Emergency Vehicle Status for Volunteer Fire Fighters

In November 2008 the Saskatchewan Government announced changes in legislation that allow volunteer fire fighters to use warning lights and sirens on their personal vehicles.

The new regulations give each municipality the option to designate the personal vehicles driven by their fire fighters as emergency vehicles. In essence, the fire fighter’s personal vehicle - during an emergency - will have the same status as a fire truck.

Municipalities are not required to adopt this program. There are obligations and potential liabilities that must be carefully considered. Municipal leaders should work with their Fire Chiefs to determine if designating fire fighter’s personal vehicles for emergency response will have a benefit for their community that outweighs the possible safety risks. If a municipality decides not to designate personal vehicles for emergency response, volunteers will not be able to use emergency warning devices.

A Guide for Municipal Leaders

Implementation

There are four steps to follow before your fire fighters may use emergency warning lights and sirens.

Develop a Bylaw

The municipality must enact a bylaw allowing the personal vehicles of volunteer fire fighters to be designated as emergency vehicles. The bylaw can be used to govern which fire fighters may use lights and sirens, a process for vehicle safety inspections and procedures for ensuring the warning devices are used appropriately.

A recommended draft bylaw is attached. This example bylaw puts administration of the program in the hands of the Fire Chief. This frees Council from having to frequently amend the bylaw when members leave or join the Fire Department. There are also notes detailing the key provisions of the bylaw.

Provide Driver Training

The Traffic Safety Act and related regulations require fire fighters to successfully complete an emergency vehicle operator’s course. These courses are offered by Emergency Management and Fire Safety. There is no charge for student registration.

Emergency Management and Fire Safety has trained a number of driving instructors who will deliver the emergency vehicle operators course to fire fighters. Your Fire Chief will contact us to arrange training dates and locations. Any costs beyond the course registration fees – the cost of renting a classroom for example – will be the responsibility of the municipality.
Institute Vehicle Safety Inspections
All emergency vehicles must be safe and well maintained. Annual inspections by a qualified mechanic will ensure fire fighter’s personal vehicles meet the *Traffic Safety Act* requirements for mechanical safety.

Supply the Correct Warning Equipment
Emergency vehicles must have both lights and sirens. The red lights used on a fire fighter’s personal vehicle must meet the Society of Automotive Engineers (SAE) Standard J845 or J1318 for Class 1 warning devices.

All reputable emergency signaling device manufacturers make lighting units which meet one or both of these standards. Changes to *The Vehicle Equipment Regulations, 1987* also require that the audible warning devices used meet SAE Standard J1849. Again, reputable manufacturers make siren equipment which meets this requirement.

Liability

Fire fighters, even unpaid volunteers, are considered employees of the municipality when responding to emergencies. Whether fire fighters are driving a personal vehicle or a fire truck the municipality may share liability in the case of a collision or injury. During an emergency response the vehicle owner’s personal liability insurance coverage may be suspended by SGI and that coverage becomes the responsibility of the municipality.

Municipalities have a number of protections in legislation. Part 12 of *The Municipalities Act* and Section 45 of *The Fire Safety Act* both place restrictions on actions taken against fire fighters and municipal officials. Councils will want to seek legal advice on these matters.

Should my Department Consider Designation?

According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) the purpose of an emergency response is “to deliver personnel and apparatus to the scene of an emergency in a safe and timely manner.” Volunteer fire fighters who successfully complete an Emergency Vehicle Operator course will have a good understanding of the obligations and limits the use of lights and sirens place on a driver.

Councils should work with their Fire Chiefs to determine if designating fire fighter’s personal vehicles for emergency response will have benefit for their community that outweighs the safety risks. Everyone should keep in mind that almost one-quarter of all fire fighter injuries and deaths occur during emergency response.

For more information contact:
JD Lloyd
Emergency Management and Fire Safety
(306) 933-5733
jd.lloyd@gov.sk.ca