

Lands eyed in prison options; B.C. Corrections officials to discuss proposed prison for Okanagan on March 7 at Centre Stage in Summerland

A portion of the municipal land previously offered as part of the defunct Summerland Hills Golf Resort proposal is now being eyeballed as a possible site for a provincial prison.

Mayor Janice Perrino said Thursday the site is among three municipally-owned parcels and one private property being proposed as a possible prison site. Details will be outlined at an informational meeting early next month.

B.C. Corrections officials will discuss the proposed medium-security prison for the Okanagan on March 7 at 6:30 p.m. at the Centre Stage Theatre in Summerland. Similar meetings will be held at the Penticton Trade and Convention Centre on March 8 at 6 p.m., and at the Penticton Indian Band community hall March 9 at 7 p.m.

A recent municipal survey indicated that 56 per cent of the 869 respondents supported further investigation by council into the prison proposal. Forty-four per cent were opposed.

Perrino admitted the survey result was close, but council decided to continue to investigate the matter. "It has always been a concern that this is one of those issues that divides communities," she said. "However, it clearly shows that there is ample interest for us to pursue this, so we're taking the next step."

The municipality has sent details of the proposed sites to the provincial government for review, prior to the March 7 meeting.

"That doesn't mean that we're picking one of them, but it means that they'd be viable" Perrino said.

The mayor confirmed that one of the sites is part of the 120 hectares the district had offered to sell to the developers of the proposed golf resort. A minimum of eight hectares is needed for the prison.

The developers pulled the plug on the Summerland Hills project in January 2010, citing a lack of financing and the general economic downturn. Their option to purchase the municipal land expired last February.

Perrino said the provincial government's announcement that a site at the north end of Kelowna was not acceptable, has given the South Okanagan a higher profile in the hunt for a prison location.

She said although council members will attend the upcoming public meeting, they will only be there to listen to the presentation by B.C. Corrections staff. "I don't think they'll do a sales pitch, I think what they want to do is answer questions from the public," she said.

Those attending will also be presented with another survey, asking whether they are for or against the prison and which site they would prefer. If a majority support the district going forward, the municipality will formally submit the site proposals to the province.

Perrino added she'd personally like to see a public plebiscite held, if the application gets to that stage. The non-binding vote would give council a further indication of community support.

"This divides the community as it is, so we need to keep them well-informed and allowing them, I think, to make the decision."

However, she noted the ultimate decision is up to the province. Victoria has set a deadline of April 1 for submissions of interest from Okanagan communities.