

**Subject: Enhanced False Fire Alarm Strategy**

**File Number: ACS2024-EPS-OFS-0001**

**Report to Emergency Preparedness and Protective Services Committee on 15  
February 2024  
and Council 21 February 2024**

**Submitted on February 6, 2024 by Paul Hutt, Chief, Ottawa Fire Services**

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**Ward: Citywide**

**Objet : Optimisation de la stratégie relative aux fausses alarmes-incendie**

**Numéro de dossier : ACS2024-EPS-OFS-0001**

**Rapport présenté au Comité des services de protection et de préparation aux  
situations d'urgence**

**Rapport soumis le 15 février 2024**

**et au Conseil le 21 février 2024**

**Soumis le 2024-02-06 par Paul Hutt, Chef du Service des Incendies d'Ottawa**

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## **REPORT RECOMMENDATION(S)**

That the Emergency Preparedness and Protective Services Committee recommend that Council:

1. Approve the proposed amendments to the Fees and Charges for Ottawa Fire Services By-law (No. 2020-195) to include fees for false fire alarms, in the

general form set out in Document 1, and as described in this report; and

2. Approve the addition of two full-time equivalents in Ottawa Fire Services to enhance fire prevention activities and implement the new false fire alarm strategy, to be funded on a cost-recovery basis from the proposed fees, as further described in this report; and
3. Direct staff to evaluate and report back to the Emergency Preparedness and Protective Services Committee and Council on the effectiveness of the False Fire Alarm Strategy at the end of a three-year period.

### **RECOMMANDATION(S) DU RAPPORT**

Que le Comité des services de protection et de préparation aux situations d'urgence recommande au Conseil :

1. d'approuver les modifications qu'il est proposé d'apporter au *Règlement concernant les droits pour le Service des incendies* (n° 2020-195) afin d'y inclure les frais pour fausses alarmes, selon les modalités générales exposées dans le document 1 et comme l'explique le présent rapport; et
2. d'approuver l'ajout de deux postes équivalents temps plein au Service des incendies pour bonifier les activités de prévention des incendies et mettre en œuvre la nouvelle stratégie sur les fausses alarmes, postes qui seront financés selon le principe du recouvrement des coûts à même les frais proposés, comme l'explique le présent rapport; et
3. de demander au personnel d'évaluer l'efficacité de la stratégie relative aux fausses alarmes-incendie au terme d'une période de trois ans et de faire rapport au Comité des services de protection et de préparation aux situations d'urgence et au Conseil à ce sujet.

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Ottawa Fire Services responds to over 10,000 false fire alarms a year. There is a risk to public safety if a fire alarm is activated and later determined that the cause is not a fire but instead a poorly maintained fire alarm system or instances where Ottawa Fire Services is not notified prior to undertaking work on a fire alarm system. In these instances, fire resources are expended when not necessary and would not be available for other potential emergency responses.

The Ottawa Fire Services False Fire Alarm Strategy sets out proposed amendments to include new fees to the Fees and Charges for Ottawa Fire Services By-law (No. 2020-195) that would apply to false fire alarms that are deemed a nuisance. A nuisance alarm are instances where the activation of a fire alarm system occurs through a mechanical failure, equipment malfunction or improper maintenance or installation of the system. To avoid being subject to the fee, owners or fire alarm system companies must notify Ottawa Fire Services in advance of undertaking work on a fire alarm system to prevent a false fire alarm.

The proposed new fees would not apply to instances where the activation occurred as a result of accidental damage to the system or for a malicious fire alarm, where there is negligent or intentional misuse of a fire alarm system. Individuals who maliciously activate a fire alarm can be charged under the *Criminal Code of Canada*, including section 437.

The *Ontario Building Code, O. Reg. 332/12* determines whether a facility needs a fire alarm system. Buildings with a contained use area, impeded egress zones, or more than three storeys requires a fire alarm system, as well as any building with a total occupancy load of greater than 300 people. Under the *Fire Protection and Prevention Act, 1997*, owners of these facilities have several responsibilities, which include testing, maintaining, and inspecting fire alarm systems annually and repairing or correcting any potential deficiencies.

The proposed new fee would not apply to residential single-family homes, townhomes or condominiums that do not require a fire alarm system as prescribed by the Ontario Building Code.

The proposed fee would not apply to a first false fire alarm however, Fees and Charges will be sought to offset associated costs for attending to a false fire alarm for subsequent false alarms at the same property over the calendar year. The proposed fee would be \$500 for a second false fire alarm, \$1,000 for a third false fire alarm and \$1,500 for any subsequent false fire alarm, all within the same calendar year.

