

SATURNA ISLAND FIRE PROTECTION SOCIETY NEWS

by Don Rutherford, Vice-President

The results are in! Our fall 2024 online survey of Saturna residents received 89 responses. SIFPS's board is grateful to those who took the time to complete the survey and offer thoughtful replies to the questions we posed.

The results of the survey confirmed our sense that Saturna Islanders strongly support and appreciate the service of their volunteer firefighters and emergency medical responders.

In response to our question about satisfaction with current service levels for local firefighting, 87.2% said they were "very satisfied," 10.5% said they were "somewhat satisfied," and only a handful registered "slightly satisfied."

Your comments identified one critical area in which more attention is needed: fire prevention. We all know that this is huge risk on Saturna. It is at the top of Chief Peter Clark's agenda. All residents have a role to play in improving our collective safety, starting with participation in BC's FireSmart Program, managed on Saturna by Karen Kreiger and Steve Ford (firesmartsaturna@gmail.com).

In response to our question about satisfaction with the current service levels for local emergency medical response, 65.9% said they were "very satisfied" and 30.6% said they were "somewhat satisfied." The comments suggested that the discrepancy between these numbers was due to the belief that we are owed more by the province, ideally in the form of a BC Ambulance station, staffed by paramedics.

SIFPS is in active discussions with BC Emergency Health Services, and local political leaders, to make the case for more resources on Saturna. As most islanders are aware, this is a major issue throughout the province, with some ambulance stations unable to staff shifts with paramedics. In the short term, we can expect only modest increases in material support from BCEHS. But it is an issue we will continue to pursue.

The shortfalls in emergency medical services across the province underline the benefits that our SIR and SIFD volunteers bring to the island. As one respondent noted, on Saturna, "response times are better than some mainland locations." Many comments emphasized the need to reaffirm our support for the well-being of our volunteers, who sacrifice work and family time to keep up with demanding training and on-call shifts. This is a top priority for SIFPS: to ensure that our volunteers are supported in every way possible, so that we can continue to enjoy the high levels of emergency service we do on Saturna.

Inevitably, this leads to the topic of funding. Here the survey indicates the need for greater communication from SIFPS. Only 25.6% of respondents said they were "very familiar" with how Saturna's fire and emergency medical services are funded; 52.3% said they were

“somewhat familiar” with funding mechanisms, and 17.4% said they were “slightly familiar.” On the assumption that those who responded skewed towards people most familiar with SIFD and SIR, we have some work to do in laying out how our emergency services are funded and the financial pressures they are under.

Extensive information on these topics can be found on our website (saturnafirerescue.ca). In a nutshell, the situation is this. Because firefighting in BC is a municipal responsibility, SIFD is funded through property taxes collected by the CRD, supplemented by donations and grant funds received for major purchases.

Emergency medical response, by contrast, is a provincial responsibility, administered through BCEHS. As it stands, SIR receives *no* budgetary support from BCEHS. It had been receiving a grant covering just over 14% of its operating expenses from the Vancouver Island Health Authority, but that has not been guaranteed for 2025. In 2023, we were able to expand the scope of emergency services covered by our governing CRD bylaw to include “medical patient transportation.” This authorized the use of tax revenues to fund the operation of SIR, but it is not a permanent solution. Given the precarious state of healthcare access throughout the province, this is not a problem that will be easily solved.

The most pressing concern for SIFPS is the renegotiation of our “Fire Services and Emergency Response Services Funding Agreement” with the CRD. Although the current agreement is in effect until the end of 2027, the CRD is pushing us to amend its terms to bring them in line with the CRD’s understanding of the authority it holds with respect to rural firefighting services like Saturna’s. Such a renegotiation has implications for the funding of SIR and for our current governance model, in which SIFD is managed independently by SIFPS as a charitable society as opposed to a CRD commission, as happens on other Gulf Islands.

It is too early to tell how this will play out. At this point, SIFPS is beginning a process of community engagement that will allow us to confidently advance the island’s case with the CRD. We have taken away from the survey that Saturna residents value the emergency services provided by SIFD and SIR in their current form. Going forward, we will endeavour to maintain, and where possible expand, these services within existing legal and financial constraints.