

John Barlow, Member of Parliament for Foothills

Rural Crime Report

Gaining a situational understanding of the prevalence of rural crime in the Foothills riding, the experiences of residents, and suggestions for solutions.

2/28/2018

Rural Crime Meetings

February 20th & 21st, 2018

Time: 7:00PM

Fort Macleod & Aldersyde

Meeting called by: MP John Barlow
MLA Pat Stier (Fort Macleod)
MLA Wayne Anderson (Aldersyde)

Attendees Superintendent Gordon Sage, RCMP
Sgt. Bryan Mucha, RCMP (Ft. Macleod)
MLA David Schneider (Aldersyde)

Note Takers Carrie Fischer; Wanda Sommerfeldt

Executive Summary

We held two meetings in rural areas of our riding and had a fairly good turnout at each. Generally speaking, rural residents from Foothills riding are concerned about an increase in incidents of rural crime; the repeat, cyclical nature of the crimes; an increase in aggressiveness of the crimes being committed; a perceived “catch and release” of criminals by the justice system with no real consequences or punishment; and the financial costs of replacement of stolen items including the risk to their eligibility for insurance.

We heard from rural residents with frightening experiences of confronting or being confronted by criminals while these residents were peacefully enjoying the safety of their own homes or properties. Rural residents are extremely concerned because they are noticing trespassers on their property appear drunk, high or have firearms or other weapons and are demonstrating unpredictable or erratic behaviour. It used to be that criminals would only “hit” properties when the homeowner was not present, but now rural homeowners are walking into a room or waking up to find a person in their home with a weapon. Many residents share they have been the victim of theft or break and enter crimes several times.

The residents who spoke with us expressed significant frustration at the lack of police response to their rural residence. We heard from residents who have had to wait 30 minutes for response to a 911 call to a crime in progress, 26 hours for a response to a vehicle theft, and several who never received a physical presence response or call back from RCMP to crimes they reported, *even when the crimes were currently in progress*. There is a general lack of confidence in police response to calls for assistance to a crime in progress on a rural property. Many residents are looking for clarification on how they may defend themselves, their families and their property in light of these response times.

Rural residents also shared their frustration at the lack of support for victims and innocent residents who are subject to the behaviours of habitual offenders. Often the perpetrators of these crimes commit several crimes in multiple jurisdictions, are difficult to track, aren't local to the area and only receive a “slap on the wrist” in court from judges once they are caught – if their case even makes it to court. There is a sense criminals know they will not receive serious consequences if they are caught and even if they receive jail time, it is short and they reoffend when they are released.

The rural residents who were in attendance almost unanimously demanded better use of police resources, more police and judicial resources, clear consequences to property crimes that recognize the inconvenience and cost to innocent, law-abiding citizens, and clarity in understanding what they may do to protect themselves in the absence of the above.

Executive Summary - Recommendations

1. Address gaps in Judicial system including vacancies and leniency on sentencing. Consider stiffer sentencing for crimes such as home invasion, robbery and theft of vehicles.
2. Review resources for RCMP and recruitment to ensure rural detachments and call centres are fully staffed/trained.
3. Increase resources for mental health treatment of repeat offenders.
4. Support early success of designated Crime Reduction Units.
5. Work with community crime watch organizations to develop awareness campaign and to access resources and technology such as digital communications system.
6. Work with Insurance Bureau of Canada to partner/fund rural crime watch programs and ensure victims of rural crime do not lose their eligibility for insurance.
7. Initiate review of centralized 911 dispatch system with focus on response to rural calls

Meeting Notes

Agenda item: Opening Discussion

Presenter: J. Barlow, P. Stier, G. Sage

Discussion:

Opening conversation to describe intent of meeting and provide background information from RCMP on recent restructuring to combat the increasing issue of rural crime.

Conclusions:

RCMP is aware of the issue and actively pursuing ways to improve performance and response times in rural Southern Alberta.

