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**Subject:** Niagara Emergency Management Program Annual Report

**Report to:** Public Health & Social Services Committee

**Report date:** Tuesday, May 11, 2021

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## **Recommendations**

1. That Regional Council **APPOINT** the members of the Niagara Region's Municipal Emergency Control Group, as provided in Report PHD 5-2021, by position as required by the Office of the Fire Marshal and Emergency Management.

## **Key Facts**

- This report is intended to provide a brief summary of the key activities of the Program in 2020
- The Niagara Region Emergency Management was heavily involved in the COVID-19 response in 2020. This work has continued into 2021
- The program has been supporting both the Regional Emergency Operations Centre (REOC) and the Public Health Response to COVID-19
- The REOC has been in full activation since March 18, 2020. This makes the COVID-19 response the longest emergency response to date in Niagara
- The Program is required under the Office of the Fire Marshal and Emergency Management's Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act (EMCPA) Compliance Guide for Municipalities to provide an annual report to Council
- While the province waived the emergency exercise requirement for 2020, the program was still required to undertake all other activities required for compliance including planning, training, public education, hazard identification and risk assessment, and other legislated activities.

## **Financial Considerations**

Due to the response required as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately \$5 million in additional staff supports were required to support the Emergency Operations Centre efforts. Some of these costs were mitigated through the redeployment of existing staff resources from other departments, which required them to re-prioritize their work plans.

Other incidents and responses that required action from the program were provided within budget.

## **COVID-19 Response**

Pandemics are complex and evolving emergencies that are known for having a significant impact on the capacity and business continuity of organizations, including governments. The COVID-19 response has required significant effort from the entire corporation. The pandemic affected capacity in terms of requiring staff to fill roles with the REOC, redeploy to other positions to support the response efforts, and staff absenteeism due to having to isolate and illness.

The Regional Emergency Operations Centre (REOC) was activated to:

- Support Public Health
- Coordinate the corporation's response
- Ensure the continued delivery of critical Regional services
- Support key stakeholders

The REOC went to full activation on March 18, 2020. The state of full activation continues to this day. The complexity of the response required the activation of 27 REOC positions under the provincial Incident Management System (IMS). Each of these positions has unique roles and responsibilities related to managing the response. The duration of the response has required that both the primary and alternate for some of these positions work in the REOC.

A Mid-Response Review for the REOC was conducted by Emergency Management in winter of 2020 to identify any gaps or opportunities to improve REOC practices and procedures. All REOC members participated in the review process. Opportunities for improvements in several areas were identified and activity on addressing these is ongoing.

## **Impact on Other Regional Business Continuity**

Members of Regional staff make up the majority of membership of the REOC, including members of senior management. The amount of staff time dedicated to carrying out the duties required of their membership on the REOC includes preparation of reports, attendance at meetings, being available both during and after hours for emergency response, other responsibilities inherent in their role and to the other areas of the

REOC, completing follow up items, etc., this takes a material level of effort by staff, including the time spent carrying out these duties.

Under normal circumstances staff responsibility to the REOC can last days to several weeks, the Region's response to COVID-19 is extraordinary; the response to this event has gone on for well over a year now creating staff burnout and workload concerns. Further, it is important to note that the time spent by staff carrying out its responsibilities to the REOC has also impacted their ability to focus on their regular role within the corporation, which has only contributed to workload and burnout concerns, as well has delayed or outright suspended staff's ability to deliver certain operational requirements.

Redeployment of staff has continued within departments where staff have moved within their normal division of work and those staff who have crossed divisions, this continues today. In addition, staff redeployment occurred in the spring of 2020 and again in January 2021 cross-departmentally to areas that have been identified as requiring a greater need of staff resources, some more notable examples include: Seniors Services LTC Homes, Public Health, and Homelessness. Overall, staff continue to and were redeployed to services deemed as Priority 1- Essential as outlined in respective business continuity plans (BCP), including in accordance with applicable collective agreement and/or terms and conditions of employment provisions. The Region has continued to have excellent collaboration between unions as witnessed by the cross functional placement between union roles across the organization. There have been a number of staff redeployments to date, at last report there have been 478 staff redeployed with an additional 64 staff supporting the EOC units.