### **Assumption and Analysis**

In 2022, Ottawa Fire Services responded to a total of 10,478 false fire alarms, which represented 37 per cent of the total number of incident responses. This resulted in an average of 29 times a day or over 200 times a week. A total of 36 per cent of false fire alarms were deemed to be nuisance false fire alarms and would be subject to the proposed fee set out in this report. This represents a potential reduction of approximately 13 per cent of Ottawa Fire Services total response volume. These trends are consistent over a five-year period from 2018 to 2022.

Staff used benchmarking and research to develop the enhanced strategy, by comparing the performance of different false fire alarm reduction strategies in other municipalities. The introduction of a false fire alarm fee is a common measure aimed to recover municipal resources and discourage circumstances that contribute to unnecessary emergency responses. This fee should also motivate property owners to invest in reliable and well-maintained fire alarm systems thereby reducing/eliminating false fire alarms. This approach ensures that the strategy is effective and adaptable to the diverse needs of different communities and will enhance public safety by reducing the risks associated with false fire alarms.

### **Financial Implications**

The proposed new fee would offset the cost of the two full-time equivalents for Ottawa Fire Services to enhance fire prevention activities related to the new false fire alarm strategy. Revenue would be reinvested into fire prevention activities. Commercial fire alarm systems and the associated cost of maintenance are the responsibility of property owners. Owners who are knowledgeable about these responsibilities and follow the requirements for proper system installation, use and maintenance will avoid incurring fees for false fire alarms.

### **Public Consultation/Input**

Ottawa Fire Services consulted with stakeholders, including:

1. Building Owners and Managers Association
2. Landlords
3. Property managers
4. Post-secondary education institutions
5. Large shopping malls
6. Other facilities with commercial fire alarm systems

Small sessions facilitated the consultation on the proposed new fee to allow participants the opportunity to express their opinions and engage in discussions with each other and staff. The sessions educated participants on the high-level requirements and responsibilities of building owners under the *Ontario Fire Code. O. Reg 213/07*. This included details on obtaining inspections, associated costs, and the process for acquiring a compliance letter, where necessary. Additionally, participants received information on a potential new program, including details about associated fees. Ottawa Fire Services also consulted with the Canadian Fire Alarm Association who support the enhanced false fire alarm strategy, which includes the proposed new fee.

### **RÉSUMÉ**

Chaque année, le Service des incendies d'Ottawa répond à plus de 10 000 fausses alarmes-incendie. La sécurité publique est mise en jeu lorsqu'une alarme-incendie est déclenchée et qu'on découvre plus tard que la cause n'était non pas un incendie, mais plutôt un système mal entretenu, ou que le Service des incendies n'avait pas été avisé de travaux sur un système. Dans ces situations, des ressources sont gaspillées et ne peuvent donc pas servir à d'autres interventions d'urgence.

La stratégie relative aux fausses alarmes-incendie du Service des incendies d'Ottawa propose de modifier le *Règlement concernant les droits pour le Service des incendies* (n° 2020-195) par l'ajout de frais pour les fausses alarmes dont on juge qu'elles découlent d'une nuisance. On parle de fausse alarme découlant d'une nuisance lorsque l'alarme est déclenchée par une défaillance mécanique, un bris d'équipement, la mauvaise installation du système ou son entretien inadéquat. Pour éviter de devoir payer des frais, les propriétaires et les entreprises de systèmes d'alarmes-incendie doivent aviser le Service des incendies avant de commencer des travaux sur un système d'alarme, afin d'éviter les fausses alarmes.

Les nouveaux frais proposés ne s'appliqueront pas aux cas où l'alarme-incendie se déclenche en raison de dommages accidentels ni dans les cas d'alarmes déclenchées par malveillance, c'est-à-dire lorsqu'on se sert d'une alarme avec négligence ou de manière volontairement inappropriée. Les personnes qui déclenchent une alarme par malveillance peuvent être accusées en vertu de l'article 437 du *Code criminel* du Canada.

C'est le Code du bâtiment de l'Ontario (Règl. de l'Ont. 332/12) qui détermine si un système d'alarme-incendie est requis. Il est obligatoire pour les bâtiments ayant une zone de détention cellulaire, une zone à sortie contrôlée, plus de trois étages, ou une densité d'occupation de plus de 300 personnes. La *Loi de 1997 sur la prévention et la protection contre l'incendie* impose plusieurs responsabilités aux propriétaires de ces immeubles : il leur faut notamment voir à ce que des tests, des travaux d'entretien et des inspections soient effectués chaque année, et corriger les problèmes éventuels.

