

## View from the West: September 2010

Contributed by Len Garis

In many ways, the fire service in the west is aptly described by A Tale of Two Cities. Not Dickens' fictional piece, but the academic paper by the Institute for Local Self Government (League of Nations, 1977) that uses the premise of two cities, Sampleton and Exville, to compare master planning with incremental decision making in the delivery of public safety services. The paper describes how Sampleton conducts proactive long-range planning of its fire services, while Exville looks no further ahead than the next budget cycle.

A Tale of Two Cities exemplifies that change in the "monolithic and tradition-bound" public safety system is difficult. But it also shows how a long-range vision can reduce costs, improve efficiency and enhance services and safety.

This notion is supported by international studies. Rising to the Challenge, a 2008 report by the United Kingdom's audit commission on improving fire service efficiency, noted that fire services that adapted to change achieved significant savings. Global Concepts in Residential Fire Safety, a 2009 report by System Planning Corporation's TriData division, notes that a focus on prevention yields savings and reductions in deaths, injuries and property loss.

When applying A Tale of Two Cities to the fire service, there is evidence of both Sampleton-like actions and Exville-like actions as B.C. and Alberta tackle many of the same challenges.

In B.C., the Fire Services Liaison Group (FSLG) worked for three years to produce a report with 14 recommendations intended to modernize the fire service. The report was presented to the province in September 2009. The FSLG awaits a response.

A similar process took place in Alberta, where the Fire Services Advisory Committee (FSAC) submitted recommendations to the government. While the minister responsible has not yet indicated future steps, the committee has received direction to establish four working groups to address the following issues: risk assessment and community capacity; skills, competencies and leadership training; technical standards and public education; and injury prevention.

B.C.'s FSLG had flagged all these issues in its report, as well as some other matters that the Alberta Emergency Management Agency (AEMA) has addressed, such as improving consistency in firefighter training accreditation, certification and standards (at a cost of \$500,000), improving the provincial fire code and building code related to high-intensity residential fires, working with the Alberta Fire Chiefs Association on volunteer recruitment and retention, and changes to the Emergency Management Amendment Act that provide liability protection to partners (for example, search and rescue teams) and remove barriers to regional co-operation.

This May, the B.C. government took the proactive step of amending the B.C. Fire Code to require working smoke alarms in all dwellings but stopped short of requiring an alarm function test as a condition of insurance renewal or purchase.

Funding of community based fire services, such as training, is an issue in both provinces. The AEMA provides funding for municipal wildfire assistance programs, training for municipal emergency management officials and search and rescue teams, and training for municipal fire departments. In B.C., communities have been lobbying for a share of the provincial Insurance Premium Tax, specifically for training.

The fire, safety and health risks associated with marijuana grow operations is a significant concern. B.C.'s approach has been largely community led, using a municipal inspection process to eliminate the risks to emergency responders and neighbourhoods. These efforts were boosted in 2006 by legislation that enabled cities to directly access electricity

consumption data to more easily identify grow ops. Other provincial action that has been requested by B.C.'s fire service includes regulation of hydroponics shops, hydroponics equipment and medical marijuana grow ops.

Alberta faces similar concerns and has an active civic STOP Grow Ops Coalition in Edmonton. The province has co-ordinated multi-agency response teams in Calgary and Edmonton. It is heartening to hear that inter-ministerial government preparations are underway in Alberta for a province-wide approach to handling unsafe conditions created by grow operations.

A Tale of Two Cities presents a stark comparison of Sampleton and Exville -- black versus white, good versus bad. Clearly this template cannot be directly applied to real-life scenarios, which abound in shades of grey.

However, the story shows us that the people we serve have been calling for thoughtful planning and leadership for several decades. Over the last 10 years, we've seen pockets of remarkable, evidence-led change with stellar results, as noted in the U.K. and TriData reports.

Given the uncertain economy combined with rising public safety services costs, there are some trying times ahead for some communities, while others will see their careful planning pay off.

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