

Capacity at new Okanagan jail worries union

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While it's still unknown why an industrial park near Oliver was chosen as the ideal site for a new Okanagan jail, the need for the facility is quite clear: B.C. is running out of places to park its inmates.

As of September 2011, provincial jails were operating at about 180 per cent of capacity, according to figures provided by B.C. Corrections in a briefing note sent to the Minister of Public Safety.

Provincial jails hold prisoners who are awaiting trial or serving sentences of under two years.

"Safety of public, staff and inmates is at risk," noted another document that was among a batch of records that explain the rationale for the new jail and was sent to the B.C. NDP in response to a freedom of information request. The party provided those documents to the *Western News*.

B.C. Corrections estimated that its inmate population would peak around 3,000 this year, about double the 1,517 cells it had in operation, according to a November 2011 briefing note. That means most prisoners have to be double-bunked in a cell with another inmate.

"Double-bunking has become the norm now, but it causes the living units to be overcrowded," said Dean Purdy, who looks after correctional workers for the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union, and that ultimately leads to more violence.

The documents also point out that jails are coping with an increase in prisoners who need to bunk alone, such as high-profile gangsters or the mentally ill.

"Our jails are becoming the default mental health facilities due to the lack of institutions," Purdy said.

Even with 320 new cells expected to come online at two jails in the Lower Mainland in the next two years, about 81 per cent of provincial inmates are still forecast to be double-bunked by 2014, according to the documents. That estimate drops to 62 per cent by 2016 with the addition of 360 cells at the new Okanagan jail.

But the wild card is new tough-on-crime legislation adopted by the federal government that could result in an additional 471 new provincial inmates who would push up the double-bunking rate to 78 per cent by 2016, according to the government's best estimate.

NDP public safety critic Kathy Corrigan said the documents show the Liberal government ignored overcrowding in jails for too long.

"So what we then have as a result is a province that is desperately playing catch-up now."

Corrigan also said B.C. should have weighed in on the federal crime legislation, specifically provisions that impose mandatory minimum jail terms for some minor offences and remove the possibility of community sentences for others. That will push up correctional costs for the province.

“I know we would have stood up much more strongly on the issue of the federal crime bill and the impacts it’s going to have on B.C.,” said Corrigan, who added her party supports some parts of the legislation, such as provisions that get tough with sexual predators.

If the NDP forms government next spring, she said, it will carry on with construction of the Okanagan jail and assess the need for more cells once it has complete access to B.C. Corrections data.

Besides double-bunking, the other big issue for correctional officers is the staff-to-inmate ratio at B.C. jails.

The ratio had been set at 1:20 prior to 2002, when the new Liberal government began closing down jails and laying off correctional officers, according to Purdy.

Purdy said the union has been told the 360 cells at the Okanagan jail will be divided into 10 double-bunked units, each supervised by a single officer, for a staff-to-inmate ratio of 1:72.

“That’s a big concern for us,” he said, and one that he has raised with both the provincial government and WorkSafeBC.

A written statement from the government communications branch said the jail is expected to hold 500 inmates on average in a mix of segregation units, medical units and regular living units. Brent Merchant, the assistant deputy minister responsible for B.C. Corrections, said via email that inmates are placed based on risk assessments “rather than a simple staff-to-inmate formula that does not take into consideration the complex nature of the individuals being supervised, nor the physical design of the living unit.”

Merchant, who signed off on some of the FOI documents, also said double-bunking, “where risk assessments support this decision, has become commonplace to address capacity pressures in correctional centres across Canada and North America.”