Les nouveaux frais proposés ne s'appliqueront pas aux maisons unifamiliales, aux maisons en rangée ni aux copropriétés pour lesquels le Code du bâtiment de l'Ontario n'exige pas de système d'alarme-incendie.

Ils ne s'appliqueront pas non plus aux premières fausses alarmes-incendie. Toutefois, aux prochaines fausses alarmes dans la même propriété pendant l'année civile, des droits seront exigés pour couvrir les coûts associés à l'intervention. Les frais proposés sont de 500 \$ à la deuxième fausse alarme, 1 000 \$ pour la troisième et 1 500 \$ pour toute fausse alarme subséquente pendant une même année civile.

## **Hypothèses et analyse**

En 2022, le Service des incendies d'Ottawa a répondu à 10 478 fausses alarmes, ce qui représente 37 % du nombre total d'interventions lors d'incidents. C'est une moyenne de 29 fois par jour, ou plus de 200 fois par semaine. Au total, 36 % de ces fausses alarmes ont été jugées comme découlant d'une nuisance; les frais proposés dans le présent rapport se seraient donc appliqués, ce qui aurait potentiellement réduit d'environ 13 % le volume total d'interventions du Service des incendies. Ces tendances se sont maintenues sur cinq ans, de 2018 à 2022.

Le personnel s'est appuyé sur des comparatifs et des études pour élaborer la stratégie améliorée : il a évalué l'efficacité de différentes stratégies de diminution des fausses alarmes d'autres municipalités. L'instauration de frais pour fausse alarme est une mesure courante de recouvrement des ressources municipales et de dissuasion des comportements à l'origine des interventions d'urgence non nécessaires. Ces frais devraient aussi encourager les propriétaires à investir dans des systèmes d'alarme-incendie fiables et à les maintenir en bon état, ce qui réduit ou même élimine les fausses alarmes. Cette approche permet d'assurer l'efficacité de la stratégie et son adaptabilité aux besoins de divers groupes, et améliorera la sécurité publique en réduisant les risques associés aux fausses alarmes.

## **Répercussions financières**

Les nouveaux frais couvriraient les coûts des deux postes équivalents temps plein du Service des incendies d'Ottawa visant à bonifier les activités de prévention des incendies relatives à la nouvelle stratégie. Les revenus seraient réinvestis dans les activités de prévention des incendies. L'entretien des systèmes d'alarme-incendie commerciaux et les coûts associés sont la responsabilité des propriétaires; pour éviter les frais associés aux fausses alarmes, ceux-ci doivent donc s'assurer de connaître leurs responsabilités et de respecter les exigences d'installation, d'utilisation et d'entretien des systèmes.

## **Consultation et commentaires du public**

Le Service des incendies d'Ottawa a consulté les intervenants suivants :

1. Building Owners and Managers Association;
2. Propriétaires;
3. Gestionnaires immobiliers;
4. Représentants d'établissements postsecondaires;
5. Représentants de grands centres commerciaux;

6. Représentants d'autres installations comportant des systèmes d'alarme-incendie commerciaux.

De courtes séances de consultation sur les nouveaux frais proposés ont permis aux personnes participantes de donner leur avis et d'échanger entre elles et avec le personnel. Y étaient aussi décrites les principales exigences que doivent respecter les propriétaires, et les responsabilités qui leur incombent selon le Code de prévention des incendies de l'Ontario (Règl. de l'Ont. 213/07) : dispositions à prendre pour les inspections, coûts connexes, obtention d'une lettre de conformité si besoin est, etc. Les personnes participantes ont également été informées sur le nouveau programme envisagé et les frais proposés. Le Service des incendies a aussi consulté l'Association canadienne d'alarme-incendie, qui appuie la nouvelle stratégie et les frais qu'elle prévoit en cas de fausse alarme.

## **BACKGROUND**

Ottawa Fire Service protects the lives, property and environment for the residents and visitors to the City of Ottawa. Ottawa Fire Services provides services from 45 stations located across the City of Ottawa. Collectively, these stations provide service to over one million residents across 2,796 square kilometres. The Ottawa Fire Services team is comprised of career firefighters, volunteer firefighters, inspection, education, safety, training, communications, maintenance and administration personnel.

### **Current false fire alarm education and awareness program**

A false fire alarm may be caused by a nuisance, such as a mechanical failure, equipment malfunction or improper maintenance or installation of a system. A malicious instance is where there is a negligent or intentional misuse of a fire alarm system. An alarm is not considered a false fire alarm if it is determined that it was caused by a severe weather condition, accidental damage, smoke or steam or carbon monoxide.

