

City fires back at province for rejecting single police force

Victoria city council has fired back at the B.C. government for refusing to establish a single police force in the capital region.

Councillors unanimously agreed Thursday to send a letter to Premier John Horgan, Solicitor General Mike Farnworth and Vancouver Island MLAs expressing “serious concern” that Victoria and Esquimalt taxpayers continue to bear the full cost of policing the region’s core area.

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“This is an issue that won’t be resolved until the province decides to show leadership,” said Coun. Ben Isitt, who urged a tough response from council.

“And it’s extremely unfortunate that they’re choosing not to show leadership.”

The former Liberal government forced the merger of the Victoria and Esquimalt police departments in 2003, but stopped short of establishing a regional force.

Isitt said it’s “completely unfair” that Victoria and Esquimalt residents now bear the entire cost of policing the population of the downtown core, which swells in size each day with people from across the region.

“I think this is going to be a point of conflict between our council and the province until the province chooses to demonstrate leadership,” he said. “I don’t think we want to pull back on our advocacy on this issue. If anything, we should intensify it.”

Council passed a motion in March calling on the province to establish a regional force as a way to improve public safety and efficiency. While most

metropolitan areas in Canada are policed by regional departments, the capital region has four municipal departments and three RCMP detachments for about 370,000 people.

The province rejected council's plea. In a letter to Mayor Lisa Helps, Farnworth stated that "any change to policing and law enforcement in the capital region is a decision for the municipalities involved and their elected officials."

In a related matter, council passed a motion asking the police board to estimate how much money the Victoria Police Department spent in 2018 delivering mental-health services.

Victoria Police Chief Del Manak told councillors that a death review panel convened by the B.C. Coroners Service has concluded that police agencies are a de facto part of the mental-health system. The panel recommended that policing be incorporated into the provincial mental-health strategy.

Isitt said that if police are indeed playing a key role in delivering mental-health services, perhaps the city can recoup that money from the B.C. government.

"If that's the reality, I think it's totally unreasonable for the taxpayers of Victoria and Esquimalt to pay for those provincial mental-health services," he said.

"It's clearly established in the constitutional makeup that responsibility for health — and mental health in particular — resides with the province and not with local government."

Coun. Geoff Young backed Isitt's call for a full accounting of the costs. Young suggested that if the province doesn't want to establish a regional police force to help deal with problems in the downtown core, perhaps it can be pressed to cover the costs borne by the Victoria Police Department

to deliver mental-health services.

The coroners service's death review panel found that one in four of all police encounters in B.C. has a mental-health component. "In 2017 alone, mental-health concerns were identified in more than 74,000 civilian encounters with Royal Canadian Mounted Police and Vancouver Police Department and accounted for more than 18,000 police apprehensions under the Mental Health Act," the panel said.

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