

By courtesy of
NoPentictonPrison.com



N.I.M.B.Y. - NOT IN MY BACK YARD

By Christine Pilgrim

CALL IT A JAIL, A PRISON, A PENITENTIARY, A LOCK-UP, OR A CORRECTIONAL CENTRE – does it amount to the same thing? Not according to Penticton Councillor Judy Sentes who says the right terminology (a “correctional centre”) is crucial to the perception of what such a facility implies. To some it is an opportunity to enhance local economy; to others it’s a threat to their lifestyle; and to many it is an inappropriate way to address crime.

Whatever it is, Solicitor General Shirley Bond needs to find somewhere to house what her predecessor, Rich Coleman, called “the record high number of short term inmates that continues to grow in BC.”

So, the Ministry of Public Safety’s Corrections Branch is looking at building a 360 cell correctional centre with 10 living units (or pods), each serving 36 cells, somewhere in the Okanagan region. The facility will

accommodate an admissions area, administration, staff services, food preparation, health care, segregation, inmate programs and on-site parking. It is expected to cover 20 acres and cost around \$200 million.

As Councillor Sentes says, “Those awaiting trial should be accommodated as near as possible to the courts where their hearings are to take place, thus allowing easier access to local lawyers, police, social services and family, while reducing the burden on local lockups.”

Any facility must be within easy access of Kelowna as it has the biggest courthouse in the area. Kelowna City Council went through the costly process of submitting a suitable corrections site years ago. But, as nothing developed from it, Council decided against repeating the process this time round.

According to the fact sheet published on line by the

Ministry, a prison would produce approximately 240 full-time jobs, generating a payroll income of between \$17 and \$20 million annually, while the Province would provide the host community with substantial annual grants (between \$500,000 and \$1.5 million) in lieu of property taxes.

At the Ministry's invitation, Penticton's Mayor Dan Ashton, along with four City Councillors, visited the North Fraser Pre-trial facility in Port Coquitlam, as well as Alouette Correctional Centre for Women and the Fraser Regional Correctional Centre in Maple Ridge, to get an idea of what a local facility might look like.

They were impressed by how much all three centres blended with their surroundings. Two were enveloped by trees and the North Fraser Pretrial facility looked like any other tall building in the industrial area where it stood. The living pods appealed to Councillor Garry Litke, although he is personally against the concept of prisons per se. He noted the areas set aside for exercising, which meant prisoners would have no need to go outside for physical exercise.

Penticton Council also met with Pitt Meadows RCMP whose Superintendent Dave Walsh said, "In my 18 years' experience in a jurisdiction with a number of provincial and federal penal institutions, I have found that there is a net positive effect on the community due to the law-abiding, family-oriented type of people these facilities employ."

Three sites were submitted by Penticton Indian Band (PIB) for consideration: a location near Faulder, one adjacent to the experimental farms in Trout Creek and another inside City boundaries. PIB Chief Jonathan Kruger was unavailable for comment, but an article published in a March edition of the Penticton Western News, quotes him as saying, "If it is good for the community we will go for it; if not, then it can go somewhere else."

The paper further quotes Osoyoos Indian Band's Chief Clarence Louie as "interested in anything that creates jobs and brings money to the area, but there is no need to get excited either way until a shortlist (of sites) is drawn up."

