

## Intermunicipal Dispute Resolution Initiative

# MEDIATION RESOLVES ISSUES BETWEEN FIRE DEPARTMENTS

Town of Drayton Valley ↔ Town of Brazeau ↔ County of Brazeau ↔ Village of Breton

When four communities are sharing fire protection services, with a handful of full-time paid employees, dozens of volunteers, and two councils to report to, it's not an easy thing to put together.

Municipalities in this central Alberta region are trying, though, and that's commendable. Currently, the Town of Drayton Valley provides fire protection services for the Town as well as for the County of Brazeau, which includes the Village of Breton. That wasn't always the way.

At one time, Breton had their own independent fire department that raised its own funds for the village fire hall, equipment and volunteer force. When the County of Brazeau took over fire protection services in the 1990s, many of the services became centralized in the Town of Drayton Valley. There were lots of changes for all parties, and, unfortunately, conflicts followed.

After a decade of shared services, these conflicts have not gone away. There have been personality clashes, a break down in communications, and questions about funding and how money was allocated. New government regulations complicated the situation even more. In April 2004, Occupational Health and Safety introduced a new "Code of Practice for Fire Fighters" that outlined enhanced procedures for firefighter training and new standards for equipment, something that would require everyone to make further changes.

By late 2004, the councils for both Drayton Valley and the County of Brazeau were hearing grievances from both sides. They realized the situation needed to be addressed. It was decided that a formal – and impartial – review of operations was needed, as well as assistance with the disagreements between personnel. They called in two outside groups to help.

### Enlisting the help of outsiders is a positive step towards resolution

For experienced support in fire safety, they turned to the Fire Commissioner's Office. Their Advisory Services provide consulting for municipalities and other clients to improve fire protection standards and services. As part of the review process, the Fire Commissioner looked at the fire halls in Drayton Valley and Breton, assessed the equipment, and looked at training.

For help with the personnel conflicts, they consulted with the Municipal Dispute Resolution Services of Alberta Municipal Affairs and accessed an innovative program that provides mediation and dispute resolution support to municipalities who want to improve how they deal with conflict. Under the Intermunicipal Dispute Funding program, the players received financial assistance to offset the cost of securing an independent mediator to help resolve the disagreement.

Mediation is a way of resolving disputes where a neutral third party, the mediator, assists two or more parties negotiate an agreement on a matter of common interest. Although there was a history of conflict between these parties, both sides could definitely see a "common interest". Four senior fire services personnel agreed to mediation in an attempt to iron out their differences

The mediation session went better than expected, and in only one meeting between two Fire Chiefs, one Deputy Fire Chief and one Fire Captain, they were able to resolve most of the dispute and draft a plan of action for future interaction.

“The mediation process worked great,” says Sheldon Fuson, Drayton Valley and Brazeau Fire Chief. “The mediator met with all of us separately, and then the four of us met with the mediator together in one room. It was really important to have that impartial third party to ask questions, hear us out and record information. I went into it somewhat hesitantly because I had never been involved in mediation before, but I was very impressed with the process.”

Like Fuson, none of the other players had been in mediation before either. Tom Impey, Breton Fire Chief, says that although he initially felt bad that someone else had to come in to assist them, in the end he saw the benefit of it. “Sometimes personalities get in the way, and people have a hard time accepting change. There were mistakes on both sides, but it was good for everyone to admit in person that it was not working the way it should be, and that we all needed to do better.”

### **Mediation gets everyone on the same page**

It’s unusual for groups in conflict to resolve disputes in just one meeting, but because all parties wanted to improve the relationship between the municipalities, the mediation was all about searching out proactive ways they could reach the common goal of working together more smoothly.

“It felt like a real gathering of the minds,” says Mark Raines, Fire Captain in Breton “The mediator was detached and had no emotional tie to the issues, so could see things in an impartial way. Meeting on neutral ground meant we were able to speak our minds without the fear of retaliation or without the communications being manipulated through others.”

Brent Greer, Deputy Fire Chief in Drayton Valley and Brazeau agrees. “After mediation, things began turning around, definitely as a result of the process. It provided us with a better understanding of the issues, and made us see what expectations the others had.”

After that one meeting, the group created a Memorandum of Understanding that dealt with specific tactics for training, reporting structures and communication between the groups. This, along with the Fire Commissioner’s report, was presented to both councils and has formed the basis of how the groups will move forward.

One of the positive things to come out of this mediation session revolved around training. In the past, it was difficult to get an agreed-upon time to conduct the ongoing training required for firefighters because most of the volunteers had other day jobs and family obligations. Previous to mediation, training typically occurred on different nights of the week or on weekends, and there were time conflicts for many of the volunteers. Due to these conflicting schedules, training occurred in smaller groups without a lot of synergy between jurisdictions.

“We’re very pleased that starting in April 2006 we’re beginning joint training sessions twice a month where all members are present,” says Greer. “Although this is just a first step, it’s important. We haven’t solved everything overnight, but it is developing in the right direction.”

Impey agrees that things are improving, but says that it takes time to make changes and adapt new processes, some that require more paperwork and different reporting structures. “Sometimes the slow speed at which these things happen can be frustrating. There are many new changes not only as a result of the mediation but because

of liability issues with training and equipment, as well as government regulations to be considered. We'd all like to see the discussed improvements move faster, but it will happen."

Another constructive thing to come out of the mediation was increased personal contact from the Fire Chief responsible for Drayton Valley and Brazeau County (including Breton).

"One of the complaints that came out during mediation was that some of the guys felt I didn't get out to Breton enough," says Fuson. "My perception was that I didn't want to be seen as interfering. But once we all understood where this was coming from, we set up a personal meeting once a month where I travel to Breton and talk about where we're going as a group. It's been really positive for everyone, and I think the operation is improving because of it."

Raines has seen this, too. But, like the others, he is also realistic about how much can happen right away. "The process went very well, but there are challenges that come up as you go. You're never finished. But, would I recommend mediation to others? Absolutely. I was really happy when I heard we were going into mediation because we all needed to make things work better."