

A Brief History of the Sasamat Volunteer Fire Department

In 1976, the newly elected Director for GVRD's Electoral Area 'B' (Verna Barrett) realized that the residents of Anmore, Ioco, Belcarra and Bedwell Bay needed to work collaboratively together if they were ever going to control their own destiny. In order to demonstrate that our communities would be stronger as a "united entity", rather than continuing to fight battles with the *Greater Vancouver Regional District* (GVRD) on an individual basis, Verna recognized that creation of a fire department would bring needed community cohesion and focus.

Verna researched the legal mechanisms for creation of a fire protection specified area, and identified the political hurdles that needed to be overcome. Verna recognized that people would not be interested in paying additional taxes simply to save their house or life, and proceeded to show that reduced fire insurance premiums would offset the tax levy needed to create a volunteer fire department. A committee representing the communities of Anmore, Belcarra, Bedwell Bay and Ioco was established to study the proposal and communicate with the residents.

"So then all I had to do was find extra funding rather than just relying on tax revenues. When I talked to representatives of the *Imperial Oil Co.*, they were enthusiastic and saw it as a way to protect themselves against overtures from Port Moody — who wanted to add *Imperial Oil Co.* and Ioco Townsite to their municipal tax base — if it could be shown to the *Ministry of Municipal Affairs* in Victoria that Ioco was contributing in a substantial way to Electoral Area 'B', and thereby helping to delay the eventual amalgamation of Ioco with Port Moody. Imperial Oil then assigned a staff member — Jack Harrison — to assist me in any way possible. Jack noted that the *Imperial Oil Co.* refinery would be an excellent tax base for us as long as it was part of the proposed fire district." — Verna Barrett

As it turned-out, the *Ioco Townsite* and *Imperial Oil Co.* refinery comprised 90% of the assessment base for the *Sasamat Volunteer Fire Department* (SVFD) specified area when it was incorporated in 1977.

Verna next talked to the *Provincial Fire Marshall's Office*, who toured the proposed area with her and pointed-out concerns such as the inadequate height of chimneys relative to roof ridges on some older houses as well as the close proximity of propane tanks to residences at the two trailer courts in Anmore. The *Provincial Fire Marshall* also stressed that in order to maintain a Class '3' fire insurance rating, no major piece of equipment could be older than 10 years.

Verna also consulted the *Water Rights Branch* in Victoria to explore the concept of incorporating under them, rather than the *Greater Vancouver Regional District* (GVRD) — in order to prevent the *GVRD Parks Department* from somehow crippling or killing the proposed fire department — and found them to be very helpful.

Incorporating under the *Water Rights Act* also would give the residents living within the "specified area" the right to select their own *Board of Trustees* from the local area without having to have GVRD board members involved in making decisions in something so small (to the GVRD) as a volunteer fire department. The *Water Rights Branch* informed Verna that the proposed "specified area" would have to be contiguous — Anmore would have to be "joined" to the Bedwell Bay and Belcarra areas — in order to meet the *Insurance Advisory Association* and *Provincial Fire Standards*.

This was a problem because the *Ministry of Forestry* was responsible for protecting the large area between the two residential areas including protection of the *B.C. Hydro* powerline right-of-way — the electrical transmission lines from the Peace and Columbia River hydro-generating stations — which serviced the Lower Mainland.

“I had to talk to the *Burrard Thermal Generating Station* officials to find a way around this problem. I had no friends at *B.C. Hydro* because previously, when they had asked permission of Pollution Control [which in the Lower Mainland was a function of the GVRD] to pollute the air with their proposal to burn Bunker ‘C’ fuel oil at the *Burrard Thermal Plant* to generate electricity to ship to the USA, I had led the fight at the GVRD Board to prevent this, which ultimately resulted in the *Burrard Thermal Plant* losing its license to operate five of their six generators burning natural gas — let alone Bunker ‘C’ — for two years.” – Verna Barrett

The CEO of the *Burrard Thermal Generating Station* [Art Zink] was adamantly opposed to becoming part of the proposed tax base since *B.C. Hydro* already paid an annual grant *in lieu* of taxes to Electoral Area ‘B’ (although very small).