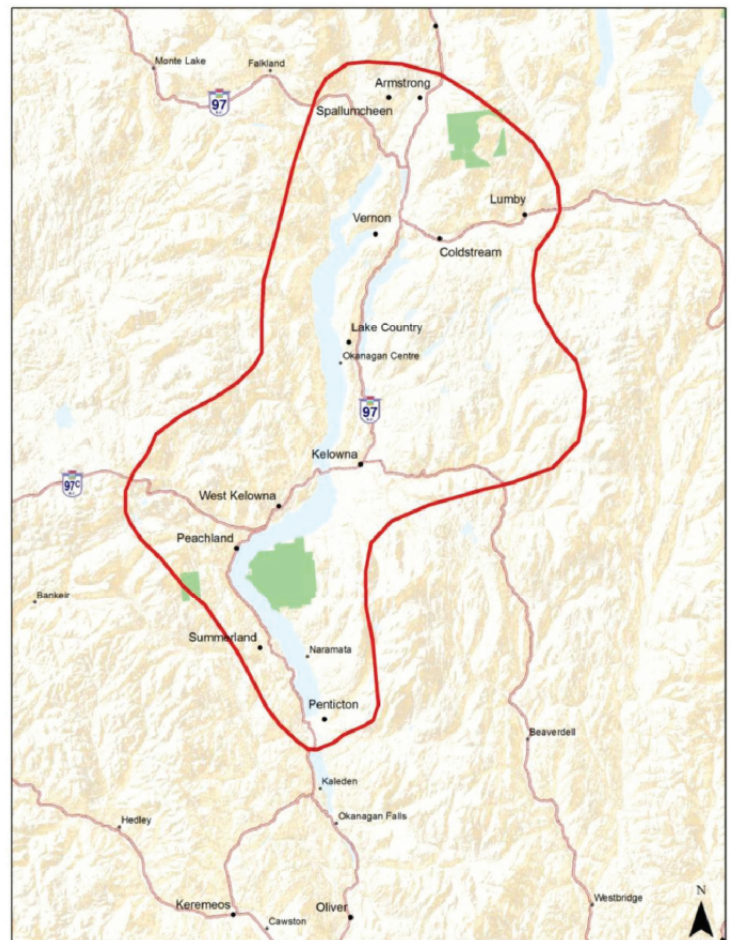
Once that happens, building should start in 2013, with completion in 2015.

Most members of Penticton and Summerland Councils support a regional approach to securing a prison somewhere in the South Okanagan because they feel it would benefit all communities living in the area.

Summerland's Mayor Janice Perrino says the will of the people is more important than her personal opinion, but she favours Council's submitted location on the north and west side of Highway 97. She says, "It's just outside town



A typical living unit (or pod) at North Fraser Pretrial Centre (above). Okanagan Area of Interest (below). Photos supplied by BC Corrections Branch.



ON THE RISE

Although data regarding the number of inmates in BC prisons fluctuates, it is a fact, substantiated by ministries and criminologists, that our prison population is steadily increasing.

That begs the question: why?

According to BC Corrections, the number of prisoners awaiting court trial or sentencing has grown from a third to half of the entire prison population. Vernon's Dirk Sigalet QC suggests that current court delays are due in part to a shortage of judges, self-representation by litigants and the increasing complexity of trials. Serious underfunding of legal aid services is also a contributing factor to court overloads.

BC Corrections confirms that a quarter of prison inmates are diagnosed with mental health disorders. Garry Litke, one of the four Penticton City Councillors who recently visited three Lower Mainland correctional centres, says that in 2001 the prison inmate count spiked by 708. That same year the government closed mental health institutions, with little backup from overstretched social services.

Increases in the prison population are also due to the changing profile of offenders. "Many now have gang affiliations, which lead to longer periods of incarceration," says a BC Corrections spokesperson.

Perhaps these reasons should be included in those "heated debates" about a prison in the Okanagan.

For more local information see:

www.lumby.ca

www.penticton.ca

www.summerland.ca

but within municipal boundaries," and adds, "The template shown by the Province looks like an unobtrusive business centre from the outside." If its proposal is accepted, Summerland Council has agreed to put the final decision on whether or not to continue to some form of general vote.

All the communities are divided in their responses. Those in favour, like Summerland's Arlene Fenrich, foresee an increased tax base from prison staff and a boost to both businesses and community.

On the other hand, Tom Bijvoiet, a member of a Penticton citizens' group that is against a local prison, feels that the stigma attached to such a facility will stifle growth opportunities and negatively impact property values and tourism. The group has launched a petition available for signature in malls and on line (<http://nopentictonprison.com>).

Bijvoiet says "I find it unbelievable that City Council would vote in favour, with the kind of opposition (of 81%) shown in a recent poll held by the Penticton Herald."

