

December 7, 2010 - Courts : Government consultations begin on a new jail in the Okanagan; other issues explored in meeting with minister (Nation Talk)

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Vancouver, Dec. 7 - The provincial government has announced that consultations will start with local governments, First Nations and other organizations on the building of a new jail in the Okanagan.

The announcement was made yesterday and confirmed by Solicitor General Rich Coleman during a meeting with representatives from the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union (BCGEU).

"The announcement of a round of consultations is a step in the right direction," said Darryl Walker, BCGEU president. "Our union has made it clear to the government that the serious overcrowding issues in existing facilities has led to increased tension and violence against correctional officers.

"We support the move by the government to consult on the building of a new jail, but want to underline the need for consultation with community groups," said Walker. "No one, including ourselves, wants a jail forced on a community."

The BCGEU has been raising concerns about overcrowded jails for months and has pointed to other problems in the correctional system.

"While we look forward to the consultations, there are other issues the minister must address," said Dean Purdy, chair of the union's correctional and sheriff services component. "The government policy of having one correctional officer working alone in a living unit with 60 inmates is far too dangerous and has to change.

"In our meeting with the minister, he agreed to review the policy on staff-to-inmate ratios," said Purdy. "The overcrowding and violence in our jails has led to a situation where a correctional officer may be killed, and that cannot happen."

The overcrowding issue was highlighted on November 10 when there was a violent attack on an officer by an inmate at the North Fraser Pretrial Centre. The officer is still recovering from the attack. This was the 30th assault on staff at that jail in the past two years.

"We made it clear to the minister that the violence has to end. I'm pleased that he has agreed to visit the North Fraser Pretrial Centre and meet with our members to get first hand an account of the dangerous situation we face everyday," said Purdy.

Also addressed in the meeting were wages for correctional officers and the impacts of the federal government's "tough on crime legislation." Purdy also pointed out how correctional officers in BC are falling down the list on wages when compared to other provinces, and considerably below the union's federal counterparts.

"It would appear that the government has heard our concerns and that we are making some progress. However, there is a long way to go yet," said Walker.