

To Lauren Melanson, RDN Director, Electoral Area C,

I am a captain with Extension Volunteer Fire Department (EVFD) and have served with the department since the South Forks/Nanaimo River (SFNR) area began receiving fire protection in 2005. There is currently a petition being circulated in the SFNR area which is advocating for a return of the satellite fire hall reserve fund money to the current property owners in the area. I respect the opinions of my neighbours who are circulating the petition, but I would like to offer my own opinion on what should be done with the reserve fund.

When the EVFD district agreed to extend protection to the SFNR area, one of the conditions of the agreement was that we contribute towards a fund that would eventually be used to build a satellite fire hall to ensure proper fire protection in the area. Now that regulations and other circumstances have made the costs of building a satellite hall seem out of reach, I still think there is another option that could fulfill the intentions of the agreement. This option would be to contribute the reserve fund money towards the construction of a centrally located hall to service the entire EVFD area with proper fire protection (following Fire Underwriters guidelines on fire department staffing and apparatus requirements and response distances).

I know a centrally located hall, and relocation of the current EVFD hall, is a contentious issue, but I would like to lay out the reasons that I think it could lead to better fire protection for everyone in the district, including Extension Village and the SFNR area. There may be an opportunity at the moment, that may not come up again, to pursue a nearly ideal property for a central hall that should be considered. The property at 796 Nanaimo River Road is in a great location and has recently had some of the concerns that were often instigated at this property addressed. I will discuss this property later in my letter.

The rest of this letter is a revised form of a letter I sent to the EVFD Board of Directors earlier this year in which I advocated for a centrally located hall. While I have shared the original letter with our Chief, Kevin Young, and some of the other firefighters in our department, I am only presenting my own opinions and am not speaking on behalf of the EVFD.

Having reviewed the "Feasibility Study for Options Development for the Nanaimo River Fire Protection Service Area in Electoral Area C" by Tim Pley & Associates Ltd., I would like to voice my support for one of the options presented in this study.

(The report can be found at <https://rdn-pub.escribemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=28329>.)

While the intention of the study was to determine the feasibility of constructing a satellite fire hall in the Nanaimo River Road area, the consultants recommended we consider the relocation of the current hall to a more central location, thereby negating the need for a satellite hall. The rationale for this proposal

(a hall near the intersection of Colwell Road and White Rapids Road) is discussed beginning on page 30 of the feasibility study.

With full acknowledgment of the deep roots that the Extension fire hall has in the community, I would ask you to please consider the proposal to relocate the main hall to a more central location, as suggested in the feasibility study. In the study, the estimated cost of a satellite hall is approximately \$3,000,000, which does not seem attainable, leaving the Nanaimo River area with very limited protection options. Below I will outline why I believe that a more centrally located hall could continue to provide robust protection to Extension village, meet the needs of the South Forks/Nanaimo River Road area and be cost and operationally effective for all residents in the Extension Volunteer Fire Department service area.

Emergency Response Time

As noted in the study, a hall in the vicinity of Colwell Road and White Rapids Road would be within 3km of Extension village, still providing quick emergency response capabilities. This location would also be within 8km of the entire area the department covers, from Elander Place to Kelsie Road to South Forks Road to the power station on Nanaimo River Road. For many firefighters this central location would actually speed up the response time to Extension village and all other areas. This location is on the way to the village for firefighters from the Nanaimo River area and other southern areas.

In 2022, 56% of all emergency incident hours were logged by Nanaimo River area firefighters and another 6% by other south-based firefighters. So 62% of emergency incident hours were logged by firefighters who would have a faster response time from a central location compared to the location of the current hall. This imbalance was certainly not always the case, and ten years ago it would have heavily favoured firefighters from the Extension village area. The make-up of our fire department personnel fluctuates, and the current firefighters from the Nanaimo River area are a dedicated group that now represents almost half of our officers. So though response time to Extension village may be hindered by a relocation of the hall, I do not believe the difference would be significant.

Staffing Requirements

Also noted in the study, meeting minimum staffing requirements for one hall would be more attainable than it would be for a main and satellite hall. Fire Underwriters require a main hall to have 15 and a satellite hall to have 10 firefighters. Excluding juniors (11 members) and new recruits (3 members), our department currently has 12 members that would respond to a main hall and 9 members that would respond to a satellite hall if it were built. Juniors and new recruits have very limited roles at emergency incidents. This means that neither a main hall nor satellite hall would meet the current staffing requirements in a divided set-up, but we would easily meet the staffing requirements for one central hall. There is definitely an opportunity for growth of the department and I look forward to seeing our juniors earn their yellow helmets in the years ahead. But constantly being able to staff two halls could be a challenge avoided with one central hall.

Apparatus Requirements

A satellite hall would require a newer frontline pumper, similar to our new Engine 1, to meet Fire Underwriters standards. Our older Truck 4 does not make the cut and though it is still in good shape, would have no place in a main hall & satellite hall scenario. We would need to maintain two relatively new frontline pumpers. But with one central hall we would only need Engine 1 as our front-line pumper and could still retain Truck 4 as a supplementary pumper, getting the most out of this apparatus. With the addition of Engine 1, our department has incorporated relay pumping, something that was not possible before. Relay pumping allows us to get one pumper close to a fire scene, which is then fed by a relay pumper in an easily accessible spot for tenders to supply water. This can greatly enhance our capabilities when attacking fires down long or narrow driveways and other difficult to access areas found frequently in our district.

