

NO: **R021**

COUNCIL DATE: **February 6, 2012**

REGULAR COUNCIL

TO: **Mayor & Council**

DATE: **February 6, 2012**

FROM: **Fire Chief**

FILE: **0360-20**

SUBJECT: **Update on the Electrical Fire Safety Initiative Program**

RECOMMENDATION

The Fire Services Department recommends that Council receive this report as information.

INTENT

This report provides information on the results for 2011 of the Electrical Fire Safety Initiative (EFSI) Program and the general status and direction of the Program for 2012.

BACKGROUND

The City of Surrey has been a leader in developing and implementing alternative solutions to address public safety risks associated with marijuana grow operations. A Controlled Substance Bylaw was adopted by the City in 2005 and the Electrical Fire Safety Inspection Program was initiated in 2005 as a demonstration project. This Program was one of British Columbia's earliest examples of applying an administrative solution to a problem that had previously been addressed only through the criminal justice system.

DISCUSSION

The success of the EFSI demonstration project and the fact that the Program was financially self sufficient led to the integration into the City's organization of the EFSI Team. The Team includes representation either directly or indirectly from Fire Services, RCMP, Electrical Inspections and By-law Enforcement.

The Provincial government adopted Bill 25 in 2006 which acted to amend the Safety Standards Act and enabled local governments to request from BC Hydro electrical consumption data for residential properties that exceeded a given consumption threshold. One of the attributes of marijuana "grow ops" is the amount of electrical power they require in comparison to the average single family dwelling. This new data resulted in an increased volume of files for the EFSI Team to inspect. As a result, the Program was expanded to two teams in January of 2007 with the Program remaining financially self sufficient.

By February of 2008, the program had made a significant impact on the number of "grow ops" operating in residential settings in Surrey. This was evidenced by a significant decrease in the number of high-consumption hydro files that were being forwarded to the EFSI Team. In 2008

the Program was scaled back to a single team. Based on evidence gathered during inspections, by 2008 there was also a marked decrease in the number of children present in houses where there was evidence that an illegal “grow op” had been present. Between 2005 and 2008 a total of 234 children were found in 121 residences where there was evidence that a “grow op” had been operating. In 2009 and 2010, there were no children found in such residences. In 2011, there were 7 children discovered at 2 different locations. There has also been a dramatic decrease in the instances of residential fires associated with grow ops.

Since its inception in March 2005 through to December of 2011 the EFSI Program has generated the following:

- 1461 locations were rendered safe with respect to electrical safety issues;
- 1005 locations had the power terminated;
- 439 locations required electrical repair notices only; and
- there was an 81.6% reduction in confirmed “grow ops” in 2011 in comparison to 2007.

Chart 1 illustrates the success and trends of the program over the past 7 years. “Confirmed Grows” represents the number of sites at which observations by the EFSI team indicated that a “grow op” had been present requiring full remediation of the residence. “Repair Notices” represents residences where there was no evidence of a “grow op” as a result of an EFSI inspection but where serious electrical issues were observed that required a repair order to be issued and tracked through the City Electrical Inspections Division.

