

QUEEN'S PARK BRIEFING

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It's happening, whether you like it or not.

Despite some flowery language, that was the main takeaway from a town hall hosted by the Ministry of the Solicitor General Wednesday night about a proposed new prison in Kemptville, a small agricultural town in eastern Ontario. Residents have said for months that the town of a few thousand doesn't have enough resources to support a 235-bed prison, dubbed the Eastern Ontario Correctional Complex.

In the two-and-a-half-hour session, residents peppered SolGen officials about the prison paving over valuable farmland; potential tax increases to pay for the additional load on police; a lack of economic benefits for the town; and the prospect of the province building a new jail at all, at a time when many believe the world should move away from locking up prisoners.

Residents have even formed two opposition groups to consolidate their grievances: CAPP (Coalition Against the Proposed Prison) and JOG (Jail Opposition Group).

The Ford government has placed an emphasis on building more prisons, committing \$500 million over five years to building and repairing prisons and hiring guards. It also recently poured an extra \$75 million into policing ahead of the 2022 election.

Solicitor General staffers did their best to sell the prison as a modern, safe facility focused on rehabilitating low-risk offenders.

"We are not trying to house, you know, gang members. We're not trying to house people who are violent there. We're trying to house people that can be rehabilitated," said Ali Veshkini, the associate deputy minister of the Ministry of the Solicitor General.

Veshkini said the province is trying to move toward a rehabilitative model for prisons.

Maria Duran-Schneider, Sol Gen's CAO, even quoted anti-apartheid icon Nelson Mandela in her speech: "It is said that no one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails. A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones."

If the shift to a focus on rehabilitation is true, it would signal a notable and unannounced ideological pivot for Premier Doug Ford, who has said Ontario needs to "lock [criminals] up and throw the key away," and railed against gang "thugs" earlier this week, vowing "no mercy" for people convicted of human trafficking.

<https://twitter.com/fordnation/status/1187405069551067136>

Officials also highlighted potential economic benefits of the prison — staff will likely spend money in town — and added that a "buffer zone" the size of one to two football fields will be used for green space, despite the prison paving over existing farmland.

They also said real estate prices might go up, as prison staff will need somewhere to live.

That's likely not true, said Aaron Doyle, a sociology and criminology professor at Carleton University, who cited a study of 200 towns where prisons were built that found home values declined by about two to four per cent.

North Grenville Mayor Nancy Peckford asked about family visits for those who don't own a car, since the town doesn't have public transit.

Veshkini emphasized virtual visits in his answer, which didn't satisfy many.

Resident Marie noted that the maximum term for prisoners at the site would be two years less a day. If they can't see their families in person for that long, "how can that be called humane treatment?" she asked.

Municipal Affairs Minister and local MP Steve Clark was also on the call. Residents had a lot of questions for him, none of which he fully answered. He remained silent for the first two directed at him, and only jumped in after resident Colleen Lynas scolded him.

"Minister Clark ... two people have asked you to answer and you have not answered them. We asked you to come here in person and talk to people and you have not done that either. So my question to you is, I want you to look Lucas in the eye, and I want you to answer his question about how you could possibly have thought that taking that piece of land, paving it over, destroying that heritage farmland, and building a prison, was in the best interests of this community," she said.

He still didn't answer the question, instead inviting people to a meeting with him in the future.

"Colleen, I know she's very angry at me," he said. "Rather than belabour the meeting, I will commit to you that we'll have a meeting in the municipality to answer questions."

Later, Lynas took issue with Clark's framing.

"I'm very disappointed that you would use that phrase, because what we've seen before is a tendency by men, often powerful men, to discredit women by referring to them as emotional," Lynas said, adding that she's not asking for a one-on-one — she wants Clark to speak to the community in public.

Some residents called on the province to pause the project until more questions can be answered. They were essentially told that the prison is going ahead no matter what, though the province will aim to make it as painless as possible.

"The economic factor is secondary to that," Veshkini said, referring to the need to build the prison.

"We've been trying to build this modernized facility for many years now," he added later.

"I remain committed to this project," Clark said.