



NIAGARA REGIONAL POLICE SERVICE

Police Services Board Report

PUBLIC AGENDA

Subject: Niagara River Rescue and Recovery Operations
Report To: Chair and Members, Niagara Police Services Board
Report Date: 2022-05-04

Recommendation(s)

That the Niagara Police Services Board receive information, in response to the Board direction of January 27, 2022, related to rescue and body recovery in the Niagara River basin.

Key Facts

- The purpose of this report is to provide details related to the operations toward rescues and body recoveries in the Niagara River Basin
- The Niagara Regional Police Service and the Niagara Parks Police work in partnership for these operations and investigations
- Niagara City Cruises (formerly known as Hornblower) assists in rescue and recovery procedures in the Niagara River basin.

Financial Considerations

Not applicable.

Analysis

The Niagara Regional Police Service (NRPS) and the Niagara Parks Police (NPP) respond to rescue, body recovery, and suicide incidents on the Niagara River every year. The difficult terrain, swift water, and suicide attempts common to the Niagara River area require that the police, and other first responders, be trained and prepared to deploy to the Niagara River as quickly as possible. The NRPS and NPP train each year, along with Niagara Falls Fire Department and Niagara EMS, to prepare for rescue operations in the Niagara Gorge. This training includes swift water rescue operations.

The NRPS Marine Unit is guided by policy to respond to all water-based emergencies and investigations. This includes drownings and marine related fatalities. The investigation of circumstances surrounding these events is, by policy and jurisdiction, the responsibility of the NRPS.

The events that occur in the Niagara River basin, below the Horseshoe Falls, present significant challenges for rescue and recovery operations. Navigation of these waters requires specific training, and deployment of vessels that are capable to withstand the difficult conditions. The NRPS Marine Unit cannot navigate to this area of the Niagara River with the vessel that is deployed in the lower river area, due to the treacherous class of rapids that are located down-river from the basin. The removal and transporting of an NRPS vessel to this area would cause significant delay to rescue or recovery efforts.

The NPP, due to their area of patrol and responsibilities, are most often the first responders to arrive to the incidents along the Niagara River. The NPP deploys officers to the area of the river basin during the summer months due to the significant population of tourists attending to enjoy the opportunities provided by Niagara City Cruises.

The NPP also has specially trained officers in the High Angle River Team (HART). These officers have expertise in the hazards presented in rescue efforts within the Niagara Gorge. The training received by the members of HART includes swift water rescue and training in body recovery.

The Niagara Parks Commission has engaged Niagara City Cruises (NCC), through contract, to provide a tour boat service in the Niagara River basin. As part of this agreement, NCC is required to provide assistance during rescue and recovery operations and provides access to a capable rescue vessel and qualified operators.

NCC also recognizes that they are responsible under Section 132 of the Canada Shipping Act, which directs, "The master of a vessel in Canadian waters and every qualified person who is the master of a vessel in any waters shall render assistance to every person who is found at sea and in danger of being lost".

A strong partnership, and protocol, has been developed between NCC and the NPP for rescue and recovery procedures. General Order policy has been developed with significant detail to guide the response of the NPP to rescue and recovery events. This includes training directly with NCC operators on an annual basis. The training includes the use of specialty equipment used in both swift water rescue and for the recovery of bodies.

In the event of a report that a person is in the water in the Niagara River basin, it is imperative that rescue efforts are deployed as soon as possible. The protocol developed between NPP and NCC recognizes that they are the two responsible parties best positioned and prepared to deploy rapidly to these emergencies. Regardless of the description of any person reported to be in the water, all responses are treated as a rescue operation as death cannot initially be assumed.

The NPP notifies the NRPS immediately when a rescue and/or recovery situation is reported in the basin. NRPS communications will notify and dispatch a response from uniform officers, Marine Unit, and investigators to the scene. If required, the NRPS will also deploy forensic officers and coordinate contact with the Coroner's office.

A review of reports related to attempted rescue and body recovery in the Niagara River Basin was conducted for the 10-year period of May 2012 to April 2022. This time period covers the transition from Maid of the Mist operations to that of Hornblower Cruises.

- 17 incidents involved the direct assistance of the tour companies.
- 10 of the reported incidents were initiated by the tour companies as a result of a deceased body being discovered at or near their boat docks. This is due to the nature of the river current in the basin.
- Other reports involved the attempts to locate persons that had recently gone over the falls.
- Four reports involved the tour company assisting in locating, and attempting rescue, within 30 minutes of the person entering the water.

It is important to recognize that when a rescue effort unfortunately becomes a body recovery in the Niagara River, it also requires a sense of urgency. The ability to recover a body may change quickly in the currents of the Niagara River and, in some circumstances, there may not be a second opportunity for recovery. It is necessary to take all safe steps available in a timely manner to recover the body for purposes of identity and evidence-based reasons for further investigation. It is also an expectation of the community and family of the deceased to make those extraordinary efforts.

Alternatives Reviewed

To have the NRPS take the lead operational response in the Niagara River basin would require owning and operating a vessel in the area. This has not been considered as it would be both cost and resource prohibitive.

Relationship to Police Service/Board Strategic Priorities

Not applicable.

Relevant Policy Considerations

General Order 144.07 – Marine Unit

General Order 028.12 – Sudden Death and Homicide Investigations

Niagara Parks Police Service – General Order 013 - Recovery and Identification of Human Remains

Other Pertinent Reports

Not applicable.

This report was prepared by Brian Ash, Superintendent, Emergency & Investigative Services, in consultation with Paul Forcier, Chief of Police, Niagara Parks Police Service, and recommended by Brett Flynn, Deputy Chief, Operational Services.



Submitted by:

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Appendices

Not applicable.