

Have you joined our Customer Idea Exchange yet? We're looking for your input - please [read about our new Idea Exchange contest!](#)



Jail pros outweigh cons for 2 cities; Mayors of prison towns in Alberta, B.C. offer insight as province mulls site for jail in Okanagan

Okanagan Sunday
Sun Jan 2 2011
Page: A1 / Front
Section: News
Byline: Joe Fries
Source: Special to The Okanagan Sunday

As municipal leaders and others debate the best site for a new prison in the Okanagan, mayors in two jail towns say the economic benefits outweigh the resultant social costs.

In December, B.C. Solicitor General Rich Coleman reaffirmed the province's desire to build a new jail somewhere in the Okanagan to ease pressure at overburdened facilities in Kamloops and elsewhere.

Leaders in Summerland and Lake Country have gone on record saying they don't want the jail, while Lumby's mayor has said his community would welcome it.

Drumheller Mayor Terry Yemen doesn't understand what all the fuss is about.

"Grab it," he advised his Okanagan counterparts.

Set in the heart of the Alberta badlands and better known as the dinosaur capital of Canada, Drumheller has also been home to a federal penitentiary since the 1960s.

Drumheller Institution has space for 598 inmates in both minimum- and medium-security settings.

More importantly, said Yemen, it has a staff of about 400 people -- approximately 85 per cent of whom live in town -- with an annual payroll of around \$25 million. That goes a long way in a community of 8,000.

Yemen said the prison workers there earn an average salary of about \$50,000 a year and have a fantastic benefits package through the federal government.

"For a job, it really doesn't get any better than that. Yeah, you are working with the dregs of society and that can get a little depressing, but there's a lot of infrastructure and help for you if you get in a bind," said Yemen, who worked at the prison for 32 years.

"There's a lot of residual benefit, too," he added, like the use of cheap inmate labour for community projects.

On the other side of the coin, the mayor allowed that the in-prison drug trade undoubtedly spills out past the razor wire and "does bring that little bit of a cloud into the community."

Yemen also said that while jailbreaks used to provide a steady source of concern, new security technology means they are "basically a thing of the past."

That's not quite the case at the Prince George Regional Correctional Centre.

"There is an escape from time to time, but usually it's a quick response and (the escapees) don't hang around the community," said Mayor Dan Rogers.

He was reluctant to tell his Okanagan counterparts what to do -- "pardon the pun, (but) there are pros and cons" -- but said playing host to a jail ultimately comes down to dollars and "whether you think there's an overall benefit when you think of the jobs that can be created by it."

Overall, the mayor said, "there haven't been as many negative impacts as you hear when people get concerned about a prison being in their community."

Most inmates who are released "are on parole and heading back to the communities where they came from and where their support is."

Rogers said that in addition to dollars, people may also want to consider their social responsibilities.

"Many of these (inmates) here are from northern British Columbia and trying to straighten out their lives -- hopefully -- and we all have that responsibility to bear the burden, so to speak."

University professor David Shichor has studied the issue of prison siting, and he noted public opinion has changed little over time. People share the same set of concerns around some facilities being built in their area.

"They don't like to have garbage dumps. They don't like to have certain kinds of facilities that can reduce the desirability of the community," said Shichor. "Jail is one of them. You'll never find a jail in an upscale community."

Shichor, 77, is a professor emeritus in criminal justice and taught for more than 20 years at California State University. Several of his articles have been published in academic journals, and he has written a book that discusses the private prison system.

The primary perception, insists Shichor, falls around security because many people express fear of prisoners escaping.

"I think the perception . . . of prisoners breaking out and running away and so on, I think that it is overblown," he said. "Escapes don't occur so often like people believe."

Much of the public's fears exist due to the manner in which TV crime shows depict prison breakouts. He emphasized these type of incidents seldom occur in real life.

In smaller towns and areas experiencing a decline in population, construction of a prison can lift a depressed economy, said Shichor.

"A prison can bring in a lot of jobs and business because families who are coming there, they need supplies and things like that, so they can bring some type of economic benefits."

It's even possible that a community in dire straits might favour construction of a prison facility over safety concerns because of positive economic factors.

The provincial jails in Prince George and Kamloops are the only two such facilities in the B.C. Interior. They house prisoners awaiting trials and those serving sentences under two years.

Most Okanagan offenders are locked up in Kamloops and have to be transported by sheriffs to the Okanagan for court appearances.

Corrections B.C. hopes to complete local consultations on the new jail by 2011, and have it up and running by 2015. The province is pouring \$185 million into its jail system to expand capacity.

About 2,800 inmates are in the provincial correctional system.

Illustration:

• Photo: Yemen

Edition: Final

Story Type: News

Length: 889 words

Idnumber: 201101020002

Tone: Neutral 

Ad Value: \$1,738 

Circulation: 23,429 

Saved Wed Jan 5 2011 12:50 pm ET, in [Clipboard](#)

[Make a note](#)

[Add a comment](#)

© 2006-2011 FPinfomart, a division of Postmedia Network Inc. All Rights Reserved.