



City Council News - March 7, 2018

Preparing for the next emergency

As many of you may have heard on the news, people in the Okanagan are being warned to start preparing for flooding this spring. After record setting floods last year, government officials are giving residents fair warning that 2018 could be just as bad, if not worse, since the region has seen an above average snow year leading to very high snow pack conditions.

Despite the accumulation of snow on the ground here, our region's snow pack is just below normal. This may surprise some people because we've become accustomed to less snow, as our region has been experiencing drought for almost a decade, creating the conditions for greater forest fire risks in our area. While an immediate concern for us is how fast the accumulated low-level snow will melt off if the weather turns spring-like too quickly, our longer-term concern remains our region's vulnerability to more catastrophic wildfires like last summer's.

Unfortunately, some people may view the above statements as fear-mongering and others simply may not want to be reminded of last year's emergencies and this year's vulnerabilities. One of the reasons political leaders tend to quickly move on to other matters after emergencies are over -- despite their promises to do everything possible during the emergency to make sure the necessary steps are taken to prevent future such events -- is that voters, in general, also want to move on and don't want to be constantly reminded of their vulnerabilities.

This makes exercising real leadership in the domain of emergency planning very difficult for politicians who are too sensitive to the vagaries of public sentiment. It also means we never get the unprecedented responses politicians promise during our increasingly unprecedented emergencies.

But, our new reality is that as our weather patterns shift as a result of climate change, we need to take more deliberate steps to plan for more weather-related emergencies and be willing to undertake unprecedented measures to moderate and mitigate the risks associated with a changing climate. To date, I have to say that the Provincial government has not undertaken any unprecedented measures to protect our communities from the increasing threats of flood or wildfires under both the past and present government.

To be fair, the current government is conducting a review and seeking public input on last year's flood and wildfire events. The BC Flood and Wildfire Review is now well underway, and you can weigh in on this process at bcfloodfirereview.ca/engagement/. If you want the Provincial government to truly tackle the challenges associated with emergency preparedness and response, then please take

the time to have your voice heard during this process.

The City of Quesnel is formally engaged in this provincial review and is recommending that the Province consider funding a full time emergency preparedness and response coordinator in our region, provide ongoing and easily accessible funding to maintain our emergency response systems and equipment, modernize the Emergency Social Services Response system, provide funding for the regional airport as an integral part of our emergency response system (the Province provides no operational funding for the airport), and consider legislative changes to enable us to coordinate our emergency response at the sub-regional level (e.g. North Cariboo rather than entire CRD) when the situation requires it.

If you are interested in learning more about our region's growing wildfire risks to stimulate your thinking about how to respond to the Province's Flood and Wildfire Review, please attend a special free presentation of the "Era of Megafires" this Thursday (March 8) at the Seniors Centre at 6:30 pm.

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Mayor and Council write Council News columns to provide residents information and updates regarding Council and City projects, initiatives, committees and business. This column is published in Quesnel Cariboo Observer on Wednesdays.