

My Friday Night Out in an RCMP Cruiser: An Eye-Opening Experience

by Councillor Kim Richter

On Friday October 15, 2007, I had a unique learning opportunity. I spent the night with the RCMP and I saw first hand what our Langley Protective Services (Police, Fire and Ambulance) deal with while most of us are curled up in bed. It was an eye-opening experience and one that every politician should make it a priority to have.

The RCMP costs Langley taxpayers about 25 cents on every tax dollar. It is the single largest slice of the Township's revenue pie and it is probably the least understood item in our financial statements.

In light of the controversy between the City and the Township around policing costs, I met with Superintendent Janice Armstrong at the end of September to try to get a better understanding of our policing system. She offered to arrange for me to spend an evening shift on the road with our officers. The following is a chronology of what I experienced.

7:45 pm – I arrived at the police station. While I was waiting to be admitted, a young woman stormed out of the building in tears and swearing. (I later learned at the briefing that she was a victim of domestic abuse, was addicted to drugs and was pregnant. The RCMP had spent considerable time that day arranging for her to go to a Transition House but she refused to do so).

7:50 pm – I met Corporal Larry Burden who would be my “escort” for the evening. Corporal Burden has 22 years of policing experience and has just recently transferred to Langley from Sechelt. He is responsible for being on the road with the shift constables and provides them with on-the-job training, advice, and supervision.

8:00 pm – Sergeant Preston and Corporal Rodricks brief the outgoing B-Watch members (9 in total) on the day's events and expected activities for the evening. Each member is given the opportunity to share/describe issues, past events, highlights, etc. Of note is the fact that one constable has picked up a bullet proof vest from a local hotel (left behind by a recent patron) while another has spent considerable time arranging for transition housing for the young woman mentioned earlier.

9:00 pm – Corporal Burden and I get in our assigned car and he explains how the computerized PRIME system works (which costs Township taxpayers \$500 per year per officer and is money well spent according to those who use the system). The PRIME system is a recent addition to policing and allows police to access information from police databases throughout the province. It also provides GPS data. In addition to the in-car computer, all police cars are equipped with plastic molded back seats (for clean-up ease), plexi-glass partitions between the officers and back seat occupants as well as reinforcing

bars on the windows so they can't be kicked or punched out. As the evening progresses, I begin to understand how important all of these are.

9:30 pm – Corporal Burden and I begin our tour by driving through the City of Langley. In the mall between Dairy Queen and the 7-11, there is a group of 3 young homeless men with bicycles. They are drinking coffee, smoking and sitting on cardboard. They appear harmless but I am told that they will likely go out later to strip wire. This wire will then be delivered to drop-off points where these homeless young men will receive pennies on the dollar for their efforts. With the recent crack down on scrap metal, a whole new breed of “entrepreneurs or middlemen” has emerged in Langley. They drive between designated drop-off points and collect scrap metal from homeless individuals. After the homeless have been paid, they will use the money to buy drugs. (Note: At 1:45 am, we drove back by this same spot and there was a drug dealer there who moved away as soon as the police car showed up).

10:00 pm – We stopped at the Vanilla Night Club on 196th Street and did a “Bar Walk”. (Corporal Burden and I went into the Club and looked around). Aside from a girl in a roof-mounted swing in the middle of the club, all was quiet (and smelling like vanilla). I did note and wonder about the safety of this club in terms of the very steep stairs in it. (If there was ever an emergency, I am sure that people could easily get pushed down and suffer significant injuries as a result. I question why a permit for such a use would be given to these particular premises and I'm reasonably certain that there could be municipal liability in such an event). Both Corporal Burden and I were treated with respect as we did our walk through. Apparently, this club caters more to the Surrey crowd yet it generates Langley policing costs.

10:30 pm – A call comes over the radio that an individual on 200th Street at 46A Ave has threatened to kill someone. 9 police vehicles converge on the spot. Traffic is stopped. Corporal Burden takes control of the situation and gets the police cars realigned so that traffic can pass. Two individuals are in handcuffs on the sidewalk. One is subsequently released as he apparently was just walking by. The other is taken to the police station in Murrayville. The regional HRIT (Emergency Response) team is also present. (They circulate throughout the Lower Mainland and just happened to be in the area when the call came through). On weekends, policing resources are apparently concentrated in the downtown Langley City core. As a township councillor (given the recent controversy on police costs), I'm not quite sure what to think of this. Corporal Burden stresses the importance of thinking about Langley as one community from a policing perspective.

