 Committee Report

# Report PDR-PCD-38-14

**To**: Chair Wright and Members of the Planning and Community Development Committee

**From**: Carolyn Bailey, Planning Technician

 **Randy Scherzer, Director of Planning and Development**

**Meeting Date:** November 13, 2014

**Subject: Unintentional “pocket dial” calls and non-emergency “drive-by” calls – Grey Bruce Landowners Association correspondence**

**Status**: Recommendation adopted by Committee as presented per Resolution PCD121-14; Endorsed by County Council per Resolution CC163-14;

## Recommendation(s)

**WHEREAS correspondence has been received from the Grey Bruce Landowners Association which outlines concerns with unintentional ‘pocket dials’ calls and non-emergency ‘drive-by’ calls;**

**NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT Report PDR-PCD-38-14 be received as further background information regarding the correspondence received from the Grey Bruce Landowners Association;**

**AND THAT staff be directed to send a copy of the staff report and the Grey Bruce Landowners Association’s letter to the Ontario 911 Advisory Board and the National Emergency Number Association;**

**AND FURTHER THAT the County requests that the National Emergency Numbers Association and the Ontario 911 Advisory Board continue their public education campaigns to raise public awareness of the issues caused by ‘pocket dial’ calls;**

**AND FURTHER THAT staff be directed to obtain any educational material produced by the National Emergency Numbers Association and the Ontario 911 Advisory Board regarding this matter and share this information on the County’s website and through social media.**

## Background

A letter from the Grey Bruce Landowners Association outlines two concerns with cell phone calls to 911; unintentional “pocket dial” calls and non-emergency “drive by” calls.

The Association describes three issues with the above concerns; misuse of emergency personnel’s time to investigate “pocket dial” calls, the cost to taxpayers for that time, and a fine to home owners for false alarms made by a “drive by” caller.

The Association provides a list of items to fix these issues; a fine for “pocket dial” callers, 911 operators to acquire name and addresses from all callers, 911 operators to make contact with cell phone callers prior to dispatching emergency response, and a campaign to ask people to verify that the event is an actual emergency prior to making a 911 call.

The letter concludes with a request to the CRTC to make recommendations to the government to resolve the situation.

### PUBLIC SAFTEY ANSWERING POINT (PSAP)

Suzanne Bell-Matheson of the Owen Sound Police Services, the primary PSAP for Grey County, outlined their protocol. If a caller requires ambulance, they don’t seek the name and address of the caller, but simply downstream the call to the ambulance communications centre as soon as possible.

If a caller requires fire or police, their first priority is confirming the location and the details of the emergency. Then they request the name and address of the caller; however it is not mandatory that they provide it and callers often refuse.

All calls are treated as an emergency until all efforts have been exhausted to indicate otherwise. It is then broken down based on the type of call they are dealing with (landline/cell phone/unintentional call/hang-up) at the time.

The communicator will attempt to call back the number in an effort to determine if it is an emergency whether it is from a landline or a cell phone. They will attempt to verify the address, and conduct an investigation based on local police records to determine if there are any hazards associated to the location that would assist in a safe response of emergency personnel. Then they create a call for service and dispatch police. If the ability exists they will leave a message identifying themselves as a 911 operator and the importance of someone calling them back. If there is an answer or a call back, the communicator will update the police that were dispatched and advise them contact was made with the caller and the results. The communicator must be mindful at all times that the caller may be under duress and structure their inquiries accordingly.

There are circumstances when the call is received from a cell phone that they are further required to contact the wireless service provider to obtain subscriber information, call the residential phone number of the cell subscriber and try to ascertain who has access to the phone, and where they might be (possible destination). They will dispatch an officer to the most appropriate location and when contact is made update them accordingly.

If it is an unintentional or misdial call, these are identified as such when the communicator can hear background noise and have listened sufficiently to determine there is no indication of an emergency situation. This could also be when a caller stays on the line and admits to the error. Communicators must pay close attention to the tone, voice inflection and word choice of the caller as additional evidence may be gleaned to assist with determining whether or not there is an emergency. If it is confirmed as a misdial or unintentional dial, then no further action is required and police are not dispatched.

There are circumstances wherein the callers are not able to respond to the communicators due to duress or threat of safety, so whenever they have a 911 call it is imperative that the communicators take the appropriate steps to ensure that the proper emergency response is provided, keeping in mind the safety of the caller and the responding emergency personnel. If the situation cannot be determined to be an actual emergency, the communicators will err on the side of caution and send police.

If a caller is calling from a psychiatric facility or a nursing home, the call is treated as a genuine call for service and an officer is dispatched to investigate.

Mrs. Bell-Matheson compiled data to find that 54% of all 911 calls that were answered in 2013 came from wireless phones.

### NATIONAL EMERGENCY NUMBER ASSOCIATION (NENA)

Information was obtained from Linda Dickson and Sue Dawson, representatives of NENA Ontario. They agree that “pocket dial” calls are a real issue and a real concern. They stated that education on the matter is a good first step. NENA has been doing public education on this for a few years, but since it is a mobile society, they can’t guarantee that they are reaching everyone travelling through our municipalities.

*ONTARIO 911 ADVISORY BOARD (OAB)*

The OAB has partnered with the Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police to raise public awareness of “pocket dial” calls. Police services across Ontario are seeing an increase in “pocket dial” and unintentional 911 calls, which represent a serious threat to public safety and negatively impact police resources. The current chair of the board, Nancy Banks, estimated that approximately 60% of 911 calls are not emergencies. Ms. Banks stated that there has been a lot of public education to reduce this.

Ms. Banks explained that the CRTC regulates the telecommunications service providers, not the emergency response agencies.

She said that invoices that are being issued are not from 911, but from the individual agencies who responded.

Ms. Banks doesn’t think it’s reasonable to suggest that people verify that an emergency is occurring before calling 9-1-1. That could delay a response when there is in fact an emergency, and may put the caller in danger.

*FIRE SERVICES*

Information was collected from area fire departments. The Blue Mountains Acting Fire Chief A. J. Lake agreed that human perceived emergencies can be a nuisance and that many of these are also a result of neighbor disputes. He stated that it is very difficult if not impossible and very time consuming to collect user fees from nonresidents.

Hanover Fire Chief Ken Roseborough stated that the Town of Hanover has a by-law to cover false alarms. They allow 3 false alarms per calendar year. After that the owner is invoiced $300 if a solution has not been found. They do not bill “drive by” callers.

Chatsworth Fire Chief Mike Givens stated that while they can invoice a property owner for not having a proper burn permit, they do not typically invoice cell callers unless they can track them down.

Sue Dawson, Manager of Barrie Fire Communications Centre was concerned that if a 911 Communicator were to be required to acquire additional information, this would potentially slow down the response of the responding downstream agency, whether it is Police, Fire or EMS, which could have a negative impact on the outcome of the emergency situation.

Based on the information gathered, staff are recommending that the County work with NENA and the OAB to share any educational material produced by these organizations through the County website and through social media.

## Financial / Staffing / Legal / Information Technology Considerations

There are no financial, staffing, legal, or information technology considerations.

## Link to Strategic Goals / Priorities

This discussion is in keeping with the County Strategic Plan: Goal 5 – listening and working together and Goal 6 – achieving excellence in governance and service.

## Attachments

Letter from Grey Bruce Landowners Association

Respectfully submitted by,

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Randy Scherzer
Director of Planning and Development

