



Beaver Emergency Services Commission Organizational Review Summary

In May of 2022 Beaver Emergency Services Commission (BESC) completed an Organizational Review. Organizational reviews are a leading practice for all organizations to ensure they are operating in the most effective and efficient manner possible. Our review was completed by Russell Farmer and Associates Consulting Ltd., a leading consulting firm for municipal clients in Alberta.

Methodology

The Organizational Review process included:

- A review of core documents, policies, bylaws, SOGs, tools and templates, and financial documents provided by the Commission or found on the Commission's website as well as other documentation identified during the review.
- A member feedback survey, distributed to all BESC firefighters via email;
- A series of individual interviews conducted with all available members of the Board of Directors, all District Fire Chiefs, municipal CAOs or Acting CAOs.
- Interviews with members of BESC administration, including the Commission's CAO.
- A benchmark study of comparable organizations identifying operational and organizational leading practices.

The resulting findings report and recommendations were provided to the Board of Directors for review, comment, and adoption.

Findings

Arising from the organizational review process were a series of key findings relating to BESC, its Board, and its operational model. These key findings included:

1. BESC's operational model fails to function as an established commission as commissions are intended to operate as a singular entity.
 - Stations are functioning almost independently, with little operational oversight from BESC administration.
 - Stations are competing with one another for resources, leading to animosity.

- District Fire Chiefs feel they can appeal to their representative Commissioner when they do not agree with Board decisions, or when they do not agree with the CAO.
 - The CAO must have full authority regarding the appointment, evaluation, performance management, and termination of Commission staff, including District Fire Chiefs. BESC's organizational hierarchy is complicated by the appointment process for District Fire Chiefs by the Board.
2. The system of establishing individual societies or bank accounts under which each station operates and pays firefighters is highly problematic and negates the purpose of the Commission. All Firefighter should be contracted to BESC, with the Commission having full responsibility for Firefighter compensation, insurance, WCB coverage, tax and EI withholding, and employment records. This does not mean that societies can not exist, merely that they should not be the employer.
 3. Recruitment is occurring at the level of independent stations, without the involvement of BESC administration or any standardization of process.
 - BESC is not supporting the recruitment process
 - BESC does not have contracts or records of employment for individual Firefighters
 - BESC does not receive reporting of new members or maintain contact lists
 4. District Fire Chiefs are dissatisfied with the global budgeting system and the amount of influence they have over the budget and spending for their station. This has led to instances of Stations failing to respect organization procurement processes.
 5. There is currently no centralized records management system for the Commission. It is unclear and inconsistent on what is being retained at stations vs. what is being retained at BESC. A process of records centralization was initiated but has not been completed.
 6. The BESC Office is not providing administrative support to Stations through standardized tools, templates, or processes. District Fire Chiefs expressed spending excessive time on required paperwork, but do not feel adequately supported in completing it.
 7. BESC's current performance management and progressive discipline systems are insufficient to meet best practice, nor are these systems utilized throughout the organization.
 - Performance and behavioural concerns are not being appropriately addressed.
 - Regular performance reviews are not occurring below the level of Regional Emergency Manager.
 - Performance management is overly focussed on annual evaluations.

