

# A new home for justice; Modern courthouse worth upwards of \$50 million

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Byline: Rochelle Baker

The City of Abbotsford has made a new justice centre, to replace its aging and inadequate courthouse and police station, one of its top priorities in 2011.

Mayor George Peary said Abbotsford is in dire need of a new courthouse, the cost of which is estimated to be least \$50 million, not including the desired expansion of the police headquarters.

"Our court facilities are grossly inadequate by any objective measure. They simply don't serve our citizens well," said Peary, adding the new justice centre is an old idea.

The city identified the need for a new courthouse as early as 1996.

The city and the Abbotsford Police Department (APD) envision a complex that would allow all the players involved in the justice system, such as police, Crown counsel, sheriffs' services and corrections to work more effectively together within the same building, said Peary.

It would also relieve the pressure on the APD, which has badly outgrown its current headquarters.

"All these different stakeholders have a role in the administration of justice but work in separate silos," said Peary.

"Co-location would lead to efficiencies and improve communication between the various people involved."

The bug in the ointment is, as always, funding, Peary said.

"The issue is what we'd like and what we can afford," he said, noting council has no appetite to go to a public referendum to ask taxpayers to take on more debt.

Paying for police station is a city responsibility, but funding for a courthouse falls to the province.

Abbotsford has asked the Solicitor General to consider funding a consultant to undertake a professional business case study and talk to all the potential stakeholders.

One possible approach to tackling the financial challenges would be to consider a public private partnership (P3), said Peary.

"It's no secret the province is keen on P3s," he said.

"[The complex] could be built by a private sector developer that speculates there might be opportunities for new facilities . . . and a concession agreement over 25 or 30 years."

However there is no guarantee other agencies would agree to become part of the project.

"A consultant would have to determine the appetite of other players to join the endeavour," Peary said.

Abbotsford Police Chief Bob Rich agreed a justice centre that pulls all the partners of the legal system together makes good sense.

"I believe the next evolution of our criminal justice system is our need to work together better," said Rich.

"I've had a couple meetings with partners with partners in Abbotsford about why a justice centre could be a really innovative change."

The centre might even include a community court similar to the one recently established in Vancouver, which takes into account offenders health, social or addiction problems acting as the underlying causes of criminal behaviour, Rich said.

Deputy sheriff John Silvester, BCEGU chair of Abbotsford local 104, said the courthouse was actually designed in the 60's to house city hall and the police and fire departments.

The city and regions growth has outpaced the building's capacity, Silvester said.

"The courthouse not only looks after Abbotsford, Mission, incidents along the U.S./Canada border and the freeway, but we also have five federal prisons in our jurisdiction," he said, adding Abbotsford is one of the busiest courthouses in the province.

"If we're not in the top five we're just outside of it."

The Abbotsford provincial courthouse has five courtrooms, but only four have the security measures in place to transfer prisoners to and from the cellblock in the basement.

Simiran Lakshman president of the B.C. Crown Counsel Association, noted there are no supreme court facilities in Abbotsford, meaning all those cases must head to New Westminster or Chilliwack, which adds to the backlog at those locations.

It also puts additional strain on Abbotsford police officers who spend longer away from work when called upon to testify.

Abbotsford provincial court doesn't have the capability of dealing with high-security cases, said Lakshman.

"It's not a secure facility and there's not enough security for gang trial [such as those involving the Bacon brothers], he said.

All such cases are shipped to Surrey, which is facing a case backlog even more daunting than that of Abbotsford.

Abbotsford is currently facing a delay of 9 to 12 months for a case to come to trial, he said, noting that a case falls into danger of being thrown out with delays of 15 months. Surrey is facing trial delays as long as 15 to 18 months, he said.

Regardless of whether or not Abbotsford is able to secure new facilities, the backlogs and security issues might still persist.

"It's not just a facility issue," said Lakshman.

"Many courtrooms go empty despite delays, and that's a result of a lack of judges, clerks, sheriffs, and counsels.

"They are all a part [of the justice system], and if you don't have any or all of them, it won't solve the problem."

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