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Auditor general examining municipal services

Report due to be presented to legislative assembly in October, says deputy minister

Shane Magee
Northern News Services
Wednesday, September 7, 2016

SOMBA K'E/YELLOWKNIFE

The Auditor General of Canada is probing how the territorial government assists communities in providing essential services such as fire protection in a report due to be released this fall.

The federal watchdog investigates spending and the effectiveness of programs, often resulting in reports with recommendations to fix issues uncovered.

The auditor general typically examines federal programs, though it also creates reports for the territorial governments. According to the deputy minister of Municipal and Community Affairs (MACA), this marks the first time an auditor general has examined his department.

"The audit objective is to determine whether MACA has adequately supported community governments to deliver essential services funded by MACA," said Tom Williams in an interview.

Those services include safe drinking water, garbage and sewage services, fire protection and emergency preparedness.

The audit began about a year ago and involved the department providing information about its practices to the auditor general's office.

The auditor general's office declined an interview request before the release of the report, as did the Northwest Territories Association of Communities, which represents and advocates for all 33 communities in the territory.

Mayor Mark Heyck stated in an e-mail he's not familiar with the audit, so he declined to comment.

The report will be tabled in the legislative assembly around mid-October, Williams said. The assembly is set to resume sitting Oct. 13 and run for 15 days.

Williams did not get into the findings of the report but said the department has had a chance to review preliminary findings and provide a response to the auditor general, which will be included in the final report.

One aspect that may arise is how the territory deals with emergency calls for crashes on highways outside community boundaries.

Hay River North MLA R.J. Simpson highlighted how the Town of Hay River fire service covers a swath of territorial highways yet, in his view, doesn't get adequate compensation for highway rescue services.

"The responsibility for highway rescue is stuck in a perpetual grey area," Simpson said June 7 in the legislative assembly.

"As far as I've been able to ascertain, no single entity in the territory is responsible for providing this service and, as a result, no one funds it adequately."

The town, he noted, receives about \$50,000 annually from the Hay River health and Social Services Authority and MACA for its in-town ambulance service.

A separate pool of funds the territory had allocated for highway rescue was reduced from \$400,000 to \$185,000 in the latest territorial budget as priorities shifted and the department cut back spending.

The auditor general is also investigating the civil aviation industry in the North, according to a list of planned reports on the office's website.

That report is expected to be released in spring 2017.



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