- No comprehensive Disciplinary Policy exists for the Commission; the process outlined the SOG manual fails to adhere to a best practice disciplinary hierarchy.
 - There is no record at BESC of any historical disciplinary action ever having been taken during the most recent CAO's period of employment.
8. Two sets of job descriptions are currently maintained by the Commission, neither of which is comprehensive nor fully accurate. One is located within the policy framework, as Policy #20.4, and the other is maintained within the updated SOG Manual.
9. The Organizational Review identified substantial issues with BESC's current policy framework, in clarity, content, and organization.
10. The SOGs were recently updated and are reported as imperfect, but sufficient. Responsibility for training in SOG content has been assigned to District Fire Chiefs, whose plans for a rollout vary widely in thoroughness.
- BESC has a responsibility to ensure effective rollout, training and compliance.
 - SOGs are not reliably followed and enforced by all Stations.
11. BESC has taken steps to enhance Health and Safety practices through revisions to their Health and Safety manual and placement of Commissioners on the Joint Worksite Health and Safety Committee.
- BESC is not providing Stations with necessary Health and Safety training or compliance oversight.
 - BESC senior administration is not taking a leadership role on the Joint Worksite Health and Safety Committee. The leadership role on the Committee is being assumed by Commissioners.
12. Communication is a major area of struggle for BESC and is further complicated by an inconsistent organizational hierarchy. Identified communication issues occur between almost all levels of the organization and involve frequency, completeness, and quality. The CAO was indicated as particularly struggling with effective communication.
13. There is currently no unified system of training or orientation for BESC firefighters. Although BESC dictates training requirements through the SOG manual, each station is responsible to independently train its firefighters and provide all necessary materials. Not all stations are able to meet these requirements, nor is training considered a priority by all DFCs.
- BESC is not leveraging its resources to support and oversee standardized training practices.
 - A Project in late 2020 and early 2021 to compile and centralize training records was initiated, then dropped. BESC does not maintain centralized training records for firefighters.

14. The Board of Directors is failing to maintain appropriate role separation, both on an individual basis and as a whole. Commissioners are overly involved in operational matters. This issue is arising, in part, due to a lack of trust in senior administration to effectively complete leadership and administrative functions.
15. The Board's recent establishment of a number of committees, as a means of addressing specific issues within the Commission, encroaches on operational and administrative matters. This is highly problematic, but has been justified by several Commissioners, who believe they must compensate for insufficient staff capacity and competency to adequately fulfill these functions. Especially problematic is the personnel committee
16. Core planning documents are not in place. BESC had an original business plan adopted in 2010, but it was not implemented. BESC does not have a Strategic Plan to guide the organization and provide a unified sense of direction.

BESC developed a 5 year replacement plan for vehicles in 2017 that is based on a template from Beaver County. At this time, capital planning is limited to equipment. An assessment of facilities is underway but has not yet been incorporated into capital planning.

17. The performance review process and format being used by BESC is insufficient. The appraisal does not provide an assessment of performance on the job duties contained in the job description nor does it contain tangible projects or initiatives to be completed during the assessment period. There is an opportunity to review and improve the performance management process to provide more effective and timely guidance to the CAO.
18. There is a perception that the Commission is failing to fulfill its responsibility for the area's Emergency Management Coordinator functions. The DEM's updated Emergency Management Response Plan was rejected by Commission Members. The DEM's 2020-21 performance review identified completing the Emergency Management Response Plan as a core expectation. This means that updating the plan was identified as a performance expectation in 2020. It was reported that the updated plan did not meet legislative requirements. If this is accurate, it brings into question the ability of the DEM to assess legislative requirements.
19. Effective and timely action is not being taken to address items on the Follow-Up Action List.
20. Overall, BESC member survey results reflected firefighters' overwhelmingly positive perceptions of individual DFCs and Stations, but generally negative perceptions of BESC and its influence on station morale and operation.
 - Firefighters do not feel recognized and appreciated by BESC; some even report non-specific instances of derogatory remarks being made by members of administration towards fire stations, inappropriately handled complaints, and unaddressed safety concerns.

- It was unanimously reported that the stations are providing excellent service to residents, meeting service expectations and levels. However, many contend that this level of service existed prior to the existence of BESC, owing to the hard work of DFCs and volunteers, and that BESC only proves to complicate and slow certain processes.
21. A consistent message arising from interviews is that there is a poor working relationship between BESC and member municipalities, especially at the level of senior administration. Representatives of member municipalities report that their engagements with BESC administration are confrontational, obstructionist, or condescending. Member municipalities do not feel they are provided with sufficient information regarding BESC, nor do they feel they have input into decision-making. Building trust with member municipalities and stakeholders should be a key role of BESC's CAO and its Board.
22. It is the responsibility of a Commission to provide an effective orientation for its Commissioners. An assessment of the presentation materials provided to the Board in November, 2021 identifies that the presentation reviews the operation of BESC, its legislation, and policies, and provides an overview of operational matter such as firefighter qualification, recruitment, apparatus, and service coverage. The presentation does not provide any information regarding effective governance, the role of the Board, or role separation. There is an opportunity to address this deficiency.