The study also points out that our Tender 5 is due for replacement in 2025/2026. If a satellite hall were built, Tender 5 could find a home there. However, if no satellite hall is built then Tender 5 will also need to be given up while it still has many good years left. A new central hall with enough space for two water tenders would also be a boon for our firefighting capabilities. On many fires we need to request mutual aid from other fire departments for extra water tender support. One tender often cannot supply enough water. We always appreciate the help from our neighbouring fire departments, but with two of our own tenders at a centrally located hall we would be much less reliant on their support.

A centrally located hall with enough space for five trucks (our new and old pumpers, our current and future tenders and our rescue truck) would substantially increase our fire response capabilities.

Hall Requirements

While I don't know all the details, for years there seems to have been some concern that upgrades or outright replacement of our current hall could be imposed on us to meet RDN building standards. Earthquake preparedness and new fire hall standards were cited as possible reasons. The feasibility study notes things like laundry facilities and better storage for firefighting gear as possible improvements to our current hall. Building a new main hall would address these concerns.

A new hall could also provide more training opportunities. A location with more space, both indoor and outdoor, would allow better incident simulations at practices. More office and storage space would also be beneficial. We are having trouble finding enough locker space for all of our current firefighters and we had to purchase a sea can due to storage space limitations in our hall.

A new hall in a less populated location could also provide easier road access for our fire trucks and less disturbance to our neighbours. While we always stress safe driving practices for our firefighters, moving the hall to a less residential location could be safer for the community by reducing emergency vehicle traffic in the village.

Financial Considerations

If a satellite hall was constructed and Extension Volunteer Fire Department then operated both halls under one budget, there would be numerous extra expenses compared to operating one central hall. Two front-line pumpers would need to be replaced regularly (every 20 years) instead of one. Two halls would need to be maintained. There would be equipment redundancies spread between the two halls that would not be required in one hall.

But if the study conclusions are accurate, and a satellite hall would be near \$3,000,000, it seems unlikely that the satellite hall will ever get built. Approximately \$240,000 has been collected by the extra taxes on Nanaimo River residents in the last 18 years. While the number of homes has nearly doubled in that time, at the current tax rate it could be well over 100 years before the satellite hall would be paid off. Quintupling the tax, or more, in order to pay for a satellite hall over 20 years would not be a popular option. For SFNR residents, the most cost effective way to have a well located hall may be to contribute towards a new centrally located hall and to direct the reserve funds towards this hall. Even an extra tax on top of the current reserve fund tax could still be the most cost effective route for SFNR residents when they face a substantial increase in insurance premiums for what Fire Underwriters would classify as an unprotected area.

Would a centrally located hall be cost effective for residents of the original Extension Fire protection area? In the short run there would likely be extra taxes. In the long run however, assuming that a new hall will be required at some point, it could prove to be a less expensive option. Using the taxes collected for a satellite hall from the Nanaimo River residents towards a new central hall would lessen the tax burden on the original Extension service area residents. The extra taxes from Nanaimo River residents would allow them to make a contribution to building a new hall with the Extension community; the community that welcomed them into the department Extension built. Nanaimo River residents would get the protection and insurance reductions they need in a cost effective manner, and original Extension residents would get a financial boost to a new hall that may eventually be required anyway.

The feasibility study recommends the RDN explore the potential to allocate Community Works Funds towards a central hall or satellite hall. It recommends further cost saving options like grant applications, and community contributions. Many firefighters and community members have expressed an interest in helping with the construction of a new hall. Bringing together neighbours from across the EVFD district in the construction of a new hall would build a more connected community as we work together for a common cause. It seems like a great opportunity to pool the resources of everyone in the Extension service area in one central project that can benefit all.

796 Nanaimo River Road

If relocation of the hall is considered I suggest 796 Nanaimo River Road would be a good property to pursue.

First, it is very close to the feasibility study's proposed location of Colwell Road and White Rapids Road. The entire Extension service area is within 8km of this location. It is 3.3km from the current hall.

796 Nanaimo River Road is near the intersection of White Rapids Road and Nanaimo River Road so has fast access to two of our main roads. It also has a back entrance on Mary's Turnaround which would give the hall two potential entry and exit points. This would be beneficial for a drive-through hall and in the event of a natural disaster that might block one access point.

The property is 5 acres. This would provide plenty of room for a fire department, practice grounds and parking. There would even be space for a community hall or other community infrastructure needs in the future.

Currently, this is the number one nuisance property for our fire department. This is the property we most frequently respond to for burning complaints (several times a year) and we have fought many major fires on this property that threatened neighbouring residents. Fire department protocol is to only respond to this property with RCMP back-up for the safety of our firefighters. If we replaced this nuisance property with a new fire hall it would reduce the drain on resources to the fire department, increase the safety of the community and increase the safety of firefighters.

I have heard that the old water plant property beside the current hall is being considered for a new hall location. If the RDN were to consider purchasing 796 Nanaimo River Road and selling the properties of the current hall and the old water plant, the prices could be fairly close to offsetting each other. Based on 2023 assessment values:

- 2201 Bramley Road: \$577,000 (0.75 acres)
- 2209 Bramley Road: \$462,000 (0.94 acres)
- Combined Bramley Road properties: \$1,039,000 (1.7 acres)
- 796 Nanaimo River Road: \$1,127,000 (5 acres)

In summary, I think that putting the SFNR reserve fund towards the construction of a centrally located EVFD hall would be the best use of this fund. A central hall could enhance fire protection for the entire EVFD service area, help the SFNR area residents meet the conditions of the original agreement that brought us under EVFD protection, and allow SFNR residents to contribute a little extra towards a new hall, which might encourage Extension village residents to be more open to a hall relocation. Further, 796 Nanaimo River Road as a new EVFD hall location seems like a rare opportunity that should be pursued.

Thank you,
Tom Reid