

Comox Valley Ground Search and Rescue Facility

Support and Partnership Exploration for a new facility.

June to January 2025

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1. Executive Summary

This backgrounder is intended to summarize the challenges Comox Valley Ground Search and Rescue (SAR) faces in finding a suitable location for a new facility. SAR is a key partner in delivering emergency services to the community and providing ground support to the region's Emergency Operations Centres and as such, staff have worked closely with the group to find an optimal solution for facility needs. The highlights include:

- No suitable public land on municipal, SD 71, or Comox Valley Regional District (CVRD) owned lands are readily available based on inquiries made by SAR to organizations.
- Opportunities for partnerships may exist in the future to purchase privately held lands.
- The next steps are to consider continued support of SAR in their search of private property (approximately 1.2 acres) for a future facility through enhancing the funding model and supporting the exploration of partnership land opportunities.
- Land purchase and new building construction costs with associated development and rezoning costs are estimated to be \$3.5 to 4M of which CVRD has committed up to \$500,000 in support by the end of 2027 and SAR has already raised nearly \$1M through their Roof for Rescuers Program.

Options and recommendations will be provided to the Board as part of the 2025 budget cycle. This background and a summary briefing note are included along with Service 265 Search and Rescue budget information.

2. Purpose

To consider various options for assisting the SAR secure a facility for operations.

3. Background

The SAR group has been an established CVRD partner that provides critical emergency services to the community. SAR was incorporated on December 17, 1979, and became a registered charity on January 1, 2000.

The CVRD Search and Rescue service was first established by Special Letters Patent and serving Baynes Sound (Area A), Lazo North (Area B), Puntledge-Black Creek (Area C) and Hornby-Denman Islands (Area K) then as by adopted [Bylaw no 2985](#), in 2007. The purpose of this service is to *"make grant-in-aid for search and rescue coordination and to assist in the acquisition of equipment required to carry out search and rescue work within the participating areas."* Through this service, various grants are distributed to support the operational functions of

search and rescue, which includes specifically those of Comox Valley Ground Search and Rescue Society.

In 2023, SAR requested Board support for a new facility and operational needs. The Board approved an annual reserve contribution of \$100,000 for five years, to support the purchase or construction of a building. Staff have continued to support SAR through Meetings, discussions, and exploration of various options for a new or expanded facility.

4. Comox Valley Ground Search and Rescue – a Brief Description

SAR has played a vital role in the Comox Valley for over forty years. This volunteer organization provides a wide range of search and rescue services including searching for lost persons or missing hikers, rope, swift water, avalanche rescues and first aid as well as support Emergency Operations Centres to perform neighbourhood door to door evacuations and Initial Rapid Damage Assessments. Their coverage area ranges from Oyster River in the north to Cook Creek in the south and from Buttle Lake in the west to the Georgia Strait in the east, including both Denman and Hornby Islands. SAR also works closely with other groups to provide mutual aid to communities province wide.

Volunteers are on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In 2021, 60 members collectively contributed over 11,500 hours and 2023, 62 members recorded 13,051 hours representing a considerable increase to search and rescue operations, educational programs, and community events. It is meaningful to note that many hours go unrecorded doing fundraising and / or administration

SAR operations are funded primarily with donations, tasking (under an Emergency Management Climate Readiness task number), and through other provincial, local government and community gaming grants. According to their 2023 Financial Statements, approximately \$273,000 was expensed for operations. From a revenue perspective, the capital fund included approximately \$26,000 in revenue and the building fund approximately \$366,000. The following table shows the major revenue sources and total expenses.

	2023 Actuals Operating	2023 Actuals Capital	2023 Actuals Building Fund	Total
Revenue				
Donations and fund raising	\$82,866		\$158,983	\$241,849
Vancouver foundation			100,000	100,000
Tasking	89,713			89,713
BCSARA distribution			84,000	84,000
Interest Income	28		22,582	22,610
Local government grants (CVRD)	50,000			50,000
Gain on disposal of assets		6,439		6,439
Community gaming grant		19,950		19,950
Total Revenue	\$222,607	\$26,389	\$365,565	\$614,561
Total Expenses	\$273,088	\$42,122	\$3,654	\$318,864
	(\$50,481)	(\$15,733)	\$361,911	\$295,697

Major categories of expenses include equipment replacement (\$52,598), rent \$56,057 and training \$53,643. The CVRD sub-lease payment is included within the donations and fundraising revenue category.