In the 2006 Audit of Ottawa Fire Services, the Auditor General recommended the Ottawa Fire Service pursue the development of a public education program related to false alarms. Ottawa Fire Services began collaborating with property owners and in 2011 proactively launched the formal False Alarm Education and Awareness Program to conduct outreach with buildings that have multiple false fire alarms.

Since 2011 Ottawa Fire Services has implemented new mitigation measures through the False Alarm Education and Awareness Program to reduce the number of false fire alarms. These measures mainly focused on providing information and education to property owners. The measures have had a positive impact on engaging and resolving

some false fire alarms. Overall, the number of false fire alarms have not been sufficiently reduced.

On April 19, 2018, the Community and Protective Services Committee approved the report entitled [Ottawa Fire Services 2017 Annual Report \(ACS2018-EPS-GEN-0004\)](#).

At this meeting, staff were directed to provide Committee members with a memorandum outlining the updated approach that Ottawa Fire Services would be taking to help reduce false alarms in the City of Ottawa. In response, staff committed to a revised approach to reduce false fire alarms that would involve engagement with key stakeholders and the potential by-law amendments.

The current Ottawa Fire Service false alarm reduction process requires significant staff time. Each quarter, staff in the Fire Prevention Office must access Fire Data Management records and manually identify addresses with more than three preventable false fire alarms that occurred during the previous three months. The top 10 addresses are selected for meetings with the property owners or managers to ensure compliance with the Ontario Fire Code, and suggest possible ways to address false fire alarms, such as increasing security/surveillance, or possibly modifying devices or moving pull stations.

Ottawa Fire Services consulted with various stakeholders to encourage using qualified service providers to conduct regular fire alarm system maintenance, including testing, repairs and documentation retention. These systems act as the first line of defense in the event of a fire, providing early detection and timely alerts. The diligent maintenance of these systems by certified technicians ensures they function reliably, which enhances public safety. This proactive approach mitigates the risk of false fire alarms and ensures that the alarms will perform as intended in critical situations, providing individuals with the crucial time needed to evacuate safely.

### **Fire alarm system requirements**

Property owners, or the owner's agent, and alarm repair companies have a responsibility to properly install and maintain fire alarm systems, which play an important role in reducing fire deaths and injuries. When a properly functioning fire alarm system is activated in an emergency, these life safety systems are highly effective in saving lives.

The Ontario Building Code determines whether a facility needs a fire alarm system. Buildings with a contained use area, impeded egress zones, or more than three



storeys requires a fire alarm system, as well as any building with a total occupancy load of greater than 300 people. Under the Ontario Fire Code, owners of facilities required to have a fire alarm system have several responsibilities. They must ensure testing, maintenance and inspections are carried out annually and correct any deficiencies.

### **Authority to impose false fire alarm fees**

Section 391 of the *Municipal Act, 2001* provides municipalities with various authorities to establish and collect user fees to recover or help defray costs associated with providing a specific service. In the City of Ottawa, user fees are collected to recover costs associated with the delivery of various services and programs. Ottawa Fire Services collects fees under the authority of By-law 2020-195, a by-law to establish fees and charges for Ottawa Fire Services.

Applying a user fee to certain categories of false fire alarms would be a revenue neutral means to finance the services that provide a direct benefit to specific users. The proposed user fee could help recover the costs associated with Ottawa Fire Services response to false fire alarm (firefighters and equipment) and aligns with the City's User Fees and Charges Policy, and other legislative requirements.

## **DISCUSSION**

False fire alarms are often the result of one of the following:

- Improper maintenance of fire alarm systems
- Improper notification to Ottawa Fire Services prior to conducting alarm system maintenance or testing
- Malicious activations of pull stations

Regrettably, the current program has not yielded the anticipated results, given that the number of false fire alarms continues to rise.

### **Impact of false alarms on service**

Over a five-year period from 2018 to 2022, there were 46,945 false fire alarms in the City of Ottawa out of 127,173 calls. An average of 37 per cent of the total calls were for false fire alarms, including both nuisance and malicious events.

In 2022, Ottawa firefighters were dispatched to 10,478 false fire alarms, which is an average of 29 times a day or just over 200 times per week. Detailed information about false fire alarm types can be found in Document 2.

