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Surrey moves forward with plan to replace RCMP with own police force

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4-5 minutes

An RCMP constable patrols on the 'The Strip' located along 135A Street in Surry, B.C., on June 19, 2018.

Rafal Gerszak/The Globe and Mail

The manager in charge of creating a new police department for B.C.'s second-largest city says the ratio of officers to citizens isn't relevant and he's not focusing on it as he embarks on Surrey's ambitious plan to replace the RCMP with its own force.

"The ratio is not really the issue. An effective policing model is what's important," Terry Waterhouse said at the City Hall in Surrey, southeast of Vancouver, in his first news conference as general manager for municipal policing transition.

Based on government statistics, the ratio in 2016 was 662 Surrey residents for every RCMP officer, which was about average for the Lower Mainland. Mayor Doug McCallum and his Safe Surrey Coalition won in last month's municipal election in part on a platform of ending the 50-year-old policing arrangement with the RCMP in favour of a city force that is more responsive to community needs.

Upon being sworn in on Nov. 5, Mr. McCallum and his team, who won seven of eight council seats, passed a motion to proceed with their plan – the first time a local government has replaced the Mounties since Cape Breton in 2000.

Mr. Waterhouse said Surrey will seek to learn from those who have gone before it. In 1995, the Fraser Valley city of Abbotsford dropped the RCMP as they amalgamated with neighbouring Matsqui. Matsqui's police force largely formed the basis for the current Abbotsford Police Department.

Mr. Waterhouse said he was involved with policing during the Abbotsford transition. He said the city remains a much smaller jurisdiction than Surrey, which has a population of more than 500,000 and is the fastest-growing community in the province.

"There are some lessons learned. But we'll have to develop a plan that meets the needs and circumstances of Surrey today," he said.

For now, however, Surrey is focused on developing a police operational plan that will calculate the financial resources required, and answer such questions as whether the new force will have a homicide squad of its own as opposed to the regional Integrated Homicide Investigation Team that now handles some areas outside Vancouver.

The city owns police buildings in Surrey, and much of the equipment used by the force. Mr. Waterhouse said he and his team will assess that inventory in developing their plan.

However, he said the two-year deadline to make the change remains fixed. "It's ambitious but our plan is comprehensive and we're confident that two years is an appropriate window to do this transition."

Mr. Waterhouse, a former Vancouver police officer, has been the city's general manager for public safety for the past three years.

In a statement on Wednesday, the British Columbia solicitor-general said the province is intent on helping Surrey reach its goal.

"Let's be clear. No one is putting up any roadblocks," Mike Farnworth said.

"A new police force isn't created over the weekend but the province is committed to working with the city as they move forward. We

want to make sure there is a solid plan in place to ensure the people of Surrey have strong policing they can be confident in.”

Mayor McCallum has previously said the Justice Institute of B.C., which trains first responders, would be key to training the new officers required for the force.

On Wednesday, institute president Michael Tarko said in a statement that they have not yet had any discussions with Surrey, and would await directions from the public-safety ministry before offering help.

He said the institute could accommodate the demand for stepped-up training by expanding its capacities based on direction and funding provided by the province for recruit and advanced police training.

With a file from Colin Freeze.