Action items	Person Responsible
✓ Property Crime Increasing in Southern Alberta (perhaps related to economic downturn or increase in opiate use, but hard to determine from policing perspective.)	RCMP
✓ Crime against persons and domestic disputes decreasing slightly.	RCMP
✓ RCMP is seeing more bold and aggressive offenders – entering property when homeowners present and aggressively challenging officers during a police stop.	RCMP
✓ RCMP used to back off after receiving aggressive action from a perpetrator, they have developed and equipped four person tactical teams to pursue suspects actively trying to elude police. They have a response time of 5-10 minutes and include night vision goggles and police dogs. This initiative is seeing success.	RCMP
✓ RCMP better understanding the contribution of mental health issues to some of their repeat calls and is working with a collaborative approach to coordinate resources in an attempt to identify the root of the issues when responding to domestic calls.	RCMP
✓ RCMP Action Plan: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Crime Reduction Initiative – four Crime Reduction Unit (CRU) teams across province made up of five police officers (1 Sgt., 4 Cst.) plus two analysts. These are mobile units with capabilities to analyze crimes across detachment jurisdictions and allow better response to the increasingly mobile nature of criminals (criminals are frequently travelling to multiple communities). 2. Revamping Intelligence Gathering – increasing analyst positions to centralize information to be collated by analysts and shared across province. 3. Call Management – Level 1-4 assigned to calls; reassessing the need to respond to all calls to focus resources but currently looking for the right balance of response v. non-response. They are also increasing the number of Municipal Employees so that Officers can call in summaries to staff instead of going in to the office to write up incidents (this keeps them on the street). 	RCMP
✓ RCMP needs public help to combat rural crime. Public must call in suspicious acts, stolen items, trespassers, etc. to assist RCMP in gathering intelligence to feed to the CRUs and analysts as well as their strategies for combating crime.	Public
✓ Rural Crime Watch is an important and valuable partner in gathering intelligence for RCMP	RCMP / Rural Crime Watch / Public
✓ Actively recruiting new members.	RCMP

Agenda item: Rural Crime Watch

Presenter: Comments from Floor

Discussion:

Rural Crime Watch / Citizens on Patrol are both important and valuable partners in gathering intelligence for RCMP

Conclusions:

Funding restraints significantly limit the ability of Rural Crime Watch to effectively advertise for new members and share information with rural residents.

Action items

Person responsible

- ✓ Increase membership – 3400 “likes” on Facebook, but 62 paid memberships for one local Crime Watch group; no new members are coming forward; public awareness of value for membership in a Rural Crime Watch group. Rural Crime Watch / Public
- ✓ Need funding or assistance with the fan-out of information. There is a heavy work burden placed on the volunteers with Rural Crime Watch groups and they currently rely on volunteer organizers fundraising to pay expenses. Can government consider funding assistance for marketing budget? Rural Crime Watch / Federal or Provincial Gov’t
- ✓ Need better communication with RCMP. Can RCMP contact Crime Watch Members in specific areas for assistance with someone they’re looking for (i.e. can you keep an eye out for ...)? RMCP / Rural Crime Watch
Response: Detachments have a coordinator assigned to Crime Watch groups

Agenda item: Questions from Floor – Who is responsible for policing? / How do we get more?

Presenter: Public

Discussion:

A comment was made we aren't getting more police because of the significant cost associated and limited financial resources – is that a federal or provincial responsibility? How do we support members to prevent them from becoming over-worked or burning out? Do we need to speak out?

Response:

There are three levels of policing: Federal for high level, big or national files; Provincial; and Municipal. There are three levels of police funding in urban municipal policing: with over 15,000 population, the municipality pays 90% of the cost of policing; from 5000-10000 population, it's a 70% provincial / 30% municipality split; and in communities under 5000 population, the cost of policing is born by the province.

Municipalities have the ability to find the right number of officers and funding allotment; there is a definite difference between urban and rural policing with a noticeable “two-tiered policing” levels. One way RCMP is attempting to combat this is with the regional CRUs. The rationale is that five members targeted to a CRU are more effective than five members spread around Southern Alberta.

Action items

Person responsible

- ✓ Review policing levels, consult with residents and consider hiring additional members Municipalities

Agenda item: Questions from Floor – More Resources

Presenter: Public

Discussion:

Funding – provincial member detachments don't have the same level of service as municipal member detachments or ability to increase members with population. We haven't seen an increase of members in many, many years despite increases in population. What can we do?

From an MD Councillor: caution that none of the governments have big pools of money accessible to assign to new police resources. Criminals have figured out that response times are long (sometimes 30 minutes or more) and the “catch and release” of criminals in the judicial system is frustrating for rural homeowners and RCMP after the RCMP does tons of work to arrest and hand a case over to the prosecutor.

Response:

Municipalities can request RCMP Members under the Enhanced Policing Position Program with the RCMP. Roles are defined by each position the Municipality requests as they are paying for the positions. There are two options for this program: 1. for \$150,000-\$160,000 per year, a municipality gets a full member position, complete with the car OR 2. a community can pay for hours of policing to enhance what they currently receive (this is a great option to share with other municipalities).

It isn't necessarily about finding new money, but prioritizing current money in government and targeting it appropriately.

UCP will be advocating for resources for crime prevention in general and through Budget Estimate Debates.

Deterrence methods work; anything you can do to make your home / yard as a challenging target for criminals discourages them (dogs, gates, locks, ...). Make sure to take pictures and have serial numbers of valuables to assist if they are stolen.