Table 1 - False fire alarm calls from 2018 - 2022

Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Total calls	26,054	26,029	22,582	23,875	28,633
Total false fire alarms (includes nuisance, malicious and other)	9,518	9,462	8,531	8,956	10,478
Per cent of total calls	37%	36%	38%	38%	37%

When a fire alarm system is triggered, Ottawa Fire Services responds as in any other situation and will determine the cause of the activation and ensures that the building is safe. The minimum standard that Ottawa Fire Services responds to a call, including an alarm, is two pumps, one ladder truck, one incident commander and one safety officer.

The cost of a full response is \$3,764 as identified in Table 2 below. If, at any time, a response is determined to be a false fire alarm only the first responding pump will attend and all other resources will be cancelled enroute.

Table 2 - Cost of alarm call response

Activity/Service	Fire Personnel (FTEs)	2024 Fire Fees By-law
Pump and crew	4	\$1,021
Pump and crew	4	\$1,021
Ladder, aerial, platform, and crew	4	\$755
Incident Commander and vehicle	1	\$508
Safety Officer and vehicle	1	\$459
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>\$3,764</b>

### Municipal Comparators

Ottawa Fire Services surveyed several Ontario municipalities to gather information about false fire alarm strategies and found that a false fire alarm fee is a common measure implemented to address the costs associated with repeated false fire alarms that trigger unnecessary emergency responses. Fees for false fire alarms may discourage property owners with fire alarm systems from causing multiple false fire alarms, thereby reducing the strain on emergency services, and ensuring a more efficient allocation of resources. The concept draws on the principle that those responsible for repeated false fire alarms should bear the cost of the associated emergency response, encouraging them to take steps to prevent such occurrences.

The table below provides an overview of six urban cities that were surveyed that have existing or planned false fire alarm strategies, by-laws and/or fees.

Table 3 - Municipal comparators

City	By-law applies to	Fee Structure
Toronto	All building types and includes both nuisance and malicious alarms	Malicious false alarms: \$543.03 per vehicle dispatched. Nuisance false alarms: \$1,629.09 for all building types except single-family homes, which is \$1,086.06 (and \$1,629.09 for any subsequent alarm)
Markham	All building types and for three or more responses within a one-year period	\$678.50 fee
Mississauga	All building types (except single-family homes)	\$271.51 for 2 <sup>nd</sup> alarm and \$1,086.06 for 3 <sup>rd</sup> and subsequent equipment malfunction alarms \$1,086.06 for 2 <sup>nd</sup> alarm of not-for-profit and registered charities without proof of charitable status and \$200 with proof. \$1,086.06 for 3 <sup>rd</sup> alarm of not-for-profit and registered charities with proof of charitable status.
London	All building types	\$900 for failure to notify fire services prior to undertaking work on an alarm system \$900 for three or more alarms in 30 days \$900 for five or more alarms in a calendar year
Vaughan	All building types	\$560 for dispatch of apparatus to 3 <sup>rd</sup> or subsequent nuisance alarm
Brampton	All building types	\$1,030 for 2 <sup>nd</sup> or subsequent alarm in a calendar year

Ottawa Fire Services examined the practices and outcomes in other municipalities or regions that have implemented false fire alarm fees, to assess their effectiveness and

fairness. The comparative analysis considers factors such as the fee amount, the criteria for imposing the fee, and the impact on the frequency of false alarms. The fee system that Ottawa Fire Services is recommending strikes a balance with achieving public safety goals, while also meeting community needs.

## **Consultation**

Ottawa Fire Services has consulted with the Building Owners and Managers Association, as well as landlords and property managers of post-secondary education institutions, large shopping malls, and other facilities which would be subject to a proposed fee. Participants were provided information about the requirements and responsibilities of building owners under both the Ontario Building Code and the Ontario Fire Code.

Summary of consultation:

- Participants agreed or strongly agreed that a false fire alarm fee would encourage property owners to avoid false alarms caused by equipment malfunctions or failure to notify Ottawa Fire Services.
- Participants also agreed or strongly agreed that increased education on achieving and maintaining Fire Code compliance would help property owners avoid false fire alarms.

As a result of the consultations, the false fire alarm strategy was amended to refine the scope of application of fees to false fire alarms caused by a nuisance, such as an equipment malfunction or failure to notify Ottawa Fire Services. Ottawa Fire Service will also increase prevention and education to assist property owners in complying with the Ontario Fire Code.

Ottawa Fire Services has also consulted with the Canadian Fire Alarm Association. The Association and its regional members play integral roles in the design, manufacturing, installation, testing, inspection, monitoring and maintenance of fire protection systems throughout the country. Their core objective is to ensure that false fire alarm systems are optimized to their fullest potential in protecting life and property. They are in support of the enhanced false fire alarm strategy, including the introduction of the proposed fee.

