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COUNCIL DATE:

REGULAR COUNCIL

TO: **Mayor & Council**

DATE: **December 17, 2018**

FROM: **Fire Chief**

FILE: **7450-30**

SUBJECT: **Community Property Safety Team**

RECOMMENDATION

The Surrey Fire Service recommends that Council receive this report for information.

INTENT

The purpose of this report is to update Council on the Fire Service's Distressed Properties initiative and related actions and outcomes of the Community Property Safety Team ("CPSTeam").

BACKGROUND

The Distressed Properties initiative arises out of the study entitled, "Distressed Properties: Pathways of Decline and the Emergence of Public Safety Risk" (Appendix "I"). The initiative was developed to identify residential properties tipping towards a state of distress, and provide the City with measures to address problem properties before they decline further and incur risk of crime or fire. In recent years, the Surrey Fire Service has observed the problem of distressed properties through the growing number of residential abandoned homes that have experienced fires. Abandoned properties also attract criminal activity including vandalism, property crime, illicit substance use and unauthorized occupation including crack houses, grow operations, illegal rooming houses, prostitution and other problems. Since 2013, concerns at these properties have required the attendance of by-law inspectors 680 times, while Surrey Fire staff attended 3,148 times. In spite of these efforts, property owners have not been effectively securing their properties and violations have continued unabated increasing the danger to residents, neighbours, and first responders.

DISCUSSION

The recommendations of the study shaped a model to identify residential properties tipping towards a state of distress and ensure that property owners take responsibility. The "Distressed Properties" model ("the Model") uses *Abandoned Properties By-law, 2017, No. 16394*, *Fire Regulations and Fire Burning By-law, 2017, No. 10771* and the *Property Maintenance and Unsightly Premises By-Law, 2007, No. 16393*. The CPSTeam was formed to address and monitor immediate issues and develop long range strategies to prevent the decline of properties.

The Model applies the British Columbia Fire Service Act to enforce the British Columbia Fire Code which requires that vacant buildings are secured against unauthorized entry. The Model serves to identify and address distressed properties and guides owners to take responsibility for stemming the progression of residential property decline. In the instance where a property owner declines to take action, the Model outlines appropriate and effective remedies. The associated costs for inspection and securing are applied to the property owners and if unpaid are applied to property taxes for collection. This Model was operationalized and put into practice in January, 2018.

Model Description

The CPSTeam consists of two Fire Inspectors and a support clerk. The CPSTeam is provided with written guidelines to identify strategies and tactics that can be used to affect change. Written in conjunction with existing City of Surrey Bylaws Section, the guidelines clearly define standards and the outer limits of enforcement orders. For example, the guidelines advocate the simultaneous use of specific fencing and the boarding techniques for abandoned structures. If these initial security measures fail, enhanced measures are required to keep the property secure until such time as the owner re-inhabits or removes the structures. If enhanced measures are not effective, the CPSTeam will require the owner to provide regular security patrols for the property.

There are various stages utilized in this model, the stages are outlined below:

- Stage one: the property's service history and current condition are used to determine the property as: "Stable", "Vulnerable" "Stressed" or "Distressed". Given these definitions, CPSTeam priorities are established. "Vulnerable" properties are identified early, and the effectiveness of enforcement strategies are measured as properties transition between these categories;
- Stage two: the property owner is provided a "Notice of Inspection" by registered mail. The inspection consists of a formal evaluation of the condition of the property. If required, an "Order to Remedy Conditions" ("Order") is issued with a due date for compliance and a detailed package outlining the security measures required;
- Stage three: a re-inspection of the property is conducted to determine whether or not the property owner has complied with the Order. If the property owner is non-compliant, a contractor is hired to install security measures. The cost is recovered from the property owner, and
- Stage four: is a monthly re-occurring inspection by on duty Fire Service members, to ensure that the properties remain in a secure state. This re-inspection routine continues until the structure is demolished or returned to an inhabitable state.

The CPSTeam collaborates with other City of Surrey departments and outside agencies to ensure that efforts are not duplicated or compromised. For example, properties under police investigation must be coordinated with the CPSTeam.

Results

The Model is highly successful. Over the past five years, the average rate of abandoned structure fires was two per month. Table 1 (Appendix "II") demonstrates that since applying the Model, the rate of abandoned home fires has decreased steadily. From June 2018 to date, only one abandoned structure has had a fire.

As shown in Table 2 (Appendix “III”), at the end of 2017, there were 194 properties identified by the Surrey Fire Prevention staff as vacant/abandoned. Since January 2018, the CPSTeam has identified an additional 209 distressed properties bringing the total of properties identified to 403. When faced with the requirement to provide ongoing security, owners elected to demolish the structures on 191 of these properties, thereby removing the fire risk at these locations.

By enforcing appropriate securing methods, the CPSTeam has minimized the risk at 134 properties. Fifty properties have been returned from distressed to inhabited having been repaired or renovated. The remaining 28 properties in the distressed category below are “in process”, and will either be demolished, secured or reinvested within the next month as they progress through the Model.

See Appendix “IV” for a map of the location and status of these properties.

Since January 2018, the CPSTeam has recovered \$114,000 through re-inspection fees (inclusive of administrative fees). A total of \$525,000 has been spent to secure non-compliant properties. These costs have been applied to the relevant property owner(s).

Next Steps

Moving forward, the challenge to discover distressed properties in a timely method requires increased communication to further reduce the rate of distressed properties and shift towards prevention. To enhance the effectiveness of the CPSTeam’s work, presentations are being delivered to the Engineering Department, RCMP, Parks Recreation & Culture Department, Planning & Development Department and By-Law staff, increasing the “eyes” of the CPSTeam for earlier identification of this risk in the community. A tool is also being developed to identify records that are known factors leading to decline in neighbourhoods. An example of this preventative measure is identification of properties where the value of the land outweighs the value of the structure. This condition has been observed to lead to an increased likelihood of abandonment.

SUSTAINABILITY CONSIDERATIONS

This report relates to the City of Surrey’s Sustainability Charter 2.0 in the themes of Inclusion and Public Safety. Specifically, it supports the following Desired Outcomes (“DO”):

- Inclusion DO13: Appropriate and affordable housing is available to meet the needs of all households in Surrey;
- Public Safety DO1: Residents are safe and have a strong sense of security in all neighbourhoods and throughout the city, and
- Public Safety DO5: Surrey is recognized and perceived as a leader in establishing and maintaining collaborative partnerships for community safety and well-being.

CONCLUSION

The Surrey Fire Service has targeted high risk properties in the community and has significantly reduced the threat of unsightliness, fire, unauthorized occupancy and all associated problems. At the same time, costs are directed back onto property owners as they are encouraged to take responsibility for their property. Neighbourhoods are restored while risk to the community, fire fighters, police and bylaw officers is reduced. Finally, some homes are being returned to the low

cost rental market that would otherwise be left in a state of decline. Detection methods are being developed to further manage the risk and move towards prevention.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Len Garis". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Len Garis
Fire Chief

Appendix "I" Distressed Properties: Pathways of Decline and the Emergence of Public Safety Risk
Appendix "II" Table I Abandoned Structure Fires by Year
Appendix "III" Table 2 CPSTeam Monthly Impact on City's Abandoned Properties
Appendix "IV" Map - Location and Status of Distressed Properties