to gaps in the system around shift changes. "We have been concerned about gaps and talked about it at length," stated Murray. "This," she said, referring to Friday's amendments, "will open a whole new can of worms. In putting together a solution to one problem, they've created a host of others, keeping in mind that their solution was not run through the Union or Deployment Committee before implementation."

In case it be thought otherwise, both Murray and Speers wanted to highlight that "we have an excellent relationship working together with management. But on deployment we do not agree. We have voiced our concerns," reiterates Speers, "many times, and documented our concerns many times. For the last eighteen years (since 2000), the paramedics in Bolton and Caledon Village have reported to and from work to those locations and were available immediately to respond to calls at the start of their shift. In the event that both Bolton and Caledon vehicles were on

call, a vehicle would be sent to Caledon East to cover. On January 14, the paramedics which will be covering the Town of Caledon will be starting work and ending their shifts from Brampton, and then will have to proceed to Bolton and Caledon to provide the same level of coverage that was available immediately at the beginning of their shifts on Jan. 13th, and the last 18 years,? Speers reiterates. ?The 16 paramedics who were here on Jan. 13th will not be the same as those who are here on the Jan. 14th. There will be a pool of 120 paramedics being cycled through,? with the implication being that these new paramedics will not be familiar with the Caledon area the same way Murray and her 16 co-workers were.

In addition, the Annualized Operational Cost Minimum of this change will be \$50, 000 for fuel and maintenance for the 78 km of driving merely to move the ambulances back and forth from Brampton, whereas before the cost was zero. ?It's a direct cost to the taxpayers,? stated Speers. ?We [the Union Executive members] have continuously met with the politicians since 2008, and voiced our concerns with the divisional model,? Murray added.

?They could reverse, but at this point in time they are not willing to admit they erred, and those decisions were made by persons without intimate knowledge of the Town of Caledon,? alleges Speers. ?In its current proposed format, in the long term it will negatively impact response times. We're in 2019 now, and so according to the plan that was approved by Council, Caledon was supposed to have four 24-hour ambulances by the end of 2017. In fact, they built four stations. Valleywood was built at a cost of \$1.3 million, the cost of Caledon East was \$1.6 million. Bolton is getting a new station, and then there's the firehall in Caledon Village. Chief Dundas has assured us that as of Monday you will get the same level of service as you did before with two ambulances, so why did we build four stations?? Speers queried.

The truth lies in documents given to the Caledon Citizen, which in its next issue will be investigating the sequence of events that starts with the adoption of a very different version of the original ten-year plan proposed in the Health Analytics report in 2007, the recommendations of which stated that a hybrid- not divisional- model should be adopted for Peel, and advising that Caledon remain as-was with its stand-alone stations. What happened after Council adopted that version of the ten-year plan, and how we arrived at what is being presented to us today, will be explained in depth and with documents to prove the allegations of the Union that the plan in effect as of Jan. 14th, 2019, is in fact detrimental to people living in the Town of Caledon.