



City of Richmond

Report to Committee

To Community Safety - March 11, 2008

To: Community Safety Committee

Date: February 28, 2008

From: Phyllis L. Carlyle
General Manager

File: 09-5140-01/2008-Vol 01

Re: Electrical & Fire Safety Inspection Program Update

Staff Recommendations

That the success of Richmond's Electrical and Fire Safety Inspection Program be re-assessed in October, 2008 after the one year pilot project is completed.

Phyllis L. Carlyle
General Manager, Law & Community Safety (4104)

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ROUTED TO:	CONCURRENCE	CONCURRENCE OF GENERAL MANAGER	
Budgets	Y <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> N <input type="checkbox"/>		
R.C.M.P.	Y <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> N <input type="checkbox"/>		
Community Bylaws	Y <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> N <input type="checkbox"/>		
REVIEWED BY TAG	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>	REVIEWED BY CAO	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>

Staff Report

Origin

In August 2007, a one-year pilot Electrical and Fire Safety Inspection program (EFSIP) was introduced in Richmond, with progress reports to be prepared after six months and one year of operation. This report provides a six-month program update and future program direction recommendations.

Richmond's program was introduced under the following premises:

1. That abnormally high electrical consumption is an indicator that the electrical system integrity may have been compromised, resulting in potentially serious fire/life safety and property loss consequences.
2. That those communities who adopt the EFSIP are likely to be seen as a less desirable place in which to operate residential grow-ops.
3. That the special safety inspection fee charged would recover the program delivery costs.

Findings Of Fact

Inspection Activities and Findings

A typical inspection program involves a Fire Inspector and RCMP member who post inspection notices with 48 hours notice to the resident. Then the Fire Inspector, Electrical Inspector and two RCMP members return for the inspection after the 48 hours notice. Typically, two days are spent issuing notices and the following two days conducting the inspections.

The table below summarizes Richmond's EFSIP inspection activities and findings from August 2007 to January 2008.

Inspections Conducted	Evidence of Grow Op or Past Grow Op	7 Day Repair Notice Issued	Unsafe, "Do Not Occupy" Notice Issued	Hydro Disconnections Requested	Inspection Fee Not Applied
126	64	34	30	25	68

All of the 64 residential inspections conducted where evidence of a grow op or past grow op was found resulted in the issuance of a safety repair or no occupancy notice. The degree of unsafe building and living conditions in the grow-op premises varied greatly, as did the value of the homes. Of the 64 confirmed grow ops, 23 were found in multi-family dwellings and 41 in single-family dwellings. None of the 64 grow-ops have reappeared on the high electrical consumption inspection list.

Some innocent rental occupants were unaware that their rental home had been a previous grow-op. Through British Columbia's Residential Tenancy Act, the landlord is responsible to ensure the property meets "health, safety and housing standards established by law". In order to ensure standards are met through the Act, the landlord may enter the property with proper notice to inspect their premise. Consequently, even if the landlord is unaware the home had a previous grow-op, an inspection fee is issued.

Of the 62 inspections conducted where there was no evidence of a previous grow-op, the EFSI team were provided an opportunity to review the high electrical consumption with the homeowner, owner's representative, or occupant to determine if any fire/life safety issues were present in the dwelling. A variety of potentially serious fire/life safety issues were discovered, including:

- Unusually high number of major appliances present primarily associated with illegal lodgings.
- Suspected faulty hydro meters.
- Presence of potentially dangerous fire and electrical safety hazards, including:
 - Unsafe storage/placement of flammable materials near wall heaters, hot water tanks, or furnaces.
 - Questionable alterations to gas connections.
 - Blocked egresses.
 - Overloaded electrical outlets.

The identification and reporting to Community Bylaws of the illegal and unsafe boarding and living situations is important to preventing the potential loss of lives in the case of fire.

The feedback from those inspected who did not have evidence of grow-op activity has been, for the most part, positive. The Fire Inspector has found that the occupants have been genuinely pleased with the professional and courteous electrical and fire safety information and advice provided to them. They were pleased to learn that the special safety inspection fee did not apply to them.

Other EFSI Programs

Richmond's EFSI program, along with the others communities, has been modelled after the City of Surrey's. Each community may have slight differences, however overall the programs and resources allocated are comparable.

The following table sets out the cities with active Electrical and Fire Safety Inspection Programs and their average inspections per month. All the communities allocated similar resources to the EFSI team. Richmond averaged 21 inspections per month during this reporting period.

