

Regional board opposes Coast Guard cutbacks

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Published: **January 24, 2012 12:00 PM**

Updated: **January 24, 2012 12:38 PM**

Intended cuts to Coast Guard centres will “put lives on the line” said Strathcona Regional District director Jim Abram, but Campbell River councillors aren’t so sure.

Abram, regional director representing Quadra and the Discovery Islands, is fighting the federal government’s decision to reduce the number of coast guard officers on watch at Marine Communications and Traffic Services Centres starting this month.

The centres provide distress and safety communication, vessel traffic services and weather information – such as tsunami alerts – and are typically manned by three officers on 12-hour shifts, according to Abram. The closest centre to Campbell River is at Cape Lazo in the Comox Valley.

Abram said if the cuts go through as planned, it will affect marine traffic throughout the region and put lives at risk.

“If one life were lost because of this proposal it would be worth it to make sure this doesn’t proceed,” Abram said at last Thursday’s regional district board meeting, “I’m sure the Coast Guard wouldn’t intentionally put lives on the line, but in the past, they have put lives on the line.”

Keith Ashfield, Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, denied the cuts will impact the well-being of mariners.

“Emergencies happen but it’s not like we are not going to have people on staff being there and able to handle the calls,” Ashfield told the *Mirror*. “I’m quite confident that this will work. We are not going to put people’s lives at risk.”

Abram urged his fellow board directors to support sending a resolution to the Association of Vancouver Island and Coastal Communities (AVICC) asking the association to consider petitioning the federal government to maintain current staff levels on watch at all five marine centres in B.C.

But Campbell River councillor Mary Storry said she was unable to lend her support because she needed more information.

“I wouldn’t feel comfortable going up and supporting this at the AVICC so I can’t support this now,” Storry said at Thursday’s regional district meeting. “I still can’t wrap my head around the fact that the Coast Guard would put our communities at risk.”

Coun. Andy Adams didn't feel it would be appropriate for the regional district to meddle in the Coast Guard's operations.

"This resolution proposal is, to me, crossing the line and getting into the specifics of management," Adams said. "This one goes a little too far for me to support."

Brenda Leigh, regional director for electoral area D (Oyster Bay-Buttle Lake) backed Abram's request to get it on the table at the Association of Vancouver Island and Coastal Communities.

"I'm sure this will affect other governments and I'd like to see the Strathcona Regional District take the lead on something for once," said Leigh, who, like Abram opposed any cuts to Coast Guard services.

"It's a dangerous area and any reduction of eyes and ears on the water for any Campbell River resident or tourist to the area is harmful and a bad decision," she said.

Despite opposition from councillors Storry, Adams and Claire Moglove, Abram's resolution passed and will go before the Association of Vancouver Island Coastal Communities' board.

The resolution will also be sponsored by the Gold River and Sayward councils. If the resolution is supported by the coastal communities board, it will then go to the Union of B.C. Municipalities and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities.

"I'm extremely pleased it went through," Abram said. "The issue is the safety of the travelling public and Campbell River is trying to increase tourism and you don't increase tourism by reducing safety services, it doesn't make sense. It's nonsensical."

The regional district board also voted to send a letter to Ashfield supporting the current level of service at the marine communications and traffic centres.

"It's positively worded, asking them to keep the services and they can decide how to keep them – it can be done," Abram said. "It's simply a letter asking the minister to do something sensible."

The board will also arrange to meet with the coast guard for a briefing session as soon as possible.