Recommendations

BESC was provided with the following recommendations to address the findings of the Organizational Review.

1. Adopt an updated Code of Conduct for Commissioners that includes (but is not limited to): a) role separation, b) communication and engagement practices, c) conflict of interest guidelines, d) confidentiality, and e) standards of conduct.
2. Discontinue the practice of DFCs being elected by members and appointed by the Board so that all officer positions are selected and appointed by the CAO, or their designate.
3. Establish a practice whereby all BESC Firefighters are contracted to BESC, and whereby BESC assumes all responsibility for employment practices, insurance, payroll, remittances, and reporting.
4. Establish clear records management practices by policy. Establish centralized records management for documents and records that should be within the custody of BESC as a corporate entity.
 - Centralize all personnel files

5. Review training practices to: a) centralize training records, b) ensure training requirements are being met, c) resource individual stations to complete training in accordance with BESC standards. Assign responsibility for training tracking and oversight to a single individual.
6. Provide stations with standardized tools and templates along with training on BESC tools and processes to create uniform practices. Engage with DFCs to identify priority tools and templates that can support efficient station operations.
7. Implement effective performance management practices through: a) updating BESC's performance management and progressive discipline policy, b) providing standardized tools for completing performance reviews and for documenting incidents and progressive discipline actions, c) providing training to officers on BESC policies and tools along with fundamentals of performance management.
8. Develop and adopt current job descriptions for all positions within BESC.
9. Review and update BESC policies to address the findings of the Organizational Review. Provide training to all officers and firefighters on applicable BESC policies.
10. Develop and implement a Commission-wide training plan for rollout of BESC SOG revisions and new OH&S guidelines. Develop and implement standardized training materials.
11. Prioritize effective communication with all stakeholders including Municipal members and station members. Make effective, positive, and open communication a key responsibility of the CAO, and make it a core component of their performance assessment. Survey BESC members and municipal representatives regularly to assess perceptions of communication from BESC.
12. With the recent departure of BESC's CAO, initiate recruitment for a new CAO/DEM. Discontinue the practice of prioritizing firefighting experience in CAO candidates. Prioritize experience with: a) people management, b) stakeholder relations, c) policy development and compliance, d) budgeting, e) asset management, f) OH&S oversight and compliance, and g) effective board or council reporting and governance.
13. Review current Board Committees, removing committees that are encroaching on operational matters, or amending Committee Terms of Reference to restrict committee operations to governance functions.
14. Complete strategic planning as scheduled in Spring/Summer 2022.
15. Complete the review of facility condition and integrate facilities into a ten-year capital plan that documents major capital projects and purchases.
16. Review and update the Board's performance assessment template and process for performance managing their CAO.
17. Participate in the development of a new Emergency Management Response Plan in full cooperation with member municipalities.

18. Prioritize effective top-down engagement with Stations and Station Members to support an understanding of the role of BESC and the value that BESC provides to individual municipalities and to the region. Integrate positive messaging regarding BESC and BESC service Members into communications. Survey Members annual to track perceptions of BESC and identify opportunities to improve volunteer relations.
19. Develop an orientation package and presentation for Commissioners that includes effective commission governance, Code of Conduct requirements as well as an overview of BESC operations.
20. Document a budget process that clearly defines: a) the role of DFCs in providing input into the budget process, b) the role of the CAO in consolidating and approving budget requests from DFC into BESC's budget proposal to the Board, and c) the role of the Board in reviewing and approving BESC's budget.
21. Once a new CAO has been engaged, facilitate a meeting with regional CAOs to clarify expectations and to encourage a positive working relationship. Make regular, positive engagement with municipal representatives a core component of the CAO's job description and a core component of their performance assessment.