It is important to note that more recently redeployment efforts have also included higher-level priority to the Public Health's Pandemic Division, specifically to the mass immunizations clinics, which has also included coordinating staff from Local Area Municipalities (LAMs) through secondment agreements. In addition to significant recruitment efforts this year by Human Resources and hiring managers, staff have spent a considerable amount of time coordinating with the LAMs, and onboarding and training these externally redeployed staff, while still being responsible for their regular duties and responsibilities which as time has gone on has created significant workload and burnout concerns as well.

### **Other Incidents and Responses**

In addition to the COVID-19 response, there were 39 additional hazards or incidents that required at least some level of action by the Program in 2020. This included a

windstorm that resulted in flooding and other damages along the Lake Erie shoreline, a tornado in Port Colborne, winter storms, and other hazards, which required Regional support to the Local Area Municipalities.

### **Assistance to Municipalities**

The Program provided a significant amount of assistance to local municipalities for a variety of purposes including coordination and guidance during the COVID-19 response and the response to other hazards. Teleconferences were held with both LAM Community Emergency Management Coordinators (CEMCs) and a group of key emergency management stakeholders multiple times a week. Documents, including a Niagara Region Daily Consolidated Situation Report were developed and distributed to LAM CEMCs twice a week to provide them with additional information regarding the COVID-19 response. The program also served as a liaison between the LAM CEMCs and Public Health and ensured that the LAM questions and concerns were addressed in a timely manner. This created a substantial volume of work, which significantly challenged the capacity of the Emergency Management program and staff.

### **Program Components Required for Compliance**

Despite the significant demands related to the COVID-19 response, the Region's Emergency Management Program was still able to complete the required program activities to be deemed compliant by the province in 2020. The response has resulted in a delay in many program initiatives due to capacity issues, however the program continues to strive for excellence in emergency management and is focused on continuing to build towards adopting best practices in emergency management. This work will enable Niagara Region to become a leader in emergency management in Ontario and will increase Niagara's resilience to disasters and emergencies.

### **Training**

The Province created a new Instructor Certification Program in late 2019 for Teaching Provincial Emergency Management Courses. The Emergency Management Program Advisor has now completed the progress and joined the Emergency Management Program Manager as a certified instructor. This has resulted in additional capacity to deliver mandatory provincial training.

All Regional Emergency Operations Centre (REOC) staff are required to attend annual

training by the Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act (EMCPA). Multiple opportunities to attend different training session were provided, including the development of a new online course intended for new REOC members. One hundred percent of REOC members completed the training requirements for provincial compliance.

## **Public Education**

Public education is a key function of emergency management programs and is mandated under the EMCPA. COVID-19 and the current capacity of the program resulted in a decrease in public education activities on hazards other than pandemics. Despite this, additional information was added to the program website and copies of the 72-hour booklets were provided to stakeholders.

## **Symposium**

The 2020 Building a Disaster Resilient Niagara Symposium was cancelled due to COVID-19 to protect the health and safety of attendees and due to capacity challenges with Emergency Management program staff heavily involved in COVID-19 response. Despite the cancellation, there were no financial losses due to this event.

## **Planning**

The Regional Emergency Response Plan was reviewed as required by compliance. The response has also highlighted several opportunities to strengthen the plan, which will be incorporated in the 2021 version. Additional Business Continuity Planning support documents were developed to help departments in their planning efforts.

## **Exercise**

The Province waived the requirement for an emergency exercise in 2020 due to the level of involvement of Emergency Management programs in the COVID-19 response. The exercise in the fall of 2019 was focused on running a virtual REOC. This exercise and its outcomes proved to be extremely useful during the COVID-19 response.

## **Municipal Emergency Control Group**

The Province requires that members of the Region's Emergency Control Group (referred to as the Municipal Emergency Control Group (MECG) by the Province) be

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appointed by council. This list is provided as an annex to the Region's Emergency Plan. These positions (or their designated alternates) are:

- Niagara Region CAO
- Commissioner of Corporate Services
- Commissioner Public Works
- Commissioner Community Services
- Commissioner Planning & Development Services
- Commissioner Public Health and Emergency Services/Medical Officer of Health
- Director, Chief Emergency Medical Services (CEMC)
- Director, Transportation Services
- Director Corp Strat & Innovation, Corporate Administration

### **Alternatives Reviewed**

The Emergency Management program is constantly assessing priorities and best methodologies for service delivery. Despite the challenges due to the emergency response to COVID-19, the Region's Emergency Management Program met the provincial compliance requirements under the Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act for 2020 and is well on track to meet and exceed the compliance requirements for 2021.

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