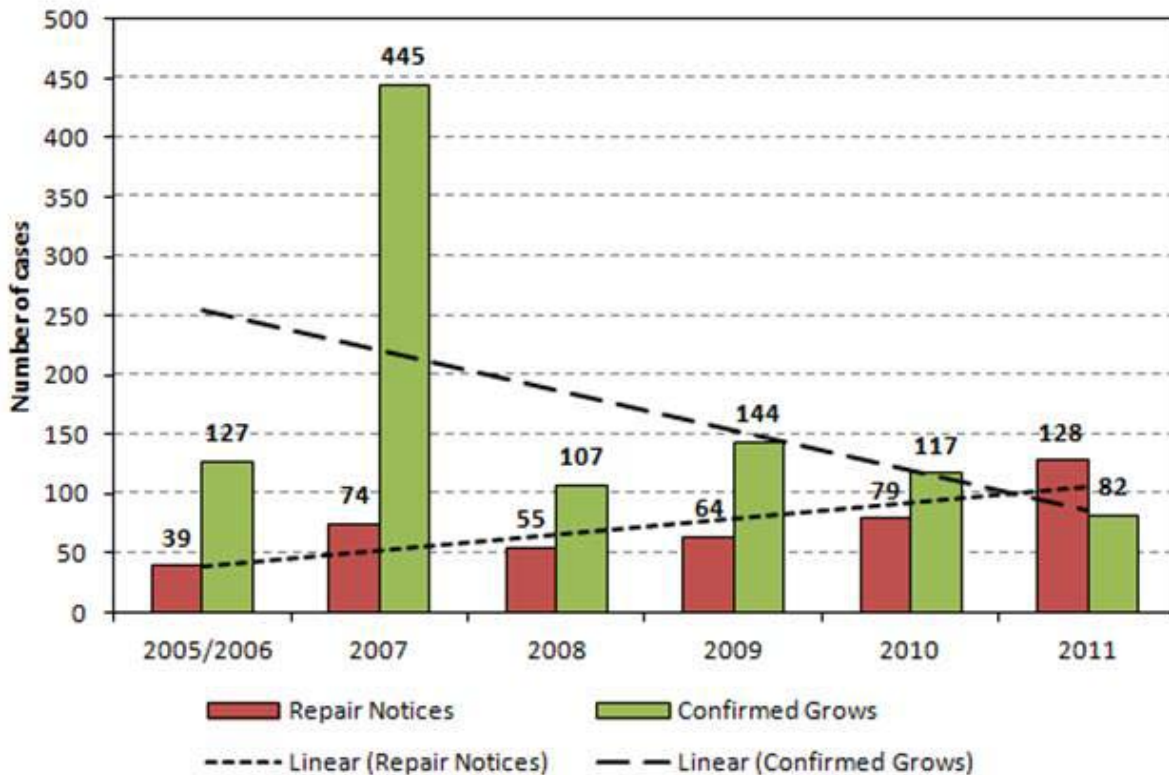


Chart 1

The Surrey EFSI Program has garnered considerable interest from other governments, police departments and fire departments, provincially, nationally and internationally. The City of Surrey

Fire Services Department continues to host training sessions for visiting agencies upon request to share the Program procedures and operational experiences.

In an effort to deter resurgence in “grow ops” in Surrey and to reduce the displacement of the problem to other communities, staff has been active in advocating and assisting in the implementation of the following strategies:

1. An increase in tax audits of illegal drug production income through the sharing of information between local and federal authorities;
2. Regulation of the sale of the sophisticated high-wattage hydroponics equipment used in most grow operations;
3. Provision in legislation for local monitoring of licensed medical marijuana grow operations, which share the same public safety risks as illegal grow operations; and
4. Support for research focused on eliminating illegal narcotics production, including the development of new detection technology, the assessment of regional programs and the completion of baseline studies of Canada’s marijuana trade.

The challenge is maintaining momentum and keeping up with illegal marijuana grow operator’s efforts to conceal their operations. An advertising campaign was launched in July 2011, to better inform the public about recognizing signs of a “grow op” as well as messaging to inform the grow operators of the City’s goal to make Surrey a “grow op free city”. A total of 21,000 homes received a brochure in this regard. An audit 2 months later found a 40% increase in reported Crime Stopper Tips related to “grow ops”. A further 8,000 homes, used as a control group, have recently received the brochure and the campaign will be audited again in 2012. City staff is also supporting research work related to the development of detection equipment that would assist in detecting illegal “grow ops”.

In Sept. 2011, a marijuana “grow op” working group was formed, co-chaired by the Province and the RCMP. City staff participates in this discussion group, which is tasked with developing strategies to combat the Provincial problem of marijuana grow ops and the public safety issues attached to the illegal cultivation and production of marijuana.

The City continues to work with UBCM and FCM to encourage Health Canada to move forward with reforming the Medical Marijuana Access Regulations (MMAR). In an effort to manage the steadily increasing number of medical marijuana “grow ops”, City Council passed a By-law in June 2011 to require that medical marijuana growers be licensed and comply with certain regulations in relation to the cultivation and production of medical marijuana.

The EFSI Program will continue to operate in 2012 with one team processing 6 to 10 files per week, primarily generated from Hydro consumption data or through RCMP Crime Stopper Tips. The Program remains financially self sufficient, being funded through the fees and charges that are generated under the provisions of the City’s Controlled Substance Bylaw.

CONCLUSION

The EFSI Program has been operating for almost 7 years and has demonstrated its effectiveness in significantly reducing the number of illegal “grow ops” within Surrey with an 81.6% reduction in confirmed grow ops between 2007 and 2011. The Program continues to be self-funded and is contributing significantly to a safer City. Information about the Program has been shared regionally, provincially, nationally, and internationally.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Len Garis". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Len Garis
Fire Chief

LG/jg

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