

The Daily Courier (Kelowna)

Lumby residents to vote on jail; Council approves April 30 referendum, with mayor saying majority's wishes will be respected

Lumby residents will choose whether a jail should be built in their town, but mayor and council will make the final decision if the vote is close.

Councillors have approved a referendum for April 30 to gauge support for a proposed 360-cell Okanagan jail. Results are non-binding, said Mayor Kevin Acton, but council would respect the majority's opinion.

"What crazy (person) is going to go against what the public wants?" he said Tuesday. "Why wouldn't it be binding?" Over 200 people demonstrated against the jail outside the village hall Monday night. Acton says at least that many support the proposal.

In the event the vote is even, say 51 to 49 per cent, elected officials would make the final ruling. "Good governance is hard decisions. That's what it will come down to -- a hard decision. It will depend on a whole bunch of things," Acton said.

The B.C. government plans to build a jail in the Okanagan to ease overcrowding at the Kamloops jail and to bring inmates closer to Valley courthouses and their families. Corrections officials have asked communities to express interest by the spring.

Opponents in Lumby welcome a referendum. They worry the number of inmates could exceed 700, nearly half the village's population of 1,650. They fear a minimum-security jail could be upgraded to a medium- or maximum-security facility without public input.

"We are a small, rural community. People choose to live here for the lifestyle. We know having a prison can completely change the fabric of our community," said Joanne Fisher, who helped organize Monday's rally.

Acton and town councillors support the jail, pointing to the well-paying jobs it would spawn in a town that's been hammered by the economic downturn and closure of two sawmills. It would expand the tax base, diversify the economy and protect the town against recession, Acton said.

"We don't have any government office in Lumby that provides a steady income or job." Opponents claim trained, unionized workers from out of town would take most jail-related jobs. Only a handful of locals who support the jail would make money, said Fisher.

"All we're hearing from council is pro-prison propaganda. We're not getting a fair, balanced picture of what it will do to our town," she said. "A number of constituents are angry. They see we're being railroaded into this prison."

Corrections B.C. plans a public-information meeting before the referendum, possibly March 23, said Acton. Eligible voters living in Lumby and in Area D outside the town will cast ballots in separate referendums.

Kelowna has shown interest in locating the jail on the 6.9-hectare Hiram Walker site on Jim Bailey Road, property it zoned for that purpose in the 1990s. The District of Lake Country opposes the site, arguing it's only three minutes' drive from downtown Winfield.