“When I pointed-out to him [Art Zink] that, if the ‘specified area’ was approved by the tax payers, *B.C. Hydro* would no longer be eligible for the protection supplied by the *Ministry of Forestry*, and obviously the new fire department would need extra funds to purchase all-terrain fire equipment to service their right-of-way. He then re-considered and offered \$50,000 worth of nylon fire hoses and special fogging nozzles on condition I not make the offer public, and that I cause no more problems for *B.C. Hydro*. Naturally, I accepted his kind offer.” – Verna Barrett

Verna next spent several days at the *Maple Ridge Volunteer Fire Department* to look at their department to get some idea of exactly what equipment was necessary to service an area without hydrants. They were very helpful in regard to annual operating budgets, as was the *Lions Bay Volunteer Fire Department*.

Mayor Ian Young volunteered the assistance of Port Moody’s fire department for the training of volunteers, and Jack Harrison (an *Imperial Oil Co.* employee) helped Verna prepare a capital budget for the two fire halls, fire truck, tank truck, volunteer uniforms and other equipment, as well as the proposed annual operating budget. With fiscal matters in hand, all that was needed was to identify some Crown Land for the two fire halls. Fortunately, the site of the original school in Anmore — at the southeast corner of Sunnyside and East Roads — had been given back to the Province, and there was plenty of Crown Land adjacent to Bedwell Bay Road.

“Sooner or later I had to bring the proposal to the GVRD Board since Electoral Area ‘B’ was technically a ‘ward’ — rather like a colony — and any official or financial actions we might wish to take had to have their approval as required by the *Municipal Act*. At the GVRD Executive Committee meeting our proposal was approved, and the Chairman of the Board, Mayor Art Phillips [City of Vancouver], even got his motion to grant \$10,000 to the new fire department passed — should it come to fruition. Unfortunately, the GVRD Finance Administrator somehow managed to prevent this from happening. When the motion to the GVRD Board from the Executive Committee was also approved by the GVRD Board, staff was instructed to prepare for the referendum. Two people were hired to sign-up names for the voter’s list. Unfortunately, the person hired in Anmore, wife of a political opponent, somehow ‘forgot’ to contact the residents of the two trailer parks which just happened to comprise the bulk of the Anmore population. When I discovered this, I went-out and got the names of the trailer park residents added to the voters list and, needless to say, took the opportunity to point-out the positive aspects of having a volunteer fire department.” – Verna Barrett

In September 1976, Verna Barrett officially established a 'Fire Committee' to investigate the feasibility of establishing a volunteer fire department. In addition to herself as the Director for Electoral Area 'B', the 'Fire Committee' consisted of representatives from the *Belcarra Ratepayers' Association*, the *Woodhaven–Bedwell Bay Property Owners' Association*, the *Eaglecrest Farmers' Institute* in Anmore and the *Loco Townsite*.

On October 27th, 1976, the GVRD Board gave three readings to Bylaw No. 237: "A by-law to authorize the provision of fire protection services to a specified area within Electoral Area 'B', and further to provide for the acquisition of land and firefighting equipment, and the operation and maintenance of fire protection services." On December 23rd, 1976, the *Inspector of Municipalities* approved the bylaw, and on December 28th the GVRD placed advertisements in the local press advising the public that a poll was to be held on January 22nd, 1977, at the *Loco Elementary School*.

In early January 1977, the *Woodhaven–Bedwell Bay Property Owners' Association* distributed the 'Fire Committee' report to the Bedwell Bay community along with a covering letter that gave a strong endorsement from the association's executive on the proposal to establish the *Sasamat Fire Protection Specified Area*. The study found that because of the tax base contributed by the *Imperial Oil Co.*, the formation of a fire protection area was not only feasible but also highly advantageous.

On January 18th, 1977, a public information meeting was held at the *Loco Community Hall* to discuss the recommendations of the 'Fire Committee', and on January 22nd the referendum to establish the SVFD passed with 251 votes in favour (75%) and 84 votes opposed. On January 26th, 1977, the GVRD Board gave fourth and final reading to Bylaw No. 237.

On February 23rd, 1977, the GVRD Board gave four readings to Bylaw 243: "A by-law for the management of the 'Sasamat Fire Protection Specified Area' Volunteer Fire Department". This bylaw established the operating parameters for the SVFD that included a borrowing limit of \$150,000 (to construct two fire halls and purchase a new pumper truck) and the composition of the *SVFD Board of Trustees* that would be appointed by the GVRD Board of Directors.