Capturing the intelligence is important, so please call in incidents and report suspicious activities. RCMP may not respond to every call, but they can only act on what they know: they must have the information in order to collate intelligence.

Agenda item: Questions from Floor – Shortage of Officers

Presenter: Public

Discussion:

We do not accept that there isn't enough money to hire more officers. We need more officers because – as previously stated – criminals are getting more aggressive and brazen. We need councils mandated to ensure police officer numbers are tied to population so the force grows with the population increases or tied to an increase in call volumes or criminal activity. A female friend just quit the RCMP because things are more dangerous.

Our personal history is that we had a major incident in 2011, in 2013 my purse was stolen and it resulted in \$5000 to \$10000 in identity theft, then in 2017 my 16 year old son woke up to someone in the house when we weren't home. He confronted the individual with a rifle and chased him off, called family members and neighbours on adjacent properties who arrived within minutes and it took RCMP 25 minutes to get there because there was a mix-up causing the wrong detachment to be dispatched.

When government amalgamated the [911] call centres in the city to save money, it put rural residents at risk because they send members to the wrong place or they try to dispatch the wrong RCMP detachment. We have had Strathmore, High River and Okotoks detachments called for response when we have called 911 for a serious incident, despite the fact we live in the Okotoks detachment area. There is also a gap that can create confusion when the 911 call centre relays information to the RCMP dispatch call centre. Can we return to rural dispatch areas?

RCMP doesn't respond to certain calls, so people are making an incident sound worse than it is so they can get a response.

Could we talk to criminals to get a better understanding of what deters them from a property? Is it dogs, fences, gates ... ?

Response:

Population growth does exceed the growth of members in rural detachments which has led to a two-tiered system of policing – one for urban municipal residents and one for rural municipal residents.

Expanding the CRU will help investigative capacity for these crimes and may have more “bang for the buck” then spreading single members to multiple detachments.

Agreed we need to make public safety a priority and follow that with required spending.

Action items

- ✓ More police officers
- ✓ Review 911 Call Centre response and dispatch quality to ensure accurate response for rural residents.

Person responsible

All levels of Governments / RCMP
 Provincial Government

Agenda item: Questions from Floor – Sheriffs

Presenter: Public

Discussion:

Would more sheriffs assist with the issue?

Response:

More sheriffs don't really make the RCMP's job easier because they can't charge under the criminal code.

Agenda item: Questions from Floor – Crime in Progress

Presenter: Public

Discussion:

What happens if we see or interrupt someone is stealing our stuff? 911 doesn't always work / RCMP doesn't respond or takes over 24 hours to respond.

Response:

Call 911. Be clear on the call about what is happening; RCMP does prioritize calls.

Agenda item: Questions from Floor - Dogs

Presenter: Public

Discussion:

Do dogs work? Am I responsible if my dog bites a criminal?

Response:

Yes, "yappy" dogs work well because criminals do not want the attention they bring.

Agenda item: Questions from Floor – Front License Plates

Presenter: Public

Discussion:

No front license plates make it difficult for community members or Rural Crime Watch members to identify a suspicious vehicle – is this something governments would consider?

Response:

Call 911. Be clear on the call about what is happening, RCMP does prioritize calls.

Action items

- ✓ Consider reinstating front license plate

Person responsible

Provincial Government

Agenda item: Questions from Floor – Bus Drivers

Presenter: Public

Discussion:

I suggest utilizing school bus drivers to gather intelligence and report on suspicious activities. They can be actioned to watch for vehicles, etc.

Agenda item: Questions from Floor – Stolen Firearms

Presenter: Public

Discussion:

RCMP in High River said that crimes are being committed with stolen firearms, can you comment?

Response:

Haven't heard that, will look into it.

Agenda item: Questions from Floor – Justice

Presenter: Public

Discussion:

People have gates, dogs, floodlights, etc. and they are still hit on a monthly basis because of the catch and release of criminals by the judicial system. Sometimes people are back on the street almost before the paperwork is finished by RCMP. We need to be proactive with stiffer penalties and an effective judicial system with actual consequences because criminals know they won't face any real consequences.

The issue is with the judges: more police officers won't help if judges won't put people in jail or apply other punishments. I've been broken into five times.

Action items

Person responsible

✓ Consider ways to fill the backlog of vacancies in the justice system

Federal / Provincial Governments

Agenda item: Questions from Floor – Prevalence of issue and issues reporting.

Presenter: Public

Discussion:

I have called in to RCMP a few times to report suspicious vehicles, etc. and had to keep calling and calling. In one instance, it took 27 minutes before they even answered the phone. That's unacceptable.

