

Report: New West firehalls plagued by poor morale. By Stanley Tromp.
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Conflicts between the union and management at the New Westminster fire department have damaged morale and left both sides accusing each other of unprofessional behaviour, says a consultant's report.

"The leadership of the union is perceived by management and the city to be 'aggressive' and 'adversarial,'" says the report, commissioned by city administrator Paul Daminato in 2004.

On the other hand, it says, some union members called the leadership style "para-military" and "manipulative/coercive," and many called for a more collaborative and democratic style.

The union complaints include criticism about an "extremely autocratic, rigid and inflexible" management style, and "a concern that the organization of training has at times 'left the city in danger' with respect to coverage or response time," says the report.

The report was aimed at identifying "the tension/conflict that exists" within the New Westminster Fire and Rescue Services, and to look for solutions.

Stamped confidential, it was written by management consultant Stacey Holloway, who interviewed 40 people in 2004.

Assistant fire service director Jim Cook rejected the concerns about training leaving the city in danger, saying "all of our training allows for acceptable response times."

And in an interview, Daminato said much has changed since the report was written.

"We've accomplished quite a bit. We've been working with a third party consultant to resolve some of the grievances. We also added a new training officer, a union position. But there's always more one can do."

Fire Chief Carl Nepstad did not return phone calls. Kevin Murray, president of Local 256 of the International Association of Fire Fighters was away on holidays and could not be reached.

But Mayor Wayne Wright scoffed at the report's strongest language. "That's just rhetoric," he said. "I think we're way past that now. People are working well together.

"If it was so bad, people could quit to move elsewhere, but they're not."

And Coun. Lorrie Williams said in an interview that fire chief Nepstad has told her "the two sides are talking, and the mood is lightening up a bit. I really believe that everybody wants a solution to this."

Greg Simpkin, secretary of the Firefighters Union local 256, said: "We are working towards resolving the differences through a consultant, Irene Holden, and it's coming along."

The city tried hard to keep the report from public view. After a freedom of information request for a copy of it was made last year, the city appealed in a judicial review in B.C. Supreme Court to block release.

Over the past year, female firefighters in Richmond and Burnaby have complained of gender-based harassment and discrimination, but the report makes no mention of that subject in New Westminster.

Three of the city's 81 firefighters are women, and Cook says the department has strong anti-harassment policies.

The report does, however, cite a wide range of other longstanding problems, saying that for this reason, "It is believed by some, that the division is 'crumbling'

. . . The current situation cannot continue. The workplace is clearly reportedly 'unhealthy' and very distressing for many . . . There are challenges interpersonally. There are reports of unresolved conflict, loss of friendships, 'unprofessional behaviour' on the part of both management and employees including reports of 'threats and intimidation.' "