SAR "Roof for Rescue" fundraising campaign has a goal to reach donations of \$1.5M for a new building. As noted on the organization's website and as of October 2024, the fundraising campaign reached \$927,841.

5. Current State – SAR Facilities

For many years commercial facilities were rented throughout the valley to house equipment and vehicles. For the past 25 years, operations were based at 3001 Moray Avenue, where a series of substantial renovations have been generously supported by donors to make the facility an effective hub for operations.

The lease is a triple-net commercial lease that has increased substantially at each renewal. The lease ended on this building in 2023, and a three-year extension was secured until July 31, 2026. The lease involves 4,977 square feet of space at a cost of \$17.71 per square foot. The table below shows historical cost as well as substantial increases to lease commitments to the future.

	Lease costs	% increase	Cost per sq ft
2022	\$36,134	64%	7.43
2023	\$56,057	55%	11.26
2024	\$86,048	54%	17.71
2025	\$86,048	0%	17.71
2026	*\$50,195	N/A	17.71

*Lease expires July 31/2026 hence difference.

Considering the financial constraints presented with this significantly rising lease rate, SAR decided to seek a permanent site for future operations. With the provincial funding only covering 40 to 50 per cent of the operational costs and to be fiscally prudent, a solution where the overall facility costs could be reduced will be required to achieve financial stability. Significant donations and supports from individuals and all levels of governments would be needed.

In 2023, a three-year sub-lease agreement entered with SAR for the purpose of the continued use of 857.2 square feet of floor and exterior parking space at the Moray location to support the Comox Valley Emergency Management Service. At 25 per cent of the annual lease cost of this building the following activities are supported;

- Emergency radio communication room back-up.
- Emergency Support Services supplies held within a 20ft C-Can cache storage.
- A 40-kw mobile generator and shelter.
- Availability of an alternate programs/training / meeting location when Harmston office is not available.
- Backup EOC space as needed.

Sub-lease costs are paid for through the 270 Comox Valley Emergency Management Service. The 2024-2028 financial plan includes a budgeted expenditure of \$22,040 annually. The space requirements are under review.

6. Service Responsibilities and Financing

Regional Emergency Services is a CVRD core service and is committed to support the operation and coordination of a regional service in preparation for emergencies and to meet the new provincial *Emergency and Disaster Management Act*. Support of SAR through the service establishment bylaw and annual unconditional grant, represents one component of emergency services for the Comox Valley. In 2024, Service 265 Search and Rescue – Comox Valley included unconditional grants of \$153,810. Of that amount, the following details the various agencies receiving funds.

- The SAR \$50,000
- CV Marine Rescue Society \$25,000
- Courtenay Rescue #71 \$21,400
- Cumberland Fire Rescue #8 \$12,760 and #4 \$21,650
- Comox Rescue #36 \$20,000
- Mid-Island Air Search and Rescue \$3,000

The 2024-2028 financial plan includes \$50,000 annually for the SAR. CVRD contributes to operations annually as part of regionally funded service.

Subsequent to a delegation request, in 2023, the CVRD Board approved the reserve contributions of \$100,000 per year, for the next five years, to support the purchase or construction of a building. As well, the annual unconditional grant was increased by \$16,000 to \$50,000. The financial plan includes an annual operating grant of \$50,000 across all five years.

7. Benchmarks and Comparisons

The following four organizations are highlighted as benchmark comparisons

Nanaimo SAR

- Building renovations cost \$2.5M
- Two phase project and funding approach – Phase 1-required building safety upgrades – Phase 2 – actual renovations
- City land was provided.
- 25 years co-management agreement for the facility between City and NSAR
- NSAR received an anonymous 1M -dollar donation.

