

Residents shout down halfway house

Nov. 21, 2000

La Ronge town council has rejected a plan to open a halfway house for federal prisoners in La Ronge, coming to a decision in the midst of a packed, hostile meeting at the Legion Hall last Wednesday night.

The Nov. 15 meeting was called because of a rezoning request from the Metis Addictions Council of Saskatchewan Inc. MACSI's proposal to the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) includes the use of a property at 132 McKay Street, but the property is zoned commercial. Regulations say halfway houses must be zoned as residential.

Council decided to host a public meeting so that they could hear residents' thoughts on the crucial rezoning issue; no councillors had attended an earlier public meeting in June, at which few dissenters spoke up.

There were many more opponents at last week's meeting, and even before the meeting was over, town council decided not to rezone.

Darryn Roy of CSC's Prince Albert parole office, and MACSI's director, James Froh, led off last Wednesday with general remarks about the halfway house, but were soon asked who qualifies as a "successful" halfway house resident, ie. what level of re-offending MACSI and CSC are "happy with."

"We're not happy with violence," Roy said. However, he added, "when we work with

them in this way, they wreak less havoc than if we just kick them out (of the prison system)."

Then the heckling began. "You're concentrating them (federal offenders) in our area," called out one person. Another shouted, "Why don't you house them in Uranium City? They could use the employment."

"It's very obvious that the co-operation (from the community) would not be there. It's pretty much unanimous with our council that we will not support this. It will fail. It's pointless."

— Mayor Joe Hordyski

Finally, resident Jack Lee made his position known to council: let the public vote at this meeting, or risk losing their seats. "We elected council, and we can kick you out," he declared.

Resident Gina Rozon tried to re-focus the debate, asking for a comparison of recidivism rates amongst federal offenders who don't go through a halfway house, versus those who do. However, those statistics weren't available, and Lee began to argue that even the tiniest recidivism is unacceptable.

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Residents fear importing criminals

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"If it happens to be your daughter that's that 0.8 per cent (that is victimized), I have a goddamn problem with that," he said.

Hordyski then asked whether the community could specify that no sex offenders be allowed into the halfway house, but he was interrupted by another heckler.

Counc. Doreen Polischuk then tried to interject, asking if residents didn't trust council to make this decision. There was a loud muttering in the crowd, "No!"

Resident Bill Chanin said that in his 60 years in the area, he had seen things deteriorate and he felt that the townsfolk have to "clean up our own act" before bringing any federal offenders in. "If they are here, they will get sucked back in," he said.

Hordyski and town council took a short recess to decide whether or not to support the halfway house.

Before council could announce its decision, however, several people approached the councillors to say that some voices had not been heard.

Bryan Orthner argued that it might be better to have services available since northern offenders will be coming back to La Ronge anyway.

"I am embarrassed to be part of this town tonight," Orthner said, before being heckled as to how long he'd lived here.

Air Ronge mayor Gordon Stomp spoke of his regret that none of the three local councils had "been on top of this", but he also said that a youth facility, not a halfway house, is what the area needs.

"We're dealing with the wrong end of the problem," Stomp said. "Don't bring them (federal offenders) in here, 'cause I think it will complicate the problem."

Finally, Heather Lundquist expressed concern for her newborn daughter's safety. "We don't want to be scared to have our kids in our backyard," she said. "If you want it in your backyard, fine, but not in my backyard."

At this point, Hordyski stood up and announced council's decision, passed before the break.

"It's very obvious that the co operation (from the community) would not be there," he said. "It's pretty much unanimous with our council that we will not support this. It will fail. It's pointless."

While the talk didn't end at this point, it was clear to Froh that the discussion was closed.

"I wish I would have known this in June.... It would have saved me and the Metis Addictions Council a lot of grief," he said.

Carmen Pauls

Staff