

Foothills 911 centre gets \$78,000 from Province

Foothills: New cellphone fee paying off for organization

By Don Patterson

Editor

Officials with the organization responsible for answering 911 calls in the foothills are hopeful a new cell phone fee will help ease the financial burden on the area's municipalities.

The Foothills Regional Emergency Services Commission (FRESC) received \$78,526 from the provincial government for the first three months after a 44-cent monthly fee was added to every cell phone bill in Alberta starting April 1.

FRESC chairperson Suzanne Oel said the funds could help ease the financial cost to municipalities

that have contracts with the organization to handle 911 service.

"This is certainly for us helpful that it will take some of the burden away from our contracts and help us financially so we don't have to increase the rates for those types of items," she said.

FRESC owns and operates foothills 911 services. It operates a call centre at the Oilfields Hospital, dispatching calls for municipal fire departments and forwarding calls for police and ambulances to dispatch centres elsewhere.

Revenues from the cell phone fee can be put towards the call centre in specific areas, to upgrade



SUZANNE OEL

FRESC Chairperson

software, and hardware, pay for staffing and training and implementing new technology such as text and video messaging.

It's up to individual call centres to decide how to use the funding.

Oel said FRESC intends to use the funds to improve and enhance technology

in its Black Diamond call centre.

"We're very pleased and hopeful that this additional money will help cover those important upgrades," she said.

Wireless companies collect the fee on behalf of the provincial government, which then distributes the revenues to 911 call centres.

All call centres receive a base payment of \$18,000 every three months, as well as an additional payment based on the percentage of the province's population served by the centre.

The Province is paying out \$2 million for the first three months after the fee was implemented. The provincial government esti-

mates the fee will generate \$13.5 million for 911 centres in the 2014-'15 fiscal year, and \$14.8 million for the 2015-'16 fiscal year.

Oel said FRESC estimates it will receive around \$300,000 in the 2014-'15 fiscal year. She said the organization is waiting a few more months to see if its estimate is correct and will then determine what it will mean for the organization's \$1.14 million annual budget.

"Right now we're just looking a three months," she said.

Oel said FRESC also hopes the fee will help cover declining revenues from a similar 911 fee charged for landline phones.

The Province already charges a 44 cent per month fee on all landline telephones and this fee will remain the same. However, revenues from this fee are dropping as almost 70 per cent of all 911 calls are being made by cell phones and this number is rising.

Emily Woods, press secretary for Alberta's municipal affairs minister, said the fee will help Alberta's emergency call centres upgrade their technology in a number of areas, such as making it possible for people to send in 911 calls by text, as well as sending pictures and videos.

"It could mean upgrading to allow for those kinds of advancements," she said.