

Mayors vying to see jail built in their community

Adrian Nieoczym

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Jails come with a dilemma. While most people recognize that they are necessary if they want criminals locked up, few would welcome one in their own backyard.

But in British Columbia's Okanagan Valley, a couple of mayors are defying conventional wisdom – as well as jail opponents – by lobbying to bring a correctional facility to their communities.

The provincial government's recent announcement that it is looking for a site in the Okanagan to house a new jail was welcome news for Kevin Acton. He's the mayor of Lumby, a village of 1,650 people located 470 kilometres northeast of Vancouver.

Mr. Acton has been talking up the benefits of putting a jail in Lumby since the summer. Of course, what he covets is not the jail itself, but the approximately 100 jobs that would come with it and the grants the province would supply in lieu of property taxes.

“That's a lot of jobs for a small town that's been hit pretty hard by the forestry economy,” he said.

Lumby used to be dotted with several small lumber mills that provided well-paying jobs and paid handsome property taxes. But those days are done.

“We're a small town ... but we have an arena and a swimming pool and a rather large community centre. We have a curling rink and some parks. So, in order to pay to keep that infrastructure up and running, we need to find a way to replenish our tax base,” Mr. Acton said.

Seventy-five kilometres away, in the Okanagan's largest city of Kelowna, Mayor Sharon Shepherd said she is sending Mr. Coleman a letter to remind him that the province already owns a piece of property on the northern tip of her city that has been zoned as a jail site since 1996.

But for the past 14 years, successive NDP and Liberal governments have failed to actually build on the site. Three years ago, the government appeared to be on the verge of moving forward, but abandoned the effort in the face of opposition from the neighbouring communities of Lake Country and the Okanagan Indian Band.

“[A new jail] was obviously identified as a need back in the 1990s,” Ms. Shepherd said. “There is a site already available in our community and that's what we'll be reminding the minister of.”

Ms. Shepherd said the need for a new facility in the Okanagan is even greater today than it was 14 years ago, as the jail cells in Kelowna's RCMP detachment are bursting at the seams. They not only house people arrested locally but also prisoners from other communities and offenders serving weekend sentences.

The city is in the process of designing a new detachment and Ms. Shepherd would like to minimize the number of cells it has to construct. "They're very expensive," she said. "And we would like to build the minimum number that would be required just for our community."

However, the opposition that stymied earlier attempts to build a jail in Kelowna has not gone away.

The mayor of Lake Country, James Baker, said that while the site in question is technically located in Kelowna, it is only a two-minute drive from downtown Lake Country, and the only road access to it runs through his community.

"So all of the increased traffic will come through our town," he said, adding that, while Kelowna would get the economic benefits of a jail, "there are certainly no benefits at all to Lake Country."

Mr. Baker said he worries that having a jail on its doorstep would undermine Lake Country's efforts to promote itself as an agri-tourism destination. "We don't want to be advertised as two minutes from the Okanagan Correctional Centre," he added.

While Lumby is not facing the kind of opposition from its neighbours that Kelowna is, residents who object to Mr. Acton's proposal have started to make their voices heard in the local media and have launched an online petition.

As a result, Mr. Acton is promising that should the province select Lumby as its preferred site, the final decision about whether to go ahead will not be his alone.

"I'm pretty sure we're going to do a referendum," he said. "This is a big decision, I don't want to be the heavy making it."

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