## **Staff Recommendations**

Despite the implementation and enhancements to the False Alarm Education and Awareness Program, instances of false fire alarms continue to rise. Ottawa Fire Services has investigated the causes of false fire alarms and determined that on average 2,600 false fire alarms a year are caused by the improper maintenance of a fire alarm system. This represents 10 per cent of total responses. During the same period,

758 false fire alarm were a result of improper notification to Ottawa Fire Services prior to conducting fire alarm system maintenance or testing. This represents three per cent of total responses. Combined 13 per cent of total responses are directly related nuisance alarms.

There is no requirement to resolve repeat false fire alarms within the current program. Ottawa Fire Services does not have the authority to require changes to a system that has been tested and/or determined not to be compliant. Additionally, under the current program, results of the education and outreach efforts vary by occupancy number and demographic.

To effectively address false fire alarms staff have determined that it is necessary to enhance the current False Alarm Reduction Strategy by providing a deterrent in the form of a user fee, to owners and property managers whose fire alarm systems are not being maintained, inspected and/or tested as required.

As such, Ottawa Fire Services recommends a new approach to reduce false fire alarms, which includes a new false fire alarm fee, that will seek to recover response costs. This will contribute to the City's continued ability to provide effective fire prevention programs and enhance public safety.

The enhanced strategy is in line with the Office of the Fire Marshal and Emergency Management's integrated approach for the delivery of fire protection services, where public fire safety education is the first line of defence. The enhanced strategy follows the direction of the fire protection legislation and industry best practice.

The enhanced False Fire Alarm Strategy is anticipated to reduce the number of calls and responses. This will ensure that resources are available to respond to emergency calls. This will also benefit public road safety and reduce fuel consumption and vehicle wear and tear.

The strategy sets out proposed amendments to include new fees to the By-law No. 2020-195 respecting fees and charges for Ottawa Fire Services that would apply to false fire alarms that are deemed a nuisance, which are instances where the activation of a fire alarm system occurs through a mechanical failure, equipment malfunction or improper maintenance or installation of the system. To avoid these instances and being charged these fees, owners must notify Ottawa Fire Services in advance of work being done on a fire alarm system that could cause a false fire alarm.

The proposed new fees would not apply to instances where the activation occurred as a result of accidental damage to the system or for a malicious fire alarm, where there is negligent or intentional misuse of a fire alarm system. Individuals who maliciously activate a fire alarm and is caught, can be charged under the *Criminal Code of Canada*, including section 437.

*Recommendation 1 – False fire alarm fees*

If Ottawa Fire Services responds to an activated fire alarm and it is determined by Ottawa Fire Services that the call was the result of a non-emergency situation or a faulty fire alarm system, it is classified as a false fire alarm. Under the enhanced strategy, Ottawa Fire Services will be able to charge a fee for responding to the false fire alarm in instances where a fire alarm is required under the Ontario Fire Code and Ontario Building Code, which determines whether a facility needs a fire alarm system. Buildings with a contained use area, impeded egress zones, or more than three storeys requires a fire alarm system, as well as any building with a total occupancy load of greater than 300 people. Under the Fire Protection and Prevention Act, owners of these facilities have several responsibilities, which include testing, maintaining, and inspecting fire alarm systems annually and repairing or correcting any potential deficiencies. Most false fire alarms can be prevented by properly maintaining the alarm system.

Ottawa Fire Services review of preventable false alarms identified two areas where a fee can have a positive impact:

1. Alarm equipment malfunctions due to poorly maintained systems
2. Alarm equipment activation or testing where the owner of fire alarm system company failed to notify Ottawa Fire Services prior to conducting maintenance.

Data shown in Table 4 indicates a significant number of false alarms annually are due to the reasons cited above, which are directly within the control and responsibility of the property owner.

*Table 4 – Response type for preventable false fire alarms*

Response type	Year					Total
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	
Improper maintenance of fire alarm system	2,873	2,493	2,227	2,513	3,051	13,157
Improper notification of fire alarm system prior to maintenance or testing	829	773	708	744	736	3,790
<b>Total Nuisance Alarms</b>	<b>3,702</b>	<b>3,266</b>	<b>2,935</b>	<b>3,257</b>	<b>3,787</b>	<b>16,947</b>

Individuals who maliciously activate a fire alarm can be charged under the Criminal Code of Canada, including Section 437.

The goal of Ottawa Fire Services enhanced false alarm strategy is to ensure public safety with a primary focus on education. Punitive measures or other similar strategies are not being recommended as these types of measures may deter residents from using fire alarm systems.