Arrowsmith SAR

- Building original cost estimate was \$675,000- actual \$1.2M.
- Town of Qualicum Beach provided land under a 40-year agreement.
 - Credit union helped them secure loan to enable completing project (\$500,000)
 - Awarded provincial gaming grant of \$250,000.
 - Several community organizations contributed large donations.

Vernon SAR

- Land and new building \$3.6M end cost- (\$800,000 over budget)
- Regional District of North Okanagan went to Public Alternative Approval Process with \$3.5M for land/building which was approved.
-

Chilliwack SAR

- \$3M demolishing and rebuild ground-breaking started Jan 2024
- City offered use of their lands as alternative sites were not found and provided \$1M.
 - Chilliwack SAR worked 15 years to save \$1M.
- Building will be completed in phases.

Please note the above comparisons were obtained from various sources of information and not all financial documents were obtained to confirm the amounts.

Requirements – New Facility

The following provides approximate ground search and rescue facility requirements:

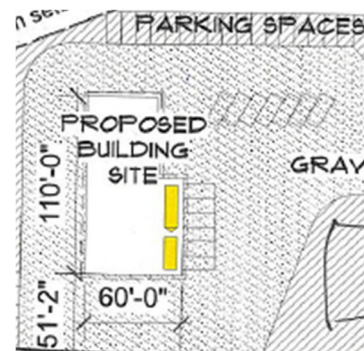
- 1.2 acres to include building and parking.
- 5500 sq feet to include six vehicle bays, offices, training room and equipment storage.
- SAR has identified they could build a structure for \$2.5 to 3M.

Comox Valley Search & Rescue New Hall and Operations Facility

- 1 Proposed Building - 5568 sf (517 m²)
 - Emergency Response Vehicle & Equipment Storage
 - Offices
 - Training room and facilities
- Gravel Parking and access
- 2 Auxillary non-permanent storage structures

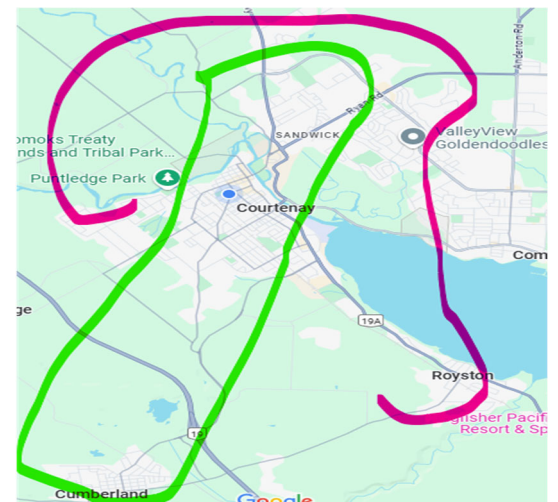
Operational response time is a primary consideration.

- Most time sensitive calls are typically swift water incidents as such rapid access to the Puntledge River is considerable although no provincial requirements exist for response times.
- Good access to Highway 19; required for response to Strathcona Park, south to Cook and Rosewall Creek areas and north to the Oyster River.
- Central location for all members to access the facility for distribution, movement of equipment and vehicles.
- Good cell phone coverage and the ability to access the Mt. Washington and CV Hospital repeater locations.
- Availability of high-speed internet (essential for mapping activities and field resource management during tasks).
- Safe entrance and exit from site.



The map to the right shows SARs preferred facility location area (*Red – max / Green- preferred*)

Zoning is critical element when acquiring either public or private property. Many properties will likely require rezoning to support SAR operations. For example, in the CVRD if rezoning needs to occur emergency use, institutional use and assembly use should all be considered as part of rezoning. Other information about municipal jurisdiction zoning is best discussed with their respective planning departments. SAR is strongly encouraged to have zoning discussions prior to completion of a purchase



property and should not necessarily view zoning as a major barrier to property acquisition.

