

# **CITY OF WILLIAMS LAKE**



## ***Making young worker safety a cultural issue***

Keeping young workers safe calls for a three-part culture of communication, consistency and common sense. That's the approach taken by the City of Williams Lake, according to Director of Municipal Services Kevin Goldfuss.

"It's critical that we establish from the first day that the organization functions within a culture of safety, that this is the way it's done, the way everyone works — and any other approach is simply not acceptable," Goldfuss says.

Among those who recently heard that message were five college and university students taking four-month summer jobs in the parks and roads departments. They joined a municipal work force of 117, of which more than one fifth are regular employees younger than 25 years.

The city ensures that the students' orientation and training parallels that given its regularly employed young workers.

The initial exposure to Williams Lake's safety culture includes a presentation by Goldfuss who covers general work and safety issues. A local WorkSafeBC field officer also shows and leads a discussion on the *Lost Youth* video. Produced by the safety agency, it features graphic re-enactments of serious young worker injuries, as well as interviews with each actual worker who talks about what happened and the difficult aftermath.

That sets the stage for two days in which the new, young municipal employees are oriented to all the specific sites where they'll work and to the safe use of any equipment that may be involved. When they start do working, newcomers are always paired with experienced staff who mentor them.

"Even after mentoring, we don't like younger employees working alone," says Goldfuss. "This may mean two students working together, but only if we're comfortable they're up to speed. Even then, regular staff supervise them continually."

As their work activities are comparatively limited, the summer students' don't receive orientation and training as comprehensive as that of regular young workers — who must meet certain benchmarks for specific tasks and equipment and whose performance is tracked and logged.

“We are very diligent about young workers being fully qualified and safe for their assigned scope of work,” says Goldfuss. He believes it's important to pay special attention to:

- ▶ Youthful exuberance that may lead young workers to rush through tasks, so they may need to be told more than once to “take the extra time to do it right. No one with a whip is standing behind you.”
- ▶ Potentially failing to ask questions because of shyness or not wanting to admit ignorance. “You get a pulse on who's who, and those are the ones requiring a bit more communications in terms of checking that they understand a task or having them demonstrate it.”
- ▶ How quickly young workers raise workplace safety issues. “They should be encouraged to apply their common sense” and bring concerns to the attention of co-workers, lead hands and foremen without delay.

“When young workers come to the City of Williams Lake,” says Goldfuss, “this is what the culture expects — be observant, be cautious, take time, ask questions. It's our job to help them do all that.”