



BRITISH COLUMBIA

VIA EMAIL

Ref. 661976

March 21, 2024

Brad Sperling
Board Chair
Peace River Regional District
Box 810, 1981 Alaska Avenue
Dawson Creek BC V1G 4H8
Email: prrd.dc@prrd.bc.ca

Dear Chair Brad Sperling:

Thank you for your correspondence of January 29, 2024, regarding crime and public safety concerns in the City of Fort St. John, and inquiries regarding the *Community Safety Act*.

I want to address the recent increase we have seen in violent crime in the region, including specifically in Fort St. John. I am advised that there are presently significant coordinated efforts between your local RCMP detachment and provincial teams to tackle priority public safety issues and increase the visible policing presence in your community and communities throughout the region. Please be assured that Ministry representatives will continue to maintain close contact with senior RCMP officials to ensure they have the resources they need to ensure public safety.

In reference to the *Community Safety Act* and the *Community Safety Amendment Act*, I acknowledge that, for numerous reasons, government has not yet brought this legislation into force. However, Government is keenly aware of the public safety challenges that have emerged over recent years, and we have taken other immediate and broad actions to address these issues. We continue to work hard with partners at all levels of government including the Union of BC Municipalities, the justice and health care systems, the non-profit sector, community leaders, and the business community, to implement other initiatives. As such, I would like to take this opportunity to highlight some of the strategic projects underway to address challenges of crime and public safety in our communities.

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Safer Communities Action Plan

On November 20, 2022, Premier David Eby announced the Safer Communities Action Plan, a \$462 million investment to address the challenging public safety issues that are facing our communities. The Plan lays out concrete steps at the provincial level to make communities safer under two tracks: enforcement and intervention services. Each initiative is structured to improve coordination between law enforcement, community service organizations, justice system agencies, health providers, and people who are recovering from addiction and mental-health challenges, and they apply a collaborative, co-ordinated approach to address the issues people are seeing in their communities. This will also help provide supports for police to focus on violent crimes and other pressing public safety issues. For communities served by the provincial police service (RCMP), the Plan includes a \$230-million boost to help hire police officers to fill the vacancies in an enforcement and crime prevention capacity, particularly for rural, remote, and Indigenous communities and specialized units. To read more about the Safer Communities Action Plan, please visit the following website:

<https://strongerbc.gov.bc.ca/safer-communities>

ReVOII & SITE

As a key part of the Safer Communities Action Plan, the Province has stood up 12 Repeat Violent Offending Intervention Initiative (ReVOII) hubs across BC. Each ReVOII hub consists of teams of dedicated police, prosecutors, probation officers, and community integration specialists to help keep communities safe by focusing their efforts on repeat violent offending. The teams actively identify cases for investigation and intervention and provide documentation to assist prosecutors in making informed decisions about charge assessments and prosecutions.

ReVOII is starting to make a difference. The police, prosecutors and probation officers that support the Prince George hub and surrounding communities are working together to reduce the risk some people pose when they don't abide by their bail conditions. For example, an individual that was released on bail was returned to custody within 24 hours for breaching a court-ordered condition and now remains in jail.

As of February 29, 2024, 420 individuals have been identified for the ReVOII program. Of that, 32 individuals have been prioritized for the Prince George ReVOII Hub, which also serves the community of Fort St. John.

ReVOII is also supported by the new Special Investigation and Targeted Enforcement program (SITE). The province is investing \$16 million over three years so that SITE can provide operational funding to enhance police capacity for investigating repeat offender cases, and support more effective and coordinated prioritizing and information-sharing across jurisdictions. SITE expands police investigative resources and targeted enforcement capacity and allows police agencies to enhance co-ordination and share information quicker.

This funding intends to make enforcement more effective, thereby improving information gathered for prosecutors and boosting police capacity for collaboration. ReVOII and SITE work to advance the Safer Communities Action Plan's goals of strengthening enforcement to hold individuals accountable, and leverage services to create safe, healthy communities for everyone.

SITE is administered by the RCMP SITE Team, which, I understand, has been in contact with the Fort St. John RCMP Detachment to discuss SITE funding opportunities for local police.

Situation Tables

Many existing and emerging public safety challenges require ongoing, multi-sector collaboration by the police, social service providers, and health agencies to preserve and promote community safety. As such, my Ministry is also leading efforts to establish Situation Tables in BC. A Situation Table is a risk-based, collaborative, rapid triage model that connects individuals facing situations of acutely elevated levels of risk to the services they need, immediately. I am pleased to note my Ministry's Policing and Security Branch is currently working with staff from the City of Fort St. John to establish a Situation Table in your community, and I encourage the City to continue to support these efforts.

