

A Sustainable Fire Service:

A Taxpayer Perspective on Owen Sound's Path to a Composite Model

Introduction

For more than two decades, the cost of providing fire protection in Owen Sound has risen far faster than population growth and, in many years, inflation. We recently learned that firefighter wages and benefits will soon total **\$5.5 million** annually, placing growing pressure on this community of only 21,612 residents. The recent arbitration decision—which also awarded **\$1.55 million** in retroactive compensation and required the City to maintain its complement of 29 full-time firefighters—has brought a long-standing challenge into sharper focus.

From a taxpayer's standpoint, the question is no longer whether change is needed, but how the City can achieve it responsibly while maintaining public safety. The City's four-year effort to persuade an arbitrator that it could not afford the existing model was unlikely to succeed, given the long history of Ontario interest arbitrators rejecting municipal "**ability-to-pay**" arguments. Instead of relying on a legal strategy with limited prospects, the City should have begun planning a gradual transition toward a composite fire service years ago.

Many municipalities across Ontario operate composite fire departments that combine career and paid-on-call firefighters. These systems show that it is possible to maintain strong public safety outcomes while improving financial sustainability. Moving forward will require disciplined leadership, long-term planning, and a commitment to structural reform rather than temporary fixes.

Can Our Community Continue to Afford the Current Model?

Increasingly, the answer appears to be no.

Based on the City's audited financial statements—the most accurate measure of actual spending—the cost of protective services rose from **\$13.2 million** in 2011 to **\$20.8 million** in 2024, an increase of **57.4 percent**. During the same period, Owen Sound's population declined slightly from **21,688** to **21,612** residents, a decrease of **0.4 percent**.

As a result, the cost of protective services per resident increased from approximately **\$607** in 2011 to **\$961** in 2024, a rise of **58.3 percent**. These costs will climb further once the most recent arbitration award is fully implemented.

Audited financial statements are the only reliable measure of actual expenditures. Budgets reflect planned spending; audited statements reflect what taxpayers ultimately pay.

Unfortunately, the City only releases these statements nearly two years after the year-end date, and its reporting does not separate police and fire costs, limiting the public's ability to evaluate the cost of each service. Greater transparency through separate reporting would improve accountability and public understanding.

Why the City's Affordability Argument Was Unlikely to Succeed

Ontario's interest arbitration system is designed to maintain compensation comparability among fire services across the province. Arbitrators typically place significant weight on:

- Wage settlements in comparable municipalities
- Historical compensation trends
- Recruitment and retention considerations, and
- Public safety requirements

Municipal affordability arguments have historically faced steep challenges. Unless a municipality is in severe financial distress, arbitrators have been reluctant to allow compensation levels to diverge significantly from comparable communities. Owen Sound's reliance on an affordability argument, therefore, faced major obstacles from the outset. The eventual outcome—a retroactive award and increased ongoing compensation—was predictable.

The lesson for taxpayers is clear: arbitration rarely produces **structural change**. Municipalities seeking long-term affordability must reform **how services are delivered**.

The Case for a Composite Fire Service

A composite fire service blends full-time and paid-on-call firefighters to deliver emergency services cost-effectively while maintaining public safety. This model is widely used across Ontario and Canada, especially in municipalities similar in size to Owen Sound.

- Barrie reduced its full-time complement through attrition while expanding a robust part-time roster.
- Midland moved from a full-time model to a composite service over a decade, lowering costs and improving flexibility.
- St. Thomas implemented modern tiered medical response protocols, reducing call volume and avoiding unnecessary staffing increases.
- Stratford adopted shared services and civilianized non-emergency roles, reducing administrative overhead.

These municipalities did not wait for arbitration to solve their problems. They acted early, built long-term plans, and implemented reforms gradually and responsibly. Unlike Owen Sound, these communities recognize an important reality:

Modern fire departments respond to far fewer structure fires than they did decades ago. Much of today's workload consists of medical assists, alarms, motor vehicle collisions, and public service calls.

This changing risk profile allows many communities to safely use a blended staffing model.

A Roadmap for Transition

Transitioning to a composite model cannot happen overnight. A successful shift would likely require five to ten years and should include the following steps:

Phase 1: Independent Review (Years 1–2)

- Commission an independent fire services review
- Conduct a comprehensive community risk assessment
- Analyze call volumes, response times, and staffing needs
- Identify opportunities for alternative service delivery

Phase 2: Build Paid-on-Call Capacity (Years 2–4)

- Recruit and train paid-on-call firefighters
- Establish clear performance standards
- Integrate paid-on-call personnel into operations and training

Phase 3: Attrition-Based Reduction (Years 3–10)

- Reduce full-time staffing through retirements rather than layoffs
- Evaluate vacancies before replacement
- Transition selected positions to paid-on-call staffing where appropriate

Phase 4: Negotiate Structural Reform (Future Collective Agreements)

Future negotiations should focus on:

- Greater staffing flexibility
- Cross-staffing apparatus

- Expanded use of paid-on-call firefighters
- Alternative deployment models

Structural reform—not wage restraint—offers the best opportunity for long-term affordability.

Protecting Public Safety While Protecting Taxpayers

This discussion is not a criticism of firefighters. They perform essential and often dangerous work on behalf of the community. The issue is ensuring that fire protection remains financially sustainable for future generations. A service that becomes unaffordable ultimately pressures all other municipal priorities, including infrastructure, recreation, housing, and community services.

Public safety and fiscal responsibility are not competing values. A well-designed composite model aims to achieve both.

Conclusion: A Call for Responsible Leadership

The recent arbitration decision was not a failure of firefighters or of the arbitration system. It highlighted the limits of relying on affordability arguments within a framework that places greater emphasis on comparability and public safety.

The path forward is clear. Owen Sound must begin the long-term work of transitioning toward a modern, evidence-based composite fire service. Other municipalities have shown that such transitions can be implemented safely, gradually, and responsibly. With strong leadership, transparent communication, and a commitment to fiscal sustainability, Owen Sound can do the same.

Taxpayers deserve nothing less.