

View Royal fire embraces the digital age



Now able to podcast, View Royal firefighters can update residents on emergency situations in a matter of minutes directly from the scene. That will help them divert people away from traffic accidents and other calls, says Lieut. Rob Marshall.

Amy Dove/News staff

Volunteer department launches podcasting service

View Royal firefighters are going digital.

From roadwork updates to traffic snarls and major fires, members of View Royal Fire Rescue have modernized their method of communicating through podcasting.

"We will be able to inform the public and give them a better understanding of what's going on," said fire prevention officer Lieut. Rob Marshall.

Essentially, when the crew attends a call firefighters can pick up the phone in the truck and leave a voicemail which is then uploaded to the website. The whole process takes less than three minutes and the podcasts are easy to update.

The podcasts can be accessed via a computer through www.viewroyalfire.com or automatically through RSS feeds or music players, such as iTunes. That will get the message to media outlets faster, he said. The hope is that as the website develops, individuals will be able to subscribe through e-mail or mobile communication devices, such as a BlackBerry.

The real advantage is that firefighters don't need to return to the hall in order to update people, Marshall said. As the department is almost all volunteer, when a call goes out there is no staff at the hall to answer phone calls. Any calls that do come in are automatically transferred to Langford Dispatch.

"When we leave everybody leaves," Marshall said. "There is nobody here."

The idea came from Saanich Police, which started podcasting last year. Victoria-based company DailySplice Technologies Inc. hosts that site, and after seeing its success, the company approached other emergency services in the region.

The podcasts are divided into four categories: operational updates, emergency preparedness, fire prevention and media clips. Video clips detailing how to install a smoke detector and other fire safety measures can be viewed, along with media clips covering calls.

The educational clips will be used for school and community programs. The instant updates will assist getting information to local media and residents. That in turn should help keep drivers out of gridlock and make the roads safer for emergency workers, Marshall said.

A gas leak in View Royal and a pedestrian killed on the Trans-Canada Highway in November 2008 illustrate the types of situations where this technology will be useful, Marshall said. In the latter instance, West Shore RCMP were forced to close the highway for roughly five hours while they processed the scene. Many motorists were less than patient, he said.

With the ability to report from the scene, particularly to the media, View Royal Fire could have informed people faster as to why the road was closed, he said. Better communication is important for the firefighter's safety too as some motorists lose their focus at crash scenes.

The podcasts will also be useful when the Town of View Royal begins construction work on Island Highway. The intent is to provide daily updates on the work and congestion issues, Marshall said.

A fire department using podcasts in this manner is new business for DailySplice.

"As far as we know there are no other fire departments in Canada doing that," said Rian Bowden, DailySplice co-founder and CEO. "We researched high and low and we haven't found anyone else."

DailySplice is working with six other clients in the Capital Regional District, including AbeBooks.com and two departments within the University of Victoria.

View Royal Fire has really jumped into the program with both feet, he said.

"(View Royal) in particular, I think, is going to be one to watch in the future."

Go to www.viewroyalfire.com and click on the podcast link launch the podcast station. To subscribe go to www.viewroyalfire.com and click on Multimedia.

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What is a podcast?

A podcast is a series of audio or video digital media files which are downloaded through the Internet to portable media players and computers. A podcast can be subscribed too, allowing individuals immediate access to new uploads.