On March 9th, 1977, Verna Barrett called to order the inaugural meeting of the *SVFD Board of Trustees*, which was held at the *Loco Community Hall*. The task before the Trustees was huge, and the large amount work required that the Trustees meet twice per month for the next two years to get the fire department fully operational. Building on the work of the pre-referendum 'Fire Committee', the new *SVFD Board of Trustees* immediately established a series of committees to address key areas of focus.

In May 1977, the *SVFD Board of Trustees* purchased a 1952 LaFrance fire truck from *Imperial Oil Co.* for the sum of \$1.00 and in July 1977 purchased a 1967 Ford fuel-oil truck with a 1500-gallon tank. Both pieces of equipment were initially stored in an 8' x 8' x 28' plywood structure kept on Harry Anderson's property in Anmore.

During the same period, volunteer fire fighters were being recruited, and on May 16th, 1977, the first organizational meeting of the SVFD volunteers was held at the *Loco Community Hall*. About 30 volunteers were present and anxious to get into a training program as soon as possible. The first of the volunteers started training at the Port Moody fire hall that same month.

The volunteer fire fighters also incorporated as an association under the *Society Act*, and on February 21st, 1978, the *SVFD Board of Trustees* accepted the recommendation of the volunteer fire fighters and appointed John Doerksen (Bedwell Bay) as SVFD Fire Chief on an interim basis until August 1st, 1978, with Norm Simpson (Anmore) and Dave Hunter (Belcarra) as Assistant Chiefs.

Following the referendum success, Verna Barrett initiated application for the Crown Land site at the southeast corner of Sunnyside and East Roads in February 1977. Locating a suitable fire hall site in the Belcarra–Bedwell Bay area was more involved and took considerably more time. By May 1977 application was made for a site (Lots 2 & Lot 3, Block 9, Plan 3014, Woodhaven Subdivision) on Bedwell Bay Road mid-way between the two sub-areas; namely, the Bedwell Bay and Belcarra Bay subdivisions. Provincial approvals for both sites were obtained by the end of 1977, and the GVRD proceeded to negotiate and sign Crown Land leases for the specific use of the SVFD.

John MacKay was appointed Chair of the *Building Committee* for the *SVFD Board of Trustees* in April 1977, and he immediately started investigating types of construction and estimated construction costs. The preferred design was concrete block construction sized to house two pieces of equipment (fire trucks). Approval by the *SVFD Board of Trustees* was given in June 1977 to have plans drawn for the two fire halls. The working drawings were prepared by Belcarra resident and architect Elna Strand.

On October 18th, 1977, John MacKay provided a cost estimate of \$75,000 to construct both halls, and the *SVFD Board of Trustees* approved funds for the clearing and site preparation of the two sites. Tenders for construction were let by the GVRD, and on November 14th, 1977, the *SVFD Board of Trustees* accepted the low bid from *Lorac Construction Ltd.* of \$35,305 for each fire hall. By June 1st, 1978, the two newly constructed fire halls were “essentially operational”.

At the October 18th, 1977, meeting of the *SVFD Board of Trustees* a motion was passed to have tender specifications drafted for the purchase of a new fire truck. However, the five-month period from December 1977 to March 1978 was subsequently spent “spinning our wheels” on deliberations over a 22-year-old second-hand fire truck that *Essondale* wanted to give away:

“Another ‘bump’ in the road was the misguided actions of the two Anmore Fire Trustees who somehow learned [in December 1977] that *Essondale* was planning to give away a 22-year-old fire truck, and believed that this ‘gift’ would save the taxpayers money. I pointed-out that this would nullify a Class ‘3’ fire insurance rating if the primary piece of firefighting equipment was older than 10 years, but they persisted in their campaign. Coincidentally, I had a meeting set with the Minister of Highways [Alex Fraser] on Barnston Island [part of Electoral Area ‘B’] and after he had refused my request to build a bridge from Surrey to Barnston Island, he happened to mention that he was part of a two-person committee in charge of disposing of Crown assets, and that he had received an official request from people in Electoral Area ‘B’ for an old fire truck from *Essondale*. I had to explain that we couldn’t accept it because it would nullify a Class ‘3’ insurance rating — ‘so please don’t give it to us’. He understood and promised to not agree to their request. Not long after, the same two individuals appeared at a GVRD Executive Committee meeting to complain that I should be removed for wasting taxpayer’s money!” – Verna Barrett.