Reaction in Summerland is split 50:50. "Those for and against have equally strong opinions and put forward equally good arguments," says Mayor Perrino.

By contrast, contention is toxic in Lumby. Prison supporter Tracie Gobbelle says many young people are leaving town to look for work and Lumby needs a way to jump-start its economy. However, fellow resident and former Green Party candidate, Huguette Allen, says she feels prisons as we know them should no longer exist; that they have been proven in the US to worsen the problems that underlie crimes, rather than rehabilitate.

Allen feels that many young people leave prisons more entrenched in gangs, crime and drugs than when they went in and their negative behaviour when released might easily chase away the young families that have moved to Lumby for its small town friendly atmosphere and natural beauty. "A prison, no matter where it is built in this area, will be close to a school," she says.

She agrees with Penticton resident and retired professor of sociology, Dr. Gerald Kenyon, that we should address the social conditions that create the need for prisons. Dr Kenyon, who is interested in urban design and community development, says, "We don't have a crime problem; we have a poverty problem, a mental health problem, and an education problem. Giving serious attention to each of these would allow us to begin to close prisons rather than build more of them."

He goes on to say that the presence of such institutions dominates small communities in so many



ways, while recent studies show they make little or no net contribution to local economies. From a moral perspective, he asks, “How can we justify committing BC taxpayers to spending hundreds of millions of dollars over the next 50 to 75 years on an alleged solution to a social problem that neither prevents nor reduces crime?”

Criminologist, advocate for victim’s rights and Professor of Criminology at the University of Ottawa, Irvin Waller, wrote the book *Less Law More Order* which deals with statistics as well as solutions. He says, “Whether data indicates figures are up, down or sideways, we need to find cost effective ways to deal with the overall problem of crime and its prevention. It should be tackled like a medical problem, or indeed any other: by diagnosis and action resulting from that diagnosis.”

He quotes the Albertan government’s policy of being tough on crime but also tough on causes. Alberta looked into its task force’s findings on the causes and problems associated with crime. It responded with smart enforcement, smart prevention and examination of mental illness issues. Waller says for every \$1 put into the project, \$7 was saved on policing and prisons.

He also quotes Winnipeg’s diagnosis and subsequent action on the increase of car theft in the city. A great deal of joy-riding by youth, some of which ended in untimely deaths, prompted Winnipeg’s three-pronged response: jail for prolific offenders; youth mentorship and education; and making cars more difficult to steal. This program cost Manitobans \$20 million but saved them \$80 million on policing and prisons.

Waller says, “I’m not a left wing, bleeding hearts, small ‘t’ liberal. I am interested in what works. Some prisons are necessary, but they are merely part of the solution as a whole.”

While heated debate on the issue of a local jail/prison/penitentiary/lock-up/correctional centre continues, former Penticton City Councillor, turned director of the Okanagan School of the Arts, Randy Manuel jokes, “The Chamber of Commerce mantra has always been: Penticton – a word from the local Indian language meaning A Place to Stay Forever. Now it could be: Pen-Pen – A Place to Stay for Two Years Less a Day.”*

** The Provincial Government is responsible for the custody of offenders serving sentences of under two years (two years less a day), as well as those awaiting trial or its outcome, having generally submitted a “not guilty” plea. See the side bar for statistics.*

BC PRISON INMATE PROFILE (2009/2010)

GENDER

88% male 12% female

ETHNICITY

59% Caucasian
22% Aboriginal
4% East Indian
3% Metis
3% Asian
3% Black
2% Hispanic
3% other or unknown

AGE

37% under 30 years old
32% between 30 & 39 years old
31% 40 years old or more

LENGTH OF STAY

Remand (average) 37 days
Sentenced (average) 72 days
Maximum 2 years less a day

OFFENCE TYPES (most serious offences accounting for 53% of inmates. The other 47% on remand)

Break and Enter	Federal Statutes
Theft under...	Assault Level 2
Robbery	Breach of Probation
Cannabis Trafficking	Stolen goods

Source: The Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor
General Corrections Branch

Proposed Okanagan Correctional Centre, Inmate Profile