Midnight – Corporal Burden and I have driven through Brookwood (quiet), Willoughby (quiet), Walnut Grove (quiet), Fort Langley (quiet). We meet up with Constable Parkes on Glover Street outside the Fort Langley Community Hall when a call comes in for a noise bylaw infraction on Francis Street in Fort Langley. Apparently, there's a very noisy party going on. We head over there and find several young people walking as well as many cars with “N's” lining the street. It's hard to find the party because the house signage is poor and it's very dark (poor house signage is a major issue for protective services) but we follow

the noise. We find a few groups of young people surrounding the party house. One group of young males is particularly obnoxious and makes catcalls at Constable Parkes. There are empty beer bottles/cans around them and someone has driven kitty corner across the front lawn leaving large tracks. Corporal Burden goes to the front door and speaks with the young woman whose parents are gone for the weekend and who is the hostess of the party. He informs her of the risk that she is running for her parents by having the party and the liability that her parents will incur if anyone is hurt. He shuts the party down.

12:45 am – After we leave Fort Langley, we drive back into Walnut Grove. Corporal Burden remarks how unusually quiet this night has been for a Friday night. He also notes how things can ‘change on a dime’ in this business and remarks that it will likely get quite active once the bars close at 2 am. He no sooner says this than a call comes through about a private party at the Elks Hall in Aldergrove. So we head over there taking Highway 1 (which is also quiet) and we talk about drugs and organized gangs on the way there. In Aldergrove, we cruise by the Elks Hall which seems under control. We stop and talk to one of the local constables who has been monitoring the situation. Although it is a ‘private’ party, the police have their suspicions that tickets are being sold and that alcohol is being consumed. They are also on the look out for a black SUV that has been involved in an earlier incident. While we are in Aldergrove, Corporal Burden drives down the back alley behind the Alder Inn and shows me the property most likely to receive stolen metals. I note that there are several people standing around this property talking to each other (which seems very odd at 1 am). The Corporal also shows me the Fraser Highway median close to 272nd Street that has caused 2 east-bound fatalities probably because of its design. This design creates an optical illusion or a narrowing hourglass effect when traveling eastbound. We drive back and forth through the median several times and in doing so the Corporal clearly shows me that this hourglass effect is not present at the same location when driving westbound. I think that the Township traffic engineers should see this problem area from the RCMP’s perspective. Why is that median there particularly if it is causing fatalities? It could easily be removed.

1:15 am – There is a call about a domestic dispute at 240th Street and 48th Ave. A 19 year old is punching his father. The fight has spilled out of the house and onto the street. Three police cars speed out of Aldergrove with flashing lights. By the time Corporal Burden and I arrive, there are 4 cars on site. The 19 year old has been placed in the back of one vehicle. He is thrashing around inside and kicking the windows. Two officers remove him from the car to handcuff him. While they are cuffing him, he is swearing profusely about his parents and fighting with the officers. He is bent forward over the trunk of the cruiser and when they have the cuffs on, he purposely slams his head hard into the trunk of the car. I thought he’d broken his nose. Corporal Burden noted that often police are accused of being rough with criminals when this is not the case. I saw with my own two eyes how an individual purposely hurt himself while in police custody.

1:30 am – We drive back to Aldergrove and do a “bar walk” through Mustangs Bar and Grill. The crowd was lively but did not confront the Corporal. Again, there was a safety issue. Mustangs has just recently opened a new outdoor patio

which was crowded with smokers on our walk through. Corporal Burden points out to me that the guard rails around the patio are only at waist height. On the north end of the patio, the drop to the ground is about 12 feet. Should there ever be a fight on the patio, someone could get knocked over this guard rail, fall a considerable distance, and suffer a significant injury. The Township clearly needs to revise its building code in this regard.

1:45 am – As things were relatively quiet in Aldergrove, the Corporal and I headed back into Langley City. We did a “drive-by” at the strip mall in Langley City between the 7-11 and Dairy Queen (where we saw even more young people congregated than we had seen earlier – one person turned away and went down the side street as soon as we arrived [a dealer?]). We also drove by the Vanilla Night Club, Gabby’s, the Citrus Nightclub and the Rendezvous Pub. Outside the Rendezvous, we spoke with a homeless person who was very cheerful and who was picking cigarette butts up off the sidewalks. (Corporal Burden told me that homeless people do this so they can roll their own cigarettes the next day from the remnants they have found). At Gabby’s, we spoke with the chief security officer who was directing traffic out of the parking lot. I was somewhat impressed with the hotdog stand outside the bar that was doing a bumper business at the time. (I thought it was a good idea that many patrons were lining up to buy and eat hotdogs before they drove home. However, Corporal Burden pointed out to me neither food nor coffee eliminates alcohol in the system, only time does). There were many young people standing outside both the Vanilla and Citrus clubs when we were there. None were rowdy and I remarked that most appeared to be waiting for a drive home. The Corporal pointed out that most were probably waiting until his marked car left the parking lot before they would go to their vehicles and drive themselves home. (Scary thought).

