

Finally snared by the long arm of cuts

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Building a new 360-cell jail in the Okanagan was pitched Monday as solid progress on the justice front. It's more like running furiously to catch up.

The badly needed jail cells will open for business in 2015, which is about 12 years after the B.C. Liberals started turning a problem into a crisis.

They followed the tried and true budgeting formula over the first term of assigning cuts partly on the basis of visibility. So when health and education (high visibility) were exempted from real cuts, it fell to lower-profile services to take the hits.

And the corrections service - generally behind walls on the outside of town - was an easy place to start. It's one of the lowest-profile government sectors of all. And its clientele is not in the best position to argue. But you can draw a direct line from those first-term budget cuts to the pervasive crisis in much of the justice system today.

The 2003 service plan, for example, projected huge budget cuts in Corrections, from \$217 million a year to \$173 million. It cut capital expenditures to zero for three years and projected 400 fewer jobs.

The plan doubled the inmate to staff ratio and cut the number of institutions almost in half.

To make the numbers work, it also arbitrarily cut the expected average population in the jails by a few hundred, based on no discernible reason. (They admitted in a footnote the number depends on court sentences, not corrections plans.)

It created problems that grew into one component of the crisis the justice system finds itself in today - when the choked system does manage to declare someone an offender and sentence them to jail, there's nowhere to put them.

By 2007, the festering problems that were growing, largely out of sight behind the walls, were so hard to ignore the government itself commissioned a study. An outside consultant, Fisher and Associates, was hired to do an "organizational health assessment" of guards in the adult custody division.

The firm found that over the previous five years, Corrections had undergone major restructuring and deep cuts to staffing levels.

Ten centres were closed and a substantial proportion of remaining staff were redistributed to other centres, resulting in bumping and significant disruption. Inmate counts continued to rise over the interval, and the centres were required to deal with increased counts.

The study said the profile of offenders changed. It was a younger, more volatile population containing more psychiatrically compromised inmates.

"Through this difficult interval the corporate culture has been impacted, staff morale has suffered and the personal costs have been high."

So much for blithely assuming incarceration can be done better, cheaper.

By 2010, the government had realized it had stressed the system to the snapping point. So a rebuilding effort began.

There was a \$185-million makeup effort that involves 20 new cells in Prince George, 104 at the Alouette Centre for Women and 210 at Surrey Pretrial Centre, where work is just getting underway.

And now another \$200-----million plan to build 360 cells in an industrial park owned by the Osoyoos Indian Band, alongside Highway 97 a few minutes north of Oliver.

Monday's decision brings to an end an 18-month-long economic development derby that ranged the length of the Okanagan Valley.

Five local governments, including two Indian bands, expressed interest at the outset: Lumby, Summerland, Penticton, Penticton Indian Band and the Osoyoos band.

Penticton bowed out, but there was intense local debate at some of the other venues over whether bidding for a jail was a good idea. Lumby, for instance, held a nonbinding referendum in which the village voted slightly in favour but the outskirts voted against, and narrowly carried the day. The eventual winner turned out to be the Osoyoos band, led by one of the shrewdest entrepreneurial First Nations leaders in Canada: Chief Clarence Louie.

The engaging chief has already garnered \$2.7 million in federal funding to get an industrial park up and running.

Now he has a big new anchor tenant that will employ 240 people and likely pay off the band's \$1-million investment in no time.

The 470-member band has a range of businesses on the go, including the first Indian-owned winery (Nk'mip Cellars) in North America, and a canyon desert golf course.