City	Population Est.	Program Start Date	Average Inspections per month
Richmond	185,400 (2006)	July 30, 2007	21 inspections/month (126/6 months)
Coquitlam	120,000 (2006)	May 28, 2007	18 inspections/month (128/7 months)
Langley Township	103,000 (2007)	May 14, 2007	23 inspections/month (162/7 months)
Abbotsford	130,000 (2006)	May, 2005	16 inspections/month (175/11 months)
Pitt Meadows	16,000 (2006)	February, 2007	4 inspections/month (38/11 months)
Surrey	436,400 (2006)	April 2005	28 inspections/month (619/11 months/2 teams)

Below are inspection fees for the other communities.

City	Special Safety Inspection Fee	Bylaw Fines
Richmond	\$3,500	N/A
Abbotsford	\$3,500	N/A
Coquitlam	\$5,000	\$500
Langley Township	\$3,700	N/A
Pitt Meadows	\$3,000	\$150
Surrey	\$2,730	N/A
Mission	\$5,200	Under Review
Proposed new program	\$4,900 + \$300 Admin/Overhead	

The number of lower mainland cities introducing their own EFSIP continues to grow, with four new cities (Chilliwack, Langley City, Mission, and Port Coquitlam) launching programs in early 2008. By working together cities are helping to reduce the risk of structural fires and electrical hazards and improve neighbourhood safety, in part due to the displacement of residential grow-ops.

Richmond is in contact with other cities and is actively working together to share information regarding existing and/or new trends and fieldwork observations. In November 2007, Richmond hosted an information-sharing forum with existing EFSIP teams and cities considering introducing the program. Langley Township is hosting the next forum on March 7, 2008.

Analysis

The number of high residential consumption locations received from BC Hydro is declining in Richmond and is the case with other program cities. The following are suspected to be the influencing factors:

- Grow-ops are locating to cities/countries without these programs, following the path of least resistance.
- Grow-ops are relocating to commercial or industrial areas.
- Grow operators are reducing their electrical consumption in a variety of ways in order to stay undetected.

Financial Impact

To ensure the program continues to enhance the safety of the City and continues to be 100% cost recovery, minor program adjustments are required:

1. Enhance public education on the program.

The identification and reporting to Community Bylaws or Fire Rescue of the illegal and unsafe boarding and living situations, and suspected grow-ops is important to prevent the potential loss of lives in the case of fire. However, the general public, landlords, and business owners must be aware of what to look for and where to bring concerns. Therefore, it will be necessary for RFR to enhance public education opportunities and awareness programs. This will be accomplished through Richmond Fire-Rescues Public Education and Community Relations Office. Enhancing public education will maintain the number of inspections to ensure public safety and maintain cost recovery.

2. Reallocate resources to ensure cost recovery.

In the last six months the EFSIT Program has experienced a deficit. By reallocating a small portion of the Fire Inspectors time to Fire Prevention the program should operate with a slight surplus at the end of the twelve month trial period.

ELECTRICAL AND FIRE SAFETY INSPECTION TEAM

Revenues & Expenditures Aug 1, 2007-January 31, 2008

REVENUE			
Special Safety Inspections invoiced * (58 billed @ \$3,500)	\$203,000	Projection @ \$3,500	\$203,000
	\$203,000		\$203,000
EXPENSES			
RFR Salaries & Benefits	\$97,427		\$81,075
RCMP Salaries	\$73,337		\$73,337
Electrical Safety Contractor	\$23,940		\$23,940
Equipment & Tools **	\$24,295		\$0
Leased Vehicle	\$11,035		\$11,035
Materials & Supplies	\$7,412		\$7,412
	\$236,446		\$196,799
NET REVENUE (LOSS)	(\$33,446)		\$6,201

*The amount collected to date is \$150,500: \$35,000 has been added to the property taxes of the subject properties, and \$17,500 has recently been invoiced for a total of \$203,000.

** includes one time costs of thermal imaging camera, radios, computers and hydro consumption analysis software

Conclusions

The inspection findings to date reveal that abnormally high electrical consumption in residential dwellings can signal the presence of fire and life safety concerns with the potential for property loss and personal injuries, whether or not grow-ops are present.

Communities with EFSI programs continue to expand under the premise that the program acts as a deterrent to the establishment of residential grow-ops and criminals are likely to follow the path of least resistance.

In order for EFSI program to continue and be financially viable, the public education program will be enhanced and a portion of the Fire Inspector's time reallocated to Fire Prevention.



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