8. Exploration of Potential Sites to Date

Over the years, multiple sites have been considered for single use or joint use between SAR and the CVRD. Table 1 provides a summary of the recent work undertaken by SAR and CVRD staff over the last two years to help identify a site.

Table 1 –Site Considerations

	Location	Status
1	Water Treatment Plant	SAR determined it is not suitable at this time
2	Visitor Centre and adjacent lands	Site assessment is underway, unrelated to SAR property search; outcome will inform opportunities
3	South Sewer offices in Royston	Site too small and too expensive to deconstruct
9	East Water Towers site	Space analysis has deemed SAR building footprint needs will not fit this location especially with planned future expansion.
12	Water Tower in Crown Isle area	Currently poor for response access. CVRD encourages SAR to consider in future if required
13	Private sites	At least five private sites were considered over the last two years by SAR, and future work will continue to evaluate private property

Table 1 reflects only one CVRD property readily available being the water treatment plant; it does not suit the geographic locational needs defined by SAR.

Table 2 Recent Real Estate Transactions For comparison, some past examples of sales within SARs preferred area to guide realistic market cost expectations. Some examples are in the Agricultural Land Reserve.

Address	City	Lot Size (acres)	Type of Sale	Zoning	Building On Site	List Price	Sale Price	Year Closed
2980 Arden Road	Courtenay	6.79	Commercial	R-1A	No	\$949,900	\$1,150,000	2022
Lt 4 Pritchard Road	Comox	4.81	Other	R1.1	No	\$1,275,000	\$100,000	2021
Lot 30 Sand Pines Crescent	Comox	1.43	Residential	R1	No	\$599,999	\$631,000	2024
Lot A Lazo Road	Comox	1.86	Residential	R1	No	\$545,000	\$480,000	2024
5087 Headquarters Road	Courtenay	6.8	Residential	R1	No	\$978,000	\$950,000	2024
Lot A Forbidden Plateau Road	Courtenay	3.76	Residential	R1	No	\$399,900	\$375,000	2024
Lot 4 Burns Road W	Courtenay	5.9	Residential	ALR	No	\$679,000	\$625,000	2024
Lot 60 Sand Pines Crescent	Comox	1.02	Residential	R1	No	\$585,000	\$510,000	2023
Lot 4 Cumberland Road	Courtenay	1.78	Residential	R1	No	\$1,000,000	\$975,000	2022
Lot 2 Back Road	Courtenay	2	Residential	R1	No	\$799,000	\$921,000	2022
Lot 2 Hatfield Place	Courtenay	2.46	Residential	R1	No	\$699,990	\$726,500	2022
Lot 4 Mountain Spirit Way	Courtenay	4.97	Residential	R1	No	\$699,900	\$712,500	2022
Lot 11 Idiens Way	Comox	5.65	Residential	R1	No	\$1,100,000	\$1,025,000	2021
Lot A Wiltshire Road	Comox	5.7	Residential	R1	No	\$769,000	\$760,000	2021
Lot 4 Island Hwy S	Royston	2	Residential	R1	No	\$1,500,000	\$1,561,000	2022
4680/4694 Headquarters Road	Courtenay	10.3	Residential	RR-5	Yes	\$4,500,000	\$3,796,000	2021
4767 Headquarters Road	Courtenay	4	Commercial	R1-A	Yes	\$1,365,000	\$1,200,000	2022
Lot A Sea Lion Way	Comox	1.01	Residential	R1	Yes	\$649,900	\$775,000	2024
2620 Farmview Road	Courtenay	2.86	Residential	R1	Yes	\$44,900	\$42,000	2023
6491 Eagles Drive	Courtenay	1.14	Residential	R1	Yes	\$625,000	\$570,000	2022
Lot 10 Torrence Road	Comox	2.01	Residential	R1	Yes	\$950,000	\$850,000	2023
Lot 20 Torrence Road	Comox	3.58	Residential	R1	Yes	\$758,000	\$725,000	2020
4759 Headquarters Road	Courtenay	4	Residential	R1-A	Yes	\$588,900	\$578,900	2021
3747 Island Hwy S	Royston	1.64	Industrial	IL	Yes	\$1,488,000	\$1,370,000	2022
4628 Madrona Place	Courtenay	1.49	Industrial	I-2	Yes	\$2,000,000	\$1,900,000	2022