1978 SVFD Building Committee Report

On October 24th, 1977, tenders were received for construction of two fire halls for the *Sasamat Volunteer Fire Department*. *Lorac Construction Ltd.* of Aldergrove was the successful tenderer with the lowest bid of \$71,105. Construction on the fire halls started several weeks later and completed by June 1st, 1978.

Each 1,700 sq. ft. firehall was strictly “bare bones” but included electric wiring, plumbing fixtures and electric heaters in the offices. The buildings were then usable, and the older [1952] LaFrance Pumper and [1967] Ford Tanker were moved-in. Local residents and Volunteer Firemen “work parties” then installed drain rock and tiles, septic fields, water storage tanks, cedar siding, painting and some landscaping. Total cost to-date [December 31st, 1978] for both halls including site preparation, hall construction, domestic water well, water storage tanks, cedar siding, paint, *etc.*, is \$87,547.

It has been only through the work of the “volunteer work parties” that costs have been kept to a minimum. The enthusiasm of some of the residents in the area is gratifying, and only goes to show what a small community can do when they “pool” their efforts towards a common purpose. There are many local residents experienced in the various trades required and their knowledge contributed to completing these projects economically. It is to these persons and the “volunteer work parties” that I wish to give a vote of thanks. Their help is greatly appreciated.

John MacKay, Chairman
SVFD Building Committee

It wasn't until the meeting of March 21st, 1978, that the *SVFD Board of Trustees* finally was able to agree to have tender specifications drafted for the purchase of a new fire truck. By mid-April, the specifications were approved by the *SVFD Board of Trustees* and forwarded to the GVRD to initiate the tender process. At the June 8th, 1978, *SVFD Board of Trustees* meeting, the tender from the *Saskatoon Fire Engine Co.* was accepted, and the final price negotiated at \$41,118. In late September 1978, John MacKay flew to Calgary to take delivery of the new fire truck and drove the truck home across the Rockies for the SVFD.

The next major event was the *Village of Belcarra* incorporation on August 22nd, 1979. However, this event did not change either the SVFD “specified area” or the taxable assessment base that supported the SVFD.

In the fall of 1984, the residents of Anmore made application to the *Ministry of Municipal Affairs* to incorporate as a district municipality, which the Province immediately put “on hold”. In March 1985, the Mayors of *School District 43* met with the Inspector of Municipalities (Chris Woodward) to discuss the application and its two political “stumbling blocks”; namely, the boundaries between the *City of Port Moody* and the

proposed new municipality, and the question of a tax-sharing formula for the *Imperial Oil Co.* property tax revenues. Port Moody wanted to include the *Imperial Oil Co.* refinery within its industrial tax base. It was made clear that the *Imperial Oil Co.* property tax revenues would not exclusively go to the proposed new municipality, and that any political restructuring must not result in increased taxation of the *Imperial Oil Co.* refinery. The “bottom line” was that Anmore’s application to incorporate was a precipitous event that had significant implications for all parties.

The *Ministry of Municipal Affairs* completed its review in April 1987, and released a report that recommended the amalgamation of Anmore and Ioco with the *City of Port Moody*. This decision anticipated the real probability that the *Imperial Oil Co.* refinery would likely be down-graded to a distribution facility in the future, and inasmuch as the economic viability of the new municipality was predicated upon the *Imperial Oil Co.* tax base — which was 80% of the total — such a significant tax base change would have been financially disastrous to the new municipality.

The Ministry’s report also identified that Anmore’s second choice was amalgamation with the *Village of Belcarra*. However, this option was rejected by Belcarra Council on the basis it would have been the economic death-knell for Belcarra due to Anmore’s low property assessment base at that time. The report also indicated that the second choice of the Ministry was amalgamation of Anmore, Ioco, Belcarra and Port Moody, but the report concluded that while this may have been an option in 1979, there was no longer support for the proposal.

Discussions between the representatives of *Ministry of Municipal Affairs*, Port Moody and Anmore subsequently resulted in an agreement for an incorporation vote for the residents of Anmore Valley, a separate vote for Ioco/Sunnyside area on the question of joining the *City of Port Moody*, and the immediate annexation by the *City of Port Moody* of the *Imperial Oil Co.* refinery.

The most important outcome was that the *Sasamat Volunteer Fire Department* would continue to function as established for a period of five years, including funding of the operating budget by the *Imperial Oil Co.* property tax base, and continued funding of the company’s capital debt obligations for the seven years remaining on the term of SVFD’s loan. Another key decision was that the proposed boundaries for the Anmore incorporation vote would not include the *Buntzen Recreation Area*, the *Belcarra Regional Park* lands around Sasamat Lake and the *Admiralty Point Military Reserve*, or the Farrer Cove properties. These areas were to continue to be part of Electoral Area ‘B’ administered by the GVRD.

In September 1987, the residents of Anmore “took the plunge” and voted for incorporation. This generated concerns from Belcarra Council regarding the shared operating costs of the SVFD due to the differences in assessment base between the two municipalities at that time. Belcarra had a \$36 million assessment base in 1987, but Anmore’s assessment base was only \$15.5 million, which was 60% less than Belcarra. As a consequence, Belcarra’s contribution to the SVFD was suddenly increased to 2.5 times greater than Anmore, and when the *Imperial Oil Co.* property tax transfers were to cease after five years, Belcarra’s share of the operating costs would increase to 70% if there was no change to the cost-sharing formula.

Belcarra began negotiating with Anmore early in 1988 to restructure the enabling legislation of the *Sasamat Fire Protection Specified Area*. However, negotiations came to an impasse that June at a joint meeting between the GVRD, Port Moody, Anmore and Belcarra when Mayor Hal Weinberg tabled a “take-it-or-leave-it” proposal that was unacceptable to Belcarra. Anmore wanted cost-sharing based strictly on assessment base, but with equal representation on the *SVFD Board of Trustees*. Belcarra maintained the view that a 50:50 cost sharing was the fairest and most appropriate formula, with the SVFD administered by a Board of Trustees consisting of equal representation from both Anmore and Belcarra. A crucial point of contention was Anmore’s proposal to significantly cut the annual contribution to the capital reserve fund as a means to reduce operating costs. Belcarra maintained that it was essential to budget in advance for significant capital expenditures necessary to ensure that SVFD equipment (primarily pumper trucks) would continue to meet operating standards. In other words, the annual budgets of SVFD should reflect the true cost of the fire service.

In August 1988, the GVRD Executive Committee appointed Chris Woodward, former Deputy Minister of Municipal Affairs, to meet with the parties and mediate discussion to help resolve the stalemate. In the event that mediation was not successful, Chris Woodward also had been asked to make recommendations on the disposition of the fire department’s assets. After a year of negotiations, the interested parties finally came to an agreement on October 11th, 1989, regarding the terms for restructuring of the *Sasamat Fire Protection Function*, as follows:

- The SVFD fire protection district would remain a function of the GVRD;
- The specified area of the SVFD fire protection district would be redefined as the municipal boundaries of Anmore and Belcarra;
- The *SVFD Board of Trustees* would be comprised of three members each appointed by and from the Councils of Anmore and Belcarra, plus one GVRD Director appointed by the *GVRD Board of Directors*;
- The financial contribution by the *City of Port Moody* (debt and operating) would be fixed at the amount contributed in 1988 for each year until the end of 1992, and Port Moody would continue paying on the debt until it was retired in 1994;
- The annual operating budget in each of the following four years would be not less than the 1988 budget;
- The annual contribution to the capital reserve fund in each of the following four years would be fixed at the 1988 level; and
- The cost sharing formula would be 50:50 for both debt servicing and capital (reserve fund), with sharing of operating costs based on assessed value of land and improvements.

The above agreement has served the municipalities of Anmore and Belcarra very well for the past 32 years, and has provided the two communities with a first-class fire department that is respected by both volunteer and professional departments throughout the region.

In the four years following Anmore’s incorporation in September 1987, the *City of Port Moody* extended its municipal boundaries twice, “absorbing” the *Government Reserve* corridor (west of April Road), Ioco Townsite, *Imperial Oil Co.* refinery, B.C. Hydro’s *Burrard Thermal Generating Station*, and the *Belcarra Regional Park* lands surrounding Sasamat Lake and the *Admiralty Point Military Reserve*.