In jurisdictions with consequences for false fire alarms, owners and owner's agents are compelled to take measures to avoid extra costs. Municipalities that impose false fire alarm fees see a gradual reduction in false fire alarms year over year.

The proposed fee will only be charged on second and subsequent false fire alarms to allow Fire Prevention Officers to engage with property owners and managers. Each instance of a fire alarm, whether entered as an alarm equipment malfunction or accidental, will be reviewed by staff to ensure fees are applied where warranted.

Staff are recommending amendments to By-law No. 2020-195 respecting fees and charges for Ottawa Fire Services to include the following graduated fee system to recover costs associated with false fire alarms, as outlined in Table 5.

*Table 5 - Proposed false alarm fee schedule*

<b>Schedule</b>	<b>Fee Amount</b>
1 <sup>st</sup> false fire alarm in a calendar year	No fee
2 <sup>nd</sup> false fire alarm in a calendar year	\$500
3 <sup>rd</sup> false fire alarm in a calendar year	\$1,000
4 <sup>th</sup> and subsequent false fire alarms	\$1,500

Based on information obtained from other municipalities Ottawa Fire Services anticipates a reduction between 10 to 20 per cent in false fire alarm responses over a three-year period after the implementation of the fee.

#### *Recommendation 2- Staff requirements*

It is anticipated that there will be significant additional inspection work involved in support of the new false fire alarm strategy. Therefore, Ottawa Fire Services is recommending the addition of two fire prevention officers, required to perform the necessary review of fire alarm data to ensure that all fees are appropriate and

warranted, and possibly issue orders and/or charges under the Fire Code if remediation is not complete.

Two fire prevention officers will be required to review fire alarm data, inspect and verify causes of false fire alarms, as well as educate alarm system owners, and apply the proposed fees where warranted. To develop the full-time equivalent request, staff considered the projected revenue based on past trends of false fire alarms, staff time on task for approximately 10,000 false alarms per year.

The addition of two full-time equivalents is required and will be offset by the revenue generated by the proposed false fire alarm fee.

An education plan is also key to the enhanced strategy. Additional education requirements for the enhanced false fire alarm strategy will be performed by existing staff. The education plan will aim to provide the alarm owners and alarm repair companies with information on how to avoid false alarms.

Investing resources in prevention activities will help to reduce false fire alarms over the long term by addressing system malfunctions or user training. This proactive approach aligns with a community-centric perspective, emphasizing the importance of fostering a culture of awareness, responsibility, and public safety.

### *Recommendation 3 – Reporting back*

Ottawa Fire Services is aiming to reduce 2,600 false alarms per year, or approximately 10 per cent of total calls, following the implementation of the enhanced false fire alarm strategy. Staff will monitor false fire alarm activity within the city to assess the overall impact of the new fees and report back at the end of a three-year period. The key metrics that will be considered for the assessment include:

- A reduction in the number of responses to false fire alarms.
- Increase number of notifications to Ottawa Fire Services prior to maintain or testing alarm systems.
- Increase in the number of alarm system maintenance and repairs.

### **Financial Considerations**

Based on the last several years, Ottawa Fire Services estimates that the proposed new fee would generate sufficient revenue to offset the cost of two full-time equivalents.

The estimated annual fee revenue is \$1.2 million, which is based on collecting 100 percent of false fire alarm fees. This revenue projection is based on the last five years of false fire alarm data in comparison with the proposed application of the fees, as shown



in table 6.

Table 6 - False alarm fee analysis from 2018 - 2022

<b>Responses</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>
Number of properties with two or more alarms	618	561	501	527	640
Number of alarms where fee would apply	1,915	1,716	1,508	1,614	2,003
Total based on proposed fee structure	\$1.2 million	\$1.0 million	\$895 thousand	\$972 thousand	\$1.2 million

The recommendations outlined in this report are in line with the Term of Council priority for “a city that has affordable housing and is more liveable for all” and further aligns with emergency response that meets community needs. Additionally, the enhanced false fire alarm strategy is a continuous improvement initiative that is identified as part of the corporate service review program.

### **Risk Considerations**

There is a risk to public safety if a fire alarm is activated and later determined that the cause is not a fire but instead a poorly maintained fire alarm system or having failed to notify Ottawa Fire Services before undertaking work on a fire alarm system. In these instances, fire resources are expended when not necessary and would not be available for other potential emergency responses.

Every false alarm triggers the deployment of multiple emergency vehicles. This diversion of resources could prove critical in situations where timely response is essential, such as fires, vehicle collisions, or medical incidents to name a few.