2:00 am – A call comes in about a gun threat at the Shark Club in Walnut Grove. The Corporal immediately heads up 200th Street with his sirens and lights on. We were at the Shark Club by 2:10 am. When we arrived, there was bedlam in the parking lot. One young man had a baseball bat. There were 6 police officers present and at least 3 separate groups of vocal young people shouting at each other. The individual with the bat was subdued and placed in a police cruiser. His bat was confiscated. His friends argued with the police about this. Apparently, he was not the individual involved in the original altercation. There were several conversations going on in more than one language and the RCMP did their best to get control of the situation. Not an easy task when one group is leering, jeering, and gesturing at the other group.

2:15 am – As I am sitting in the police cruiser (staying out of the way and “guarding” the confiscated bat), watching the dynamics of all the groups outside the Shark Club, and inhaling the strong alcoholic fumes from the “passenger” in the back seat, a member of one of the groups grabs his head and sinks to the ground. There has been no obvious reason for this. In one moment, he was speaking to the police and in the next he was on the ground twitching with his eyes rolled back to the whites. His female companions start screaming and wailing. They claim he was punched in the head inside the club. (No one can hear anything over the noise they are making). The Corporal calls 911 and asks

for an ambulance. The females keep wailing and yelling “help him, help him”. One of his companions is apparently a doctor but the RCMP will not let anyone touch the victim until the paramedics arrive. This causes even more noise. (Later the Corporal tells me that Walnut Grove’s Shark Club is yet another example of a bar which services people from outside Langley (in this case Abbotsford) but which the Langley police are responsible for).

2:30 am – All groups are waiting for the ambulance and new groups have arrived to watch. The females present keep wailing. The RCMP tries to move the downed member’s group back. They just yell louder. They can’t understand why they are being restricted when they didn’t start the fight. This causes more anger and outbursts. The wailing and arguing continues.

2:45 am – The ambulance arrives. By this time, the brother of the downed person is so agitated that the RCMP have to move him and place him in another car. A second altercation starts because the members of the group surrounding the downed individual think that the group under the canopy are leering and gesturing at them. The RCMP speak loudly to get everyone to back off and let the ambulance workers do their job. The ambulance workers cut the shirt off the person on the ground, they stabilize his neck, they put boards under his body in preparation for the lift to the stretcher.

3:00 am – Township Hall 8 Firefighters arrive to perform a medical assist in response to the ambulance’s call. They lift the patient from the ground onto the trolley. There are 8 firefighters present. The females present continue to wail and their male counterparts demand to know where the person in the ambulance is being taken. At this point, neither the RCMP nor the paramedics know because the patient has not been assessed. They explain this to the downed person’s family/friends. The ambulance leaves.

3:10 am – Another call comes over the radio that a person has collapsed and is lying in the middle of an intersection on Wright Street in Fort Langley. Three cruisers take off with sirens and lights going. This includes the cruiser I’m in. (The passenger in the back seat was released earlier minus his bat and taken home by his friends. His bat remains beside me in the front seat). We reach Fort Langley in 5 minutes. Members of Firehall 2 are already present and have assisted the downed individual to his feet. As Corporal Burden and I arrive, we see the individual being placed into the back seat of a police cruiser. We speak briefly with the attending members of Firehall 2 (who are somewhat surprised to see a local politician at that hour of the morning and ask why I’m there. I reassure them that I have not been arrested and we all have a good chuckle about my ‘nocturnal activities’).

3:20 am – As we are talking with the members of Firehall 2, a dispatch call comes through about the sound of a pellet/air gun being fired behind the James Kennedy Elementary School in Walnut Grove. We immediately head over there. Corporal Burden parks the car in the side parking lot and gets out. He asks me to remain in the car. He walks behind the school and is soon lost from sight in the relative darkness. While I am waiting in the car, an older teenage male walks across the school yard to the sidewalk. Another teenage male walks along the

sidewalk on the other side of the street. They act like they don't know each other but I can't help but wonder if the two are related. I also can't help but wonder where their parents are and whether or not their parents know what these kids are up to at 3 in the morning. Corporal Burden returns to the car. He has found nothing amiss and the school is secure. We then drive to the front of the school where two other police cruisers have arrived. He debriefs with them and we move out back to 88th Avenue and then south on 200th Street.

