

Honourable Mike Farnworth
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November 29, 2023
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Dear Minister Farnworth,

Over the last few years, Fort St. John and many other communities have experienced increases in criminal activity and social disorder. In part, this deterioration has related to drug addiction and mental illness. It has also related to the apparent inability of the justice system to hold anyone accountable in a meaningful way.

There are many consequences to this decay and one of them has been that more people are advocating for actions that could be described as vigilante, or extrajudicial. This reflects a growing lack of faith that the system is still viable and that the institutions of law and order are still effective. There is growing frustration at unchecked property crime and the experience of watching formerly safe neighborhoods decay. It is demoralizing to watch the revolving door of arrests and releases and overdose deaths. It seems to many in our community that the pendulum has swung far away from the rights of society. People have been communicating with us in increasingly desperate terms, expressing fear and a simple desire to return to the peaceful enjoyment of their homes and neighborhoods. They are asking for a system that holds criminals accountable for their actions in an effective way.

This letter is a reaction to a series of events that have caused fear and anger in several parts of our community. One recent example is the Triangle Park neighborhood on 112th Ave, in Fort St. John. It is an established street which boasts a small triangular park with a picnic table and a wonderful set of new playground equipment. It has been a place where many children would stop while walking home from school, or where parents would take their kids to play on a Saturday morning. This park was one thing that gave the Triangle Park neighborhood its identity and made it particularly desirable.

Over the last few years one residence on this formerly quiet street has become the center of violent, frightening, dangerous and unsettling incidents. In the last year there have been two shootings in or at this home. Not long before that, an overdose death occurred on the front doorsteps of the residence. By all accounts this is a place that is obviously involved in the street level drug trade. Activity goes on there night and day. There are countless short duration stops by pedestrians and vehicles, disputes, fights, and assaults. Stolen property often finds its way to the residence and neighbors report being intimidated and frightened while simply getting their mail. No matter what efforts are made by the police, there is no change in the nature and experience of living beside this residence. In part this is because those who are arrested in connection to this home and others like it are usually released.

The latest shooting at Triangle Park originated from within the offending residence. The neighboring home is occupied by a young family with small children. Recently, their home was pierced by a number of bullets in the middle of the night while they were sleeping. They have made the point repeatedly that their children could have been killed. They are right. Police have identified, and we are told, have charged those responsible for the previous shooting but this is scant comfort to anyone. Certainly, it made no difference in preventing the latest shooting.

Lately, Triangle Park is rarely used. Many parents have made the decision to stop spending time there because of the threat posed by those who attend the nearby residence to engage in the drug trade.

While trying to provide reassurance and an effective response to the residents of Triangle Park, we happened upon the Safer Communities Act. Within this Act were a suite of reasonable, and seemingly effective tools that would have been extraordinarily helpful and reassuring to our citizens. The Community Safety Act, might have provided our community with a way to hold the owners of this residence accountable. We might have been able to pursue a process through a Community Safety Order to require the residents of this property to vacate. We might have had the opportunity to go to court to articulate a common-sense solution which would have made it more difficult to be the owner of a residence such as this one. Unfortunately, this Act was never brought into force.

We have explored all options and continue to do so. Frankly though, nuisance and noise bylaws are no substitute for the meaningful support of the Provincial and Federal Government. It is frustrating and disheartening. Our bylaws were enacted to provide solutions to manage conventional municipal problems like un-mowed grass, or loud music. These laws were never designed or intended to manage the impacts of organized crime destroying neighborhoods with impunity.

Having provided this context, the purpose of my letter today is to inquire why the Community Safety Act and the Community Safety Amendment Act were never brought into force. It appears from our review that advocacy on the part of the BC Civil Liberties Association was effective at preventing the enactment of this legislation. Their objections to the proposed legislation seem incredibly indifferent and tone-deaf to the suffering occurring in communities throughout this province.

The BC Civil Liberties association said it believed the proposed law was unnecessary, unjust and would put people's housing security at risk. From our perspective the failure to enact this legislation has put people's housing security at risk. Further, it is both unfair and unjust that our residents should have to leave their homes and flee the violence that has destroyed the character and security of their neighborhoods.

I would implore you to consider where the balance should lie between the rights of our citizens to enjoy a peaceful existence and the rights of those who have destroyed that peace. There is an increasingly prevalent train of thought that there are no consequences for the very worst behavior. Our institutions are threatened by the loss of public faith in their effectiveness. It has become difficult to reassure our citizens that we have the tools to manage these situations. Please consider enacting the Community Safety Act or the Community Safety Amendment Act legislation.

Sincerely,

Lilia Hansen

Mayor Lilia Hansen
On Behalf of Fort St. John Council

cc: MLA Dan Davies