



Jailhouse blues; Crowding in Kelowna RCMP cellblock has head of detachment calling for provincial jail in Central Okanagan

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The Okanagan needs a jail and it should be built in the Kelowna area, says the city's top cop.

Kelowna's RCMP cellblock is bursting with prisoners on weekends, prompting Supt. Bill McKinnon to weigh in on a controversy that has dogged Valley leaders for 15 years -- where to locate a new stand-alone jail in the Southern Interior.

"It would make little sense, given the size of Kelowna and the number of cases and prisoners who come from our courthouse, to build (it) outside this district," he said Friday. "There's a real need, given the size of the three regions of the Okanagan." Valley offenders serving less than two years and suspects awaiting trial are usually held at the Kamloops jail, more than two hours' drive from Kelowna. Sheriff buses shuttle them to and from courthouses in Vernon, Kelowna and Penticton.

Politicians in Lumby have pitched the community of 1,800 as the new home for an Okanagan jail, saying it would boost the local economy. However, building it there would do little to relieve pressure on the Valley's most populous area, McKinnon said.

The Okanagan's population is about 300,000 and growing, and Kelowna's RCMP detachment is frequently crammed with inmates awaiting court appearances. The overcrowding is especially acute on weekends, when an average 10 to 15 offenders serving intermittent sentences do their time.

The police cells hold a maximum 54 prisoners -- up to 10 of them intoxicated troublemakers in the drunk tank. If there's overflow, RCMP release the calmer drunks to stay with friends or relatives.

Sheriffs from the Kootenays making a run to the Kamloops jail add extra strain. They often drop off prisoners in Kelowna to avoid booking overtime, and the prisoners continue their journey the next day.

"We're being used as a jail," said McKinnon. "We should have a (provincial) jail because our members are being taken off the roads of Kelowna to deal with the amount of work it takes to book in prisoners." When weekend prisoners fail to show up as scheduled, which happens often, officers have to locate them and do more paperwork, he said. Inmates who show up on a Friday night with serious stomach pains must go to hospital with a police escort, who guards them around the clock.

Those staying in cells can't see visitors, watch TV, take showers or exercise. They can read magazines but no books. One inmate on trial for murder once stayed there for six weeks.

"It is very hard time. I can't think of harder time," McKinnon said. "How much fun would it be serving a sentence in a Kelowna cellblock when drunks and prisoners are brought in 24-7? You hear people yelling and screaming or doors slamming." The District of West Kelowna recently built a new RCMP detachment without cells because it costs a lot to staff them, he said. The Kelowna detachment housed 6,000 individual prisoners last year and spends \$469,000 a year on guard salaries alone.

An Okanagan jail serving all areas of the Valley makes sense fiscally and would shorten travel times for relatives, McKinnon said. He wants to know how many cells should be built when Kelowna replaces its RCMP detachment six or seven years from now.

If a new jail is built, police would need room for 40 prisoners, including drunks. If not, they'd need room for 100.

However, building a jail has ruffled feathers since the NDP government unveiled its plan in 1996 for a 200-bed remand centre on the 6.9-hectare Hiram Walker site on Jim Bailey Road in north Kelowna.

Government cutbacks eventually pushed the \$20-million project off the priority list. The B.C. Liberals tried to launch a minimum-security jail on the same site in January 2008, but then-solicitor general John Les cancelled it when Lake Country Mayor James Baker and the Okanagan Indian band complained no one consulted them.

Baker remains strongly opposed to a jail built only three minutes' drive from downtown Winfield.

"He (McKinnon) would like to see it at this site for his convenience," he said. "I'd rather they involved the police station rather than our downtown." While Baker supports a new remand centre for people awaiting trial, he believes an Okanagan jail for convicted inmates is unnecessary. If patients must travel to Kelowna or the Lower Mainland for medical procedures, he says, why should prisoners be lodged closer to home? "Kamloops doesn't have a cancer centre because Kelowna has one. We don't need a sentencing unit," he said. "The argument 'do the time where you do the crime' is fatuous." Baker points to Surrey, where a jail and remand centre are adjacent to a municipal hall and away from residential areas. Kelowna could build a third storey on the RCMP detachment and convert it to an automated remand unit with secure elevators and corridors, and fewer staff, he said.

Prisoners could use an underground tunnel or overpass to walk to and from the Kelowna Law Courts 100 metres away.

"I don't see how (McKinnon) thinks a provincial institution is going to save taxpayers any money, because we'd have to put the same amount of care in that institution and concentrate prisoners in one setting," he said.

No one from the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General was available for comment Friday. A staffer sent an email saying the ministry is in the midst of a \$185-million capital plan to expand corrections capacity across the province.

The proposed changes would enlarge institutions in Surrey, Prince George and Chilliwack. There's no mention of the Southern Interior, although the email said: "We continue to recognize the long-term need for additional capacity in the Central Interior."

Illustration:

- Colour Photo: McKinnon
- Colour Photo: Gary Nylander, the Okanagan Saturday / Cell No. 17 was empty early Friday afternoon, but it and the 23 other cells at the Kelowna RCMP detachment are full on weekends -- sometimes to overflowing, says Supt. Bill McKinnon. He says a provincial jail should be built in the Central Okanagan.

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