

Coell meeting inspires SOS group - By Elizabeth Nolan - Gulf Islands Driftwood - Published: January 12, 2011 10:00 AM  
The campaign to restore surgery services at Lady Minto Hospital is starting to gain traction with new interest coming from higher governance levels.

Salt Spring's Save Our Surgery Committee received its first boost on Nov. 10 when the Capital Regional Hospital District, a funding partner in the now barely used operating room, moved to request a suspension of repurposing activities by the Vancouver Island Health Authority.

Partly on the strength of this official support, the campaign made the national media with an article detailing the situation published in The Globe and Mail on Jan. 2.

Even more positive is renewed attention from Saanich North and the Islands MLA Murray Coell, who received the SOS Committee at his office last Friday.

"The meeting went well," committee chair Phyllis Bolton confirmed Monday. "We reiterated to Murray Coell that we asked him to follow through on something we had asked him to do after the last election that he had not done."

Bolton said Coell had previously told the delegation that he would arrange and accompany members to a meeting with then-health minister Kevin Falcon. They wanted to register their concerns about the continuing lack of surgical services at Lady Minto Hospital, which began when VIHA terminated Dr. Roy Preshaw's contract in 2008 and then failed to hire a replacement.

Several weeks after agreeing to the committee's request in 2009, Coell sent Bolton an email saying that instead of the meeting with the health minister, a needs assessment for the community would be conducted.

To SOS' dismay, VIHA's assessment recommended a permanent surgery closure. The de facto situation became official with VIHA's June 2010 announcement that the OR would be repurposed for other uses.

Coell told the Driftwood on Monday that previous health ministers had not felt they could override VIHA decisions as the health authorities were set up to be independent of political interference. Instead, the MLAs had respected the decisions made by VIHA planners.

"I've always tried to make sure we're dealing with professional advice . . . and that we're meeting the needs of the community and trying to balance that," Coell said.

But with the new involvement of the CRHD added to continued letters and calls from the community, the desired meeting is once again in the works. "I think the new issue the SOS committee has is the CRHD cost-share issues — they've paid for an operating room and they haven't received an operating room. I think that's the issue VIHA will have to deal with," Coell said.

Bolton said SOS will decide today (Wednesday) whether it wants to meet with Colin Hansen, who is temporarily taking care of both health and finance, or wait for the more stable condition of a permanent minister. It is likely the committee will choose to make the next step as soon as possible, however.

"We would like to meet with Colin Hansen because he is a member of the cabinet, and the more we educate the members of the cabinet, the better chance we have of being successful," Bolton said.

Coell confirmed his office has received many messages from Salt Springers concerned about the hospital and about health care in general over the past two years. With a high percentage of seniors in several parts of the riding, he said, the issue will clearly be an important one in the future. A meeting with VIHA to discuss the operating room closure is being planned in addition to the health minister visit, Coell said.

In the meantime, the SOS committee will not be content to sit back and rest with small victories. Bolton said the group has already collected around 1,000 signatures on a petition opposing the OR closure. The group is now getting ready to do more active canvassing to get signatures on cards that could be considered more useful legally.

SOS members are also strategizing on how to meet a CRHD request to demonstrate the committee's community support. They intend to begin with the island's elected officials, all of whom have already stated their willingness to help. With the outcome of the recent meeting with Coell, Bolton cautiously agreed that things may be looking positive at last for surgery supporters.

"I think they are. And we can't give up in any case," Bolton said. "Despite the fact that the health authority doesn't want to hear from us, we are not going to give up until we get our surgical services back." Bolton said further letters, emails and phone calls to Coell from islanders will be helpful. [http://www.bcclocalnews.com/vancouver\\_island\\_south/saltspringislanddriftwood/news/113314754.html](http://www.bcclocