

Funding our Emergency Medical Responders

By Don Rutherford, SIFPS President

Mairead Boland's article in the October *Scribbler* was a welcome appreciation of the dedicated volunteers who contribute their time to Saturna Island Rescue (SIR). SIR crew members stand ready 24/7, 365 days a year, to respond to accidents and other medical emergencies, to attend patients and, when necessary, to transport them by ambulance for evacuation off island. This year has seen a record call volume for SIR. Current crew members, led by Chief Chak Estable-Duquette and Deputy Chief Tyler Battle, have worked tirelessly to meet the community's needs.

Ensuring that SIR remains adequately staffed and funded is a constant concern. Recent recruiting efforts have yielded six new members who completed the First Responder course offered on island in August, and are moving on to passing licensing exams, obtaining class 4 drivers licenses (required to drive the ambulance), and joining on-call shifts. SIR is always looking for new recruits, but for the moment we feel confident about the crew of volunteers who have committed to serving the community.

The aim of this article is to throw light on the significant financial challenges SIR faces.

As most Saturna residents know, SIR is not part of the provincial ambulance system operated by BC Emergency Health Services (BCEHS). There are BCEHS ambulance stations on Mayne and Pender, but Saturna's population has been deemed too small to warrant such a station. Instead, we have SIR: a volunteer, emergency medical response team, managed by a non-profit society: the Saturna Island Fire Protection Society (SIFPS).

SIFPS is responsible for overseeing the operations of our two emergency services: the volunteer fire department and SIR. In BC, fire protection is a municipal service, funded by property taxes. This is what happens on Saturna: most of the operating expenses of the fire department are provided through property taxes, assessed and collected by the CRD.

The situation is different with SIR. Emergency medical response and transportation are not a municipal responsibility, but a provincial one under the auspices of BCEHS. Ideally, it would be part of the mandate of BCEHS to fund volunteer medical response teams like SIR. Unfortunately, this is not the case. SIR gets no budgetary support from BCEHS: zero dollars. Engagement with BCEHS staff has led to SIR receiving some material support and some funding for training this year, but we are quickly approaching the limit of what we can expect from BCEHS under the current framework.

So how is SIR funded? Until this year we had received an annual grant from Vancouver Island Health Authority that covered approximately one-seventh of SIR's operating budget. Sadly, we are not confident that this support will be renewed for 2026, in which case we will be without any provincial funding for emergency medical services on Saturna Island.

On a positive note, residents and visitors have stepped up their charitable donations to SIR. This is a welcome development, for which we are very grateful. A heads up to everyone to attend the benefit concert for Saturna's emergency services scheduled for November 19 at the Community Hall!

For the foreseeable future, donations will remain part of our funding model. Realistically, however, we can't balance SIR's budget with individual donations alone. We need a predictable revenue stream and one that is many times larger than what we currently receive in donations. The costs of operating emergency services—both the fire department and SIR—continue to increase dramatically. For 2026, the operating budget for SIR alone is projected to be more than \$100,000.

We have been able to meet this cost through an amendment to the CRD bylaw authorizing the collection of property taxes for fire protection. As of 2023, we have been permitted to use such taxes to provide "fire prevention and suppression and emergency response services, and medical patient transportation," thus allowing us to direct a portion of this revenue to SIR.

Sounds good? It's kept us afloat for the last few years, but it's not a stable long-term solution.

First, this isn't what's supposed to happen. We pay provincial taxes that fund emergency health services (BCEHS), yet on Saturna we receive no support from the province. Instead, we're drawing on CRD property taxes, designed to fund fire protection services, to keep SIR going.

Second, the combined cost of operating the fire department and SIR has stretched our tax base to its limit. As of next year, our projected expenditures will have reached the cap (.85/\$1000 assessed value) approved by Saturna taxpayers. At that point, one or more of three things must happen:

- 1) We increase the property tax cap, allowing us to raise more revenue to meet the costs of running the fire department and SIR.
- 2) We cut costs, almost certainly leading to a degradation of services.
- 3) We locate new sources of revenue.

A large part of SIFPS's work, supported by the fire and SIR chiefs, focuses on constraining costs by doing more with less. Compared to how things work on other islands, with the CRD or BCEHS in charge, we run a shoe-string operation. Still, no matter how much we economize, increases in such things as vehicle maintenance and liability insurance are

outside our control. At some point, we may have to revisit the property tax cap to keep our emergency services running.

An alternative would be to cut our level of service. Rather than operating 24/7/365, SIR might limit its service hours or forsake medical transportation altogether—ceding patient care to BCEHS paramedics, who would have to travel to the island to attend patients. The board of SIFPS does not favor this option—and given the strong support voiced for SIR, we suspect that most islanders would agree. The priority is to maintain SIR at its current service level.

That leaves new sources of revenue. In December, SIFPS will present a proposal to the Saturna Community Club to make SIR the primary beneficiary of the proceeds of the annual Lamb BBQ. With the Medical Clinic now receiving appropriate funding from VIHA, we can think of no more worthy cause than SIR. Each year at the Lamb BBQ, we can tell visitors: the dollars you spend on Saturna are used to fund the essential work of our volunteer medical first responders, who are standing by to serve residents and visitors alike.

If our proposal to the Community Club is successful, it will go a long way toward keeping SIR on a solid footing for the next few years. Unfortunately, given the size of the budget, it won't solve the problem completely. Consequently, moving forward, SIFPS will pursue a two-prong strategy. We will continue to pursue new sources of revenue through grants and charitable giving, and we will press BCEHS and our elected representatives to commit to funding a permanent on-call ambulance station on Saturna. The latter won't happen this year or next, but it is what Saturna's growing population deserves.

If you would like to learn more about SIFPS and the emergency services it manages, visit our website: saturnafirerescue.ca. If you have suggestions or want to get involved, feel free to contact me by e-mail: donaldprutherford@gmail.com.