

2nd meeting held on jail site

Families of inmates rarely move to the area that houses provincially-run correctional facilities because the time spent there is minimal. This point was made several times by Brent Merchant, assistant deputy minister, B.C. Corrections branch at a town hall forum held Tuesday at the Penticton Trade and Convention Centre.

This was the second meeting on the topic regarding a proposed facility in Penticton. The crowd was significantly smaller than a previous meeting and many left before the three-and-a-half-hour meeting concluded.

Merchant said there's confusion between federal and provincial institutions. He said that with short-term stays, inmates are often moved from one prison to another (based on bed availability) and for a family to move to that community would be illogical.

"With provincial the stays are so short... often six months with time off for good behaviour," said Merchant. "People get out quickly and families don't move... none of them." He said consideration is often given to the inmate to keep them as close to their home base as possible.

"Once they're done their stay, they want to go home. Some have families, maybe a wife or girlfriend and others want to be with their friends." Three proposed locations were revealed to the public -- 616 Okanagan Ave. E (the public works yard), 780 Okanagan Ave. E. (Cantex gravel pit) and a 147-acre parcel at Campbell Mountain.

While the crowd appeared to be mostly opposed to the idea of welcoming a prison within city boundaries, a poll revealed 102 in attendance were opposed and 84 were in favour.

Of the proposed sites, Campbell Mountain was the most often preferred. Cantex was a close second and the city yards a distant third.

On questions of security, Merchant said the new prisons are being built to the highest standards with metal doors, locking pins, hundreds of cameras and reinforced concrete.

Inmate work programs include dealing with invasive weeds, working at a fish hatchery on B.C.'s coast, preparing BMX tracks, working at baseball diamonds (when young people are not in attendance) and cleaning hoses which are used in fighting B.C.'s forest fires.

These programs are done under direct supervision, inmates are dressed so they're easily recognizable and there's no interaction with the public.

Merchant said once a prison is built, residents often forget it exists. He said employees become part of the community by offering an annual scholarship. A Citizens Advisory Board is also established and in other parts of the province some even include two Grade 12 students.

"We try and be good corporate citizens," he said. "There's seldom a concern but when there is, we try and address it so that it's a win/win situation."