I have had about \$70,000 of equipment stolen from my farm in the last year. For example, when I went to haul grain, the battery was gone in the auger again and fuel was stolen from trucks and tractors. It decreases productivity.

I was speaking to a dealer and the batteries were gone from their commercial site and they won't report it.

Often these crimes aren't worth reporting because we don't get a response so they aren't worth the time it takes to be away from work, file the paperwork, etc. Even when home or business owner has evidence, members won't attend site or pick it up.

If vehicles are found, owner is responsible for paying impound and towing fees for their vehicle that was stolen from where it was legally parked on their property, including impound fees associated with the processing of the recovered vehicle.

Is there a way to streamline the reporting process? People don't have half a day to take off work or stop work on the farm to go to RCMP detachment and fill out the paperwork to report these thefts [because they are happening so frequently].

Local detachment members are telling people they are too busy to receive complaints or document them.

Response:

RCMP are working on a strategy because the operator centres are too busy and they can't keep up with the calls; the revisions to their call management strategy are expected to help with some of this. Please call local detachment because they can respond quicker and they are expected to hire staff to manage calls to the detachment. This is a work in progress and RCMP doesn't know how it will look in the end.

Please report each crime. RCMP uses the information to increase intelligence and the knowledge will support statistics needed to request additional resources. RCMP may not respond to each call, but they do use the information.

Report non-response to calls to detachment commander or to appropriate persons at K-Division; RCMP needs to document these situations.

This is why RCMP are trying to get people to call the local detachment.

It's unacceptable for RCMP Members to say they are too busy to receive complaints. Insist on the complaint or report the incident with the officer to Detachment Commander or K-Division.

Action items

Person responsible

- ✓ Consider ceasing the practice of passing costs of recovery of stolen vehicles onto the owner of the vehicle. Provincial Government
- ✓ Streamline reporting process RCMP / Provincial Government
- ✓ Ensure adequate staff at detachments and call centres RCMP / Provincial Government

Agenda item: Questions from Floor – Auxiliary Program

Presenter: Public

Discussion:

Will the new Auxiliary Program announced in January assist in the issue?

Response:

Members are excited to see the program back, but the details are still being ironed out.

Agenda item: Questions from Floor – Financial & Insurance impacts

Presenter: Public

Discussion:

Residents hit once are likely to be hit again about a month later [after items have been replaced].

Rural resident goes through \$3000-\$5000 of batteries every year because they are stolen almost as quickly as they are replaced.

Several instances of rural residents who have been robbed so many times their insurance companies dropped them and they can't get insurance from another company because they've been dropped by one.

Often residents won't report to insurance anymore because their rates go up or they may have their insurance cancelled, so they are paying the replacement costs out-of-pocket.

Can government work with Insurance Bureau of Canada or insurance companies to gain their assistance with the issue similar to the way they seed clouds to avoid hail damage? Perhaps they'd be willing to pay for enhanced police positions or help fund Rural Crime Watch initiatives.

Response:

The repeat nature of the offences and seriousness of the issue is borne out by the numbers: there were 3700 calls to the Provincial side of the Okotoks detachment in 2016 and 4400 in 2017.

Action items

- ✓ Work with Insurance Bureau of Canada to identify potential partnerships
- ✓ Offer protection to rural homeowners to prevent them from losing insurance due to multiple breakins.

Person responsible

Federal / Provincial Governments
Provincial Government

Agenda item: Questions from Floor – Who to call to report**Presenter:** Public**Discussion:**

Who do people report to? You've said that people should be calling the local detachment, but our kids have been taught to call 911 – what's the correct answer?

If you're now saying people should call their local detachment, will there be a campaign similar to the "Lock it or Lose it" campaign to increase awareness?

Response:

The 911 call centre system is overworked and people need to call local detachments.

Action items

- ✓ Increase awareness for residents to call local detachment to report crimes instead of 911
- ✓ Report all incidents or suspicious activities to inform intelligence for CRUs

Person responsible

Federal / Provincial Governments / RCMP
Public

Agenda item: Questions from Floor – Integration of or Communication between Departments**Presenter:** Public**Discussion:**

Is there a good level of integration between Municipal Enforcement, Sheriffs and RCMP?

RCMP do a great job and they are very community focused. The Province needs to consider the roles of the peace officers patrolling Provincial Parks – Fish and Wildlife and Conservation Officers – and how they can enhance the ability of RCMP to gather intelligence. These guys are on the front lines and there needs to be better communication between these three organizations.

Response:

There is between Sheriffs and RCMP, but not necessarily with Municipal Enforcement.

Other Information

Foothills Rural Crime Watch AGM

March 26th, 2018