

**Public safety and
policing**

Quesnel is a safe place to live and raise a family, but, on a number of occasions, the crime statistics generated by Statistics Canada have suggested otherwise, sometimes gaining the community an undeserved reputation as a “crime capital.” But, take heart, this label has been shared in the past with Prince George and Williams Lake and many other smaller communities throughout the country, despite the fact that the major metropolitan centers always have the highest actual incidents of crime in any given year.

The problem with crime statistics is that they measure individual incidents against population on a weighted basis according to the severity of the crime. These statistics also only use the urban population as the basis for the per capita calculation; in Quesnel’s case that means the incidents of crime are divided by the City’s population of about 10,000, not the census area population of about 23,000, which grossly inflates the overall reported severity of crime in our community.

Over the past few decades this statistical distortion of the actual criminal activity in our community has caused heartburn for many Mayors and created an impression of the City that is completely unwarranted. In reality, Quesnel’s incidents of crime are not out of keeping with any other community: we don’t have more drug houses, or robberies, or violent crimes (or any other type of criminal behavior you can think of) than other communities our size, and far less actual criminal activity of any kind than the major urban centers experience on a daily basis.

However, that does not mean we don’t have work to do to improve the overall safety of our community and address specific areas of concern. To that end, Council has established a new Standing Committee to engage the public in a conversation about improving public safety and to provide oversight and leadership to our policing function in the City. The Auditor General for Local Government’s self-assessment toolkit for policing services will be used as the initial basis for this Committee’s work, and once the Committee has developed a terms of reference and work plan it will begin a consultation process with the community to determine priorities and areas of focus for improving public safety in the City.

Under the current Municipal Police Unit Agreement (MPUA – signed in 2012) municipalities have been given a greater role in the management and oversight of the police function. According to the Auditor General’s report: “The provincial and federal governments negotiated the new agreement to include tools for municipalities to better manage their policing services, help monitor and contain policing costs, and take a more direct role in policing.” This more direct role includes: contributing to the development of policing plans and priorities, more direct involvement in staffing and budget decisions, direct involvement in complaints related to the detachment, and the ability to request a directed, independent review of the detachment if and when necessary.

As I stated at the outset of this column, Quesnel is already a safe community to live, raise a family, and retire in. Quesnel City Council has also had a long-standing productive and proactive relationship with the RCMP detachment that serves our community. The establishment of this new Public Safety and Policing Committee will simply assist Council to work with the community to improve public safety even further by deliberately utilizing the additional tools that were provided to municipalities in the 2012 MPUA.

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