9. Partnership Opportunities

During initial meetings held in February 2024, a partnership between the CVRD and SAR was suggested to determine a suitable location and building scheme for a future home base for Search and Rescue and CVRD needs. Concepts discussed a CVRD owned space (land and building) that is leased on a long-term basis to Search and Rescue. SAR had hesitations about this approach for long term viability but has indicated a willingness to remain open to discussions.

The CVRD is also experiencing space constraints in several services. The acquisition of a property has the potential to address such needs. Space constraints currently identified are briefly detailed.

- Parks service - centrally located compound for operational space to store materials and supplies.
 - 400 sq feet Indoor storage
 - 900 sq feet covered and secure storage.
 - 1,500 sq feet outside space to house two parks containers and fenced compound for materials. Space must accommodate vehicle and machinery entry and exit.
- Regional Emergency Services/CV Emergency Management for redundancy and equipment storage.
 - Confirm back up EOC location.
 - relocate backup emergency radio equipment from Moray.
 - Emergency Support Service program would benefit from a large training/meeting room space for services as Harmston Civic room is getting harder to schedule and hold bookings.
 - storage space
 - one 40KW mobile generator and one 8x10 ESS response trailer (need shelter)
 - One 20' C-can with ESS and CVEM response supplies
 - FM portable radio station
 - Pub Ed materials and supplies (Brochures, tents)
- Other CVRD discussions
 - New recreation facilities have been proposed in the past.
 - Other community well-being facilities.

10. Options and Recommendations

For the advancement of the following options the following factors and assumptions were considered

- Land costs are between \$800,000 and 1.2M. For this analysis 1M has been chosen as the mean.
- Building costs are 2.5M which 1.3 M has been raised through fund raising and CVRD contributions.

Total cost for building and land is anticipated to be approximately 3.5M.

Option 1 Status Quo

CVRD continues to budget \$100,000 per year for five years with the final contribution in 2027. Operational funding of \$50,000 continues.

- Operations contribution continues at \$50,000 per year to SAR.
- renegotiate lease in 2025; lease expires August 2026 to determine if CVRD will continue to partner in current location.
 - CVRD is considering their need to share the existing site and actively planning possible relocation if the lease is not renewed.

Option 2 CVRD Invests More Heavily in SAR

Commit an additional \$100,000 for the next three years (2025-2027)= \$300,000 annually for a total CVRD contribution of \$800,000 to SAR by 2027. Operational funding of \$50,000 continues.

- Maintain an ongoing option if the CVRD purchases land for CVRD purposes that leasing back a portion to SAR should continue to be explored.
- The public lands options viability is limited based on the Table 1 analysis.

Option 3 SAR Purchase Privately Owned Property

SAR approaches CVRD for funding commitment to contribute to purchase of land to be privately held by SAR and/or partners when appropriate.

- The land availability with proper zoning is challenging and is not a priority for the CVRD currently without Board direction.
- Could be an excellent opportunity to co-locate in ideal location with partners which could include the CVRD.
- The CVRD can not purchase land directly for SAR through borrowing as the CVRD has to own the asset.

Option 4 Purchase existing building

In the past the Property owner has indicated he would consider selling SAR .

- SAR does not feel property has long term viability.
 - do not have enough parking.
 - the training room is getting small for the size of team.

- the building has some pending capital projects.

SAR remains the decision-maker on this property and if they want to further pursue the CVRD will await their updates.

11.Recommendation Option 2

The proposed 2025-2029 financial plan for the Service 265 Comox Valley Search and Rescue be approved with an additional \$100,000 contribution to reserves per year for three years (2025- 2027) to further support CVGSAR's facility needs. (This will bring the total CVRD overall support to \$800,000.)