In support of the Safer Communities Action Plan, the Province has approved an unprecedented, multi-year investment of approximately \$230 million to the RCMP, as the Provincial Police Service. This funding will address existing vacancies and resource pressures, within the Provincial Police Service, including in specialized functions such as Major Crime Section, BC Highway Patrol as well as frontline provincial detachment units. It is anticipated that addressing existing gaps within the Provincial Police Service, will have broader benefits for communities throughout British Columbia.

Sentencing and Bail

We are also building public confidence in the prosecution system with a recent direction from the Attorney General to prosecutors to implement a clear and understandable approach to bail for repeat violent offenders, within the existing federal law. Accordingly, a new provincial bail policy took effect on November 22, 2022, and it includes the following revisions:

- A new section titled "Protecting public safety and maintaining confidence in the administration of justice" confirms the protection or safety of the public is a matter of concern in relation to repeat offenders, especially violent offenders.
- Mandatory direction for Crown Counsel to seek detention of a repeat violent offender charged with an offence against a person or involving a weapon, unless they are satisfied the risk to public safety can be reduced to an acceptable level by bail conditions.
- Advice to Crown Counsel to consider any factors that may weigh in favor of seeking the accused's detention, including the following:

- whether the accused had outstanding criminal charges alleging an offence against the person or involving a weapon;
- whether the accused allegedly breached a condition of a recognizance or a weapons prohibition of the reverse onus provisions of Section 515(6) of the *Criminal Code*; and
- past advice advising Crown Counsel not to seek detention unless a fit sentence on conviction would include incarceration has been removed from policy.

Also with respect to Bail, I note that the Province has been advocating to the federal government for changes on bail reform. In response, on December 5, 2023, the Department of Justice Canada announced legislative amendments to the *Criminal Code* aimed at enhancing Canada's bail system and promoting public safety. The changes, which came into effect on January 4, 2024, target serious repeat offenders who use weapons, like knives and bear spray, as well as those accused of repeat intimate partner violence. The amendments make it more onerous for accused persons to get bail if it is alleged that they engaged in serious violent offending. The key reforms focus on reverse onus provisions, which refer to circumstances where an accused would be detained while awaiting their trial unless they can prove that they are not a flight risk, or that their release would not pose a risk to public safety or undermine public confidence. The law reform is recognized as part of a broader solution, with continued efforts required in data collection, policies, practices, training, and programs to foster safer communities and address root causes of crime. For more information on the specific amendments, please visit:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/departement-justice/news/2023/12/reforms-to-strengthen-canadas-bail-system-and-help-keep-communities-safe-to-become-law.html>

Lastly, I encourage you to stay engaged with the Officer-in-Charge (OIC) of the local RCMP detachment regarding enforcement efforts that may improve the circumstances you describe. For reference, I offer you the following contact information:

Inspector Anthony Hanson
Officer-in-Charge
Fort St. John RCMP
10648 100 Street
Fort St John, BC V1J 3Z6
Telephone: 250 787-8140

Chair Brad Sperling
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In closing, we believe that everyone deserves to feel safe and free from criminal activity in their community. I can assure you that we will continue to examine all measures that can contribute to the improvement of public safety in British Columbia and welcome further dialogue with your community on this matter.

Thank you for writing.

Sincerely,



Mike Farnworth
Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General
and Deputy Premier

pc: Mike Bernier, MLA
Dan Davies, MLA
Bob Zimmer, MP



PEACE RIVER REGIONAL DISTRICT

January 29, 2024

File: 0400.20.18

The Honourable Mike Farnworth
Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General
PO Box 9010 Stn Prov Govt
Victoria, British Columbia V8W 9E2

Via Email: pssg.minister@gov.bc.ca

RE: Increases in Criminal Activity and Social Disorder in Fort St. John

Dear Minister Farnworth,

At its January 11, 2024 meeting the Board of the Peace River Regional District discussed the increase in criminal activity and social disorder currently affecting the City of Fort St. John. The Regional Board recognizes the strain and fear this phenomenon has caused its local community. The Regional Board passed the following resolution:

MOVED, SECONDED and CARRIED

“That the Regional Board send a letter of support for the letter from City of Fort St. John to Minister Farnworth regarding the Community Safety Act.”

Sincerely,

Brad Sperling

Brad Sperling
Chair

c: Mr. Mike Bernier, South Peace MLA, Mike.Bernier.MLA@leg.bc.ca
Mr. Dan Davies, North Peace MLA, Dan.Davies.MLA@leg.bc.ca
Mr. Bob Zimmer, MP, Bob.Zimmer@parl.gc.ca

REPLY TO: prrd.dc@prrd.bc.ca

diverse. vast. abundant.