3:35 am – At the corner of 200th Street and 72nd Avenue, garbage has been dumped on 200th Street heading north and is blocking oncoming traffic (not that there is a lot of traffic at this hour of night). Corporal Burden stops the car, puts his flashers on, gets out of the car and proceeds to pick up the garbage. He puts it in a garbage container across the street. When the Corporal comes back to the cruiser, he says that leaving the garbage there is a recipe for an accident. I am very impressed by what he has just done because it is certainly not in his job description. On top of all the policing issues he has had to deal with in this shift, it is commendable that he takes the time to pay attention to a minor detail like this. What is also commendable is that the Corporal has not taken a personal break throughout this long evening. I think he clearly demonstrates the many aspects of professionalism that I try to teach my business students at Kwantlen – when there is a job to do, do it, do all of it, and do it right.

3:40 am – Dispatch calls. There are party issues in Aldergrove at the Elks Hall.

3:50 am – After a fairly rapid trip down Fraser Highway from Langley City to Aldergrove, we arrive at the Elks Hall. There are 4 police cruisers, 5 officers and 3 auxiliaries present. Corporal Burden and I enter the hall. The lights are on and people are milling around. The first thing I notice is that the floors are completely covered in water and cigarette butts. Corporal Burden goes to the far end of the hall where the DJ is holding a very loud court. I remain at the entrance and a young man comes up beside me and says that he is there to help his friends clean up. I naively ask if a water pipe has broken. A Constable who hears this conversation quietly moves me to the side and tells me that this has been a “Rave Party” and the reason why the floor is soaking wet is because the people at the party have been taking the drug “Ecstasy”. Apparently, people who take this drug are so caught up in dancing that they forget to hydrate and if they don't hydrate, they collapse. So, as the Constable told me, this was a relatively well-run rave/ecstasy party because water was so plentiful – they were obviously pouring it over people as they were dancing to remind them to drink water. I also found it unusual that there was a bar but no liquor license in display. Several people were drinking beer while I was there. I know the Elks group in Aldergrove. They do many good works in the community and I wondered if they knew what exactly was going on in their hall. One young man told me that they regularly rented this hall for their “parties”. I was very surprised to hear this.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the hall, the DJ got obnoxious (he was on drugs) and was ultimately arrested for disturbing the peace. He was escorted outside and as I watched him being placed in a cruiser, his girlfriend started yelling about how she was going to get home. She came from North Van and so wanted to be arrested too. I suggested to one of her friends that she call her parents. He

looked at me like I was crazy and told me she was too old for that. (What an interesting concept too old to ask for a drive home but not too old to ask to be arrested!).

4:10 am – We leave the Elks Hall and drive down to the Safeway in Aldergrove (272nd St. and Fraser Highway). We meet a maintenance worker blowing leaves in the parking lot who tells us that a group of young people have just gone behind the store and he is worried about this. Corporal Burden and I drive behind the mall where we find a group of 6 young people. As soon as they see us arrive, they dissipate. The Corporal spends considerable time talking to the private security guard on site about what to be on the guard for. He checks out this security guard's credentials and then reassures the maintenance worker.

4:45 am – Corporal Burden and I take another sweep through downtown Langley City. Everything seems very quiet – even the homeless. They have congregated at the mall across from the Subway and are curled up in their cardboards, not bothering anyone.

5:00 am – After all the driving we've done this shift (we've been to Walnut Grove twice, Fort Langley twice, Aldergrove twice, Murrayville once, Brookwood once, and Langley City 3 times), we're running on fumes. It's time to gas up. So we head over to the Township Operations Yard where the Corporal's ID card gets us in after hours. As Corporal Burden told me, it is very bad form to return a cruiser to the police station on empty as each shift is assigned different cars and you never know what car you're going to get. I found it a novel experience to go to a gas pump and fill up while watching the litre numbers increase as the price numbers remained at "0". We put 68 litres of gas in the cruiser for this night's work. Of course, I wondered what the annual total cost was of all this "free" gas.

5:20 am – After returning to the police station in Murrayville, Corporal Burden took me upstairs to the Dispatch Center where I met the people who had directed us all evening to the 'hotspots' in Langley. I am impressed by the technology they command and by how efficiently and effectively they do their jobs.

5:25 am – Corporal Burden took me downstairs to the cells. Eleven of the 12 cells were occupied. They all contained young males. These individuals were either drunk or on drugs. While I was there, another young male was being 'booked'. He was covered in vomit and he blew way over (180) the legal limit for alcohol. He had been driving when he was picked up and therefore he would get the 12th cell. So ultimately our Langley RCMP station was a full house. From my perspective, I think our police station that night was a babysitting service for drunks and druggies. How sad. What a useless waste of valuable and expensive community resources.

5:35 am – I finally went home. It was a long and very educational night. I take my hat off to our police officers who do this every day of the week. Thank you all!