

Date: Wednesday, April 9, 2025

Meeting Type: Committee of the Whole

From: Jeff Gautreau, Fire Chief

Subject: By Law No. 14-2010 to Regulate Open-Air Burns

Report#: CAO2025-020

This document and its attachments are public and available in an accessible format upon request.

Recommendation

That the Township of Georgian Bluffs endorses the updating of By Law No. 14-2010 Regulate Open- Air Burns, as attached, and,

That staff be directed to implement permitting software, burnpermits.com, to support permit administration, and,

That an administrative fee be implemented to recover cost of permit administration, and,

That staff be directed to amend the Fees and Charges bylaw and bring to Council for approval to reflect the administrative fee.

Background

By-Law No. 14-2010, which regulates open-air burning, is now outdated and needs to be updated. The present by-law does not provide enough clarity which in turn limits the control and enforcement that the Inter Township Fire Department and the Township of Georgian Bluffs can provide.

After reviewing the current by-law, staff believe it is unclear about which types of properties need permits and how different situations should be handled. Every property is unique, and many people enjoy having small open-air fires in their backyards with family.

Analysis

The Inter Township Fire Department serves both the Township of Georgian Bluffs and the Municipality of Meaford. Two different Burn By-laws apply — one for each

municipality. The recommended changes, if adopted would see the Georgian Bluffs By-law more consistent with the Municipality of Meaford.

Having two separate by-laws can cause confusion for Inter Township Fire Department staff when responding to incidents. Aligning these regulations is important to ensure clear communication and efficient operations within the Inter Township Fire Department and Georgian Bluffs By- Law Enforcement. Updates have been made to the Township of Georgian Bluffs Open Air Burn By-law to match the Municipality of Meaford By-Law.

Requiring permits for open-air fires helps protect the Municipality from liability and makes sure residents understand their responsibilities, such as:

1. Reading and agreeing to all terms and conditions before receiving a permit;
2. Allowing municipal services to know where open-air burns are happening across the Municipality;
3. Providing helpful information to Inter Township Fire, South Bruce Peninsula Fire Department, and Municipal Enforcement, like the type of fire, exact location, and contact person before they arrive at the scene — improving communication; and
4. Reducing the number of calls with little or no information, helping emergency services respond more effectively.

Currently, permits for open-air fires are by submission to ITFD via paper based forms. ITFD reviews and collates these and retains them. However, there is no single database of permits issued and no systematic way of contacting permit holders in the event of changes in circumstances, such as to share when fire bans may be put in effect.

Staff are recommending that permitting be implemented through www.burnpermits.com, and online specialist service for issuing permits. This solution is already used by many fire departments and is already in use in Meaford. This would create an improved user experience for those applying for a burn permit, as well as improve the Fire Department's ability to administrate the permitting process. The tool streamlines permit issuance and notifications of burning, as well as allowing the department to send notifications to all permit holders directly. Staff are recommending charging a small fee for permits to offset the cost of the software.

Burnpermits.com provides integrated mapping, enabling the ITFD to see at a glance in one system where all permitted burns are taking place. It would also simplify tracking how many permits/burns are issued each year. This software also provides a means of informing residents of the current burn risk level, and the proper guidelines for each level, and can send mass notifications to registrants via text message, email, or automated phone call. In the case of a burn ban, the system will automatically notify residents and prevent a burn from being registered. This system also integrates with the Who's Responding app, which is being widely used by ITFD staff and volunteers.

Financial Impact

Burnpermits.com operates on a credits system. Users, in this case, the Township, pre-pay for credits. Credits are used to issue permits and to issue notification to permit holders.

Based on historical data, the Township has issued around 200 – 250 permits a year; in 2024, 221 permits were issued. If this number remains similar in 2025, it is expected that the Township will require between 2,500 and 3,500 credits a year (10 credits per permit, 1 credit per notification received or sent). Credits are \$500 for 5,000, with costs decreasing the more credits purchased. Credits do not expire.

There is no cost for the set-up of the portal, and as this revised By-Law would mirror the Meaford By-Law, the development of the intake process would simply require duplicating, with revised corporate identity, the already established Meaford site.

Staff are recommending that a small administrative fee be implemented of \$5 - \$10 to cover the costs of the software. These fees can be collected via burnpermit.com using PayPal, accepting payments by debit or credit card. All fees collected (less the PayPal fee of 2.9% per transaction) would be received by the Township directly.

Strategic Lenses

The mission of the Inter Township Fire Department (ITFD) is to protect life, property and the environment in the Township of Georgian Bluffs and Sydenham Township in the Municipality of Meaford from all perils through education, prevention, investigation, training, rescue, fire suppression, dangerous goods containment and life support services.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging

The updated By-Law aims to ensure that all residents have clear, fair, and accessible regulations regarding open-air burning. The transition to a more user-friendly online permitting system will remove barriers for residents by streamlining the application process and reducing confusion. Ensuring that fire safety information is easy to understand and widely available will help all community members comply with the regulations and promote safer fire practices.

Efforts will also be made to share information about open-air burning regulations through multiple communication channels to reach as many residents as possible

Truth and Reconciliation

Ceremonial fires are an integral part of life for First Nation, Metis and Inuit communities. Recognizing the deep history of cultural genocide that has been acknowledged in

Canada and the impact that the removal and control exerted by post-settlement governments on traditional Indigenous practices, the burn bylaw expressly exempts Ceremonial fires hosted by Indigenous community members from the requirements of the bylaw.

Climate Change

Air Quality Protection – Unregulated burning, especially burning plastics or other materials unsuitable for an open-air fire, releases pollutants. Permits help regulate when and how fires are burned to minimize air pollution.

Wildfire Prevention – Unchecked fires can easily spread to surrounding vegetation, especially in dry or windy conditions. A permit system ensures fire safety measures are in place to reduce the risk of wildfires.

Ecosystem Protection – Burning at the wrong time or under poor conditions can harm local wildlife habitats, disturb nesting birds, or destroy beneficial insects. A permit helps ensure fires are conducted in an environmentally responsible manner.

Conclusion

Updating the Open-Air Burn By-law is essential to improve safety, ensure consistency, and enhance enforcement across the Township of Georgian Bluffs. The proposed changes will provide clearer definitions, better guidelines for different types of burns, and more effective regulations to protect people, properties, and neighborhoods. Aligning the by-laws will help the Inter Township Fire Department operate more efficiently and reduce confusion when responding to incidents. These updates will support a safer community and create a more streamlined approach to open-air burning regulations.

Respectfully Submitted: Jeff Gautreau, Fire Chief