Furthermore, the additional strain on resources due to false fire alarms may compromise the overall effectiveness of emergency services and hinder our ability to manage multiple incidents simultaneously.

The cost of deploying emergency vehicles, personnel, and equipment for each false alarm accumulates rapidly. This financial consideration not only affects the operational efficiency of emergency services but also places an unnecessary burden on taxpayers. Addressing the issue of false fire alarms is not only crucial for maintaining the integrity

of emergency response systems but also for ensuring responsible and judicious use of public resources.

Additionally, residents subject to frequent alarms may treat them as a nuisance rather than indication of a real emergency. This leads to complacency as residents may be less likely to follow fire safety measures during a real alarm.

## **Implementation**

Staff recommend that the proposed False Fire Alarm Strategy and fee come into force on July 1, 2024. This will provide sufficient time for hiring and training the new staff required and to develop and implement a comprehensive communications strategy. The success of the strategy relies not only on enforcement but also on proactive communication to create awareness and understanding within the community.

This timeline also allows staff to educate residents and businesses about the changes and allow sufficient time for property owners to make any necessary adjustments to their alarm systems and understand the potential consequences of repeated false alarms. A phased approach, involving an initial awareness campaign followed by a grace period for compliance, can help ensure a smooth transition and minimize any negative impact on businesses and residents.

Staff will conduct communications through various channels, including public announcements, and online resources, to convey the changes and the importance of responsible alarm system management.

Regular updates and reminders through community outreach programs and online platforms will help reinforce the message over time, promoting a culture of responsibility among property owners and reducing the occurrence of false fire alarms. The communications strategy will also include regular updates on changes to regulations, advancements in alarm system technology, and best practices in false alarm prevention will be incorporated into the ongoing training.

## **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

The proposed Fire Alarm Strategy will be implemented on a cost-recovery basis through new fees to offset the cost of two full-time equivalent Fire Prevention Officers and equipment to administer and monitor implementation of the strategy.

## **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no legal impediments to approving the recommendations in this report. As outlined in the report, the recommended amendments to By-law 2020-195 are consistent with the provisions of the Municipal Act, 2001, respecting fees and charges.

## **CONSULTATION**

Ottawa Fire Services consulted with the Building Owners and Managers Association, as well as a variety of landlords, and property managers of post-secondary education institutions, large shopping malls, and other facilities which would be subject to a proposed fee if the recommendation was approved and implemented.

Ottawa Fire Services has also consulted with the Canadian Fire Alarm Association.

## **ACCESSIBILITY IMPACTS**

Ottawa Fire Services serves the needs of the diverse and growing community and follows the City's accessibility legislative framework. This includes adherence to the requirements of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (2005) and the Integrated Accessibility Standards Regulation, 191/11, meeting the City of Ottawa's Accessibility Policy, and following the City's Accessibility Design Standards to the greatest extent possible.

The new strategy to reduce false fire alarms will benefit all residents of the City of Ottawa and has the potential to have a positive impact for people with disabilities, who are often disproportionately affected by false alarms.

The level of effort for an individual with a disability to evacuate in the event of a fire alarm may not be acceptable practice for an unexpected or false alarm. The use of evacuation lifts, evacuation chairs or carry-down procedures all carry a degree of risk that is best avoided in non-emergencies.

For individuals with hypersensitivity and sensory difficulties, unplanned and unwanted fire alarms can be even more upsetting evoking panic, confusion and lasting anxiety, jeopardizing means of escape and hindering personal emergency evacuation plans.

## **INDIGENOUS, GENDER AND EQUITY IMPLICATIONS**

Ottawa Fire Services is committed to the Corporate Diversity and Inclusion Plan. Recognizing that vulnerable populations are disproportionately impacted by emergencies, Ottawa Fire Services incorporates an equity, diversity and inclusion lens

into its emergency response and outreach and education work. as well as gender, race, and equity implications of proposed policies and projects.

### **RISK MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS**

Risk implications and associated mitigation strategies are identified and explained in this report.

### **TERM OF COUNCIL PRIORITIES**

The recommendations outlined in this report are in line with the Term of Council priority for “a city that has affordable housing and is more liveable for all” and further aligns with emergency response with community needs.

### **SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION**

Document 1 – By-law 2020-195 Amendments

Document 2 – 2018 to 2022 False Fire Alarm Data

### **DISPOSITION**

Ottawa Fire Services, in conjunction with any other relevant Branches/Departments, will implement Council directions emanating from this report, as appropriate.

Upon approval, Ottawa Fire Services, in conjunction with Legal Services, will prepare the required by-law amendments for enactment by Council.