

Maple Ridge prisons not good neighbours

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People who live near two prisons in Maple Ridge want a “good neighbour” agreement, signed by the province more than 15 years ago, resurrected.

The call for better communication with the Fraser Regional Correction Centre and Alouette Women’s Correctional Centre comes as police continue their hunt for a man who scaled a 3.6-metre tall fence to escape from the men’s prison Saturday.

Police only notified the public about the brazen escape, which took place at noon and was captured on security camera, three days later.

“We had an agreement with the corrections branch. They have torn it up,” said Gordy Robson, a former mayor of Maple Ridge and a member of the Webster’s Corner Neighbourhood Association, a residents’ group in an area that encompasses both prisons.

The agreement was signed in the mid-1990s by then-mayor Carl Durksen, who held the office from 1994 to 1999. The agreement committed to regular meetings with the corrections branch and included an automated notification to nearby residents via telephone following an escape.

“We’ve been trying to get council to talk about this for the past few months,” Robson added.

“The fact that they are going over the fence is a little scary. How could that possibly happen?”

Robson claims employees of both prisons have called the neighbourhood association with complaints about staffing problems at the facilities.

“I think the whole thing is a disaster and it’s only a matter of time before there are serious consequences,” Robson said.

“For them to have somebody over the fence and not tell the neighbourhoods to me is malicious.”

However, B.C. Corrections has no concerns about the RCMP response.

Ajit Singh, 21, was an open custody inmate.

Open custody classifications are reserved for inmates who do not have violent criminal histories. They participate in community-based work crews, are nearing the end of their sentence and are preparing to transition back into the community.

When he escaped on April 16, Singh had only served five days of a month-long sentence for obstructing a peace officer, imposed on him April 11.

Jess Gunnarson, with B.C. Corrections, confirmed the branch has no direct knowledge of the agreement with the District of Maple Ridge and Webster’s Corner Neighbourhood Association.

“If such an agreement was signed, it was signed before any of the current correction branch management was in place,” he said.

“If it does exist, it would be a very historical document at this point.”

Both prisons have community advisory boards, which are comprised of at least six members of the community and prison staff, all appointed by the wardens.

Gunnarson said the best way for residents to bring their concerns to the prison is through the advisory boards.

“We think that our relationship in Maple Ridge with the community is really quite a good one,” he added.

“Our relationships are built on mutual co-operation that has existed for a long period of time.”

B.C. Corrections believes complaints about overcrowding at the men’s prison, which had 525 inmates on the day Singh escaped, are unfounded.

Fraser regional has 304 cells, including temporary structures built next the main building, and each cell can accommodate two inmates.

“We don’t think it can be described as overcrowded. We are certainly within our current capacity,” Gunnarson said.

But the prison guard union continues to blame overcrowding for contributing to many of the problems at Fraser regional, including a steady availability of illegal drugs, an increase in assault on corrections officers and “walk-aways” from work crews.

Singh was being housed in a temporary “tent” structure constructed in 2008 to alleviate capacity issues at the jail.

Dean Purdy, a spokesperson for the B.C. Government Employees Union’s correctional and sheriff services section, said the tent structure was meant to accommodate 52 men. On Saturday, there were 84 men in the unit, supervised by two guards.

A preliminary investigations indicates Singh slipped out between head counts.

Originally built to hold 254 inmates, the union notes Fraser regional is 200 per cent over capacity.

“There has been a lot of pressure on the correctional officers,” said Purdy.

“The job of a correctional officer is getting more difficult. There’s a lack of presence in the units and the inmates take advantage of it.”

The union wants the province to increase staff-to-inmate rations at the prison.

One officer is now tasked with supervising between 36 and 40 inmates, said Purdy, when the original plans entailed one guard for every 18 inmates.

Maple Ridge Mayor Ernie Daykin has heard the concerns voiced by the Webster's Corner Neighbourhood Association, but believes the district has a "very good" working relationship with both prisons.

"If there is a good neighbour agreement that can be reviewed, we will for sure," he said.

Maple Ridge-Mission MLA Marc Dalton also assured he would bring those concerns to B.C.'s solicitor general.

"I know it's always alarming when we hear about a prison escape," said Dalton.

"But the residents should feel assured that authorities are doing everything to bring this person back into custody. He is not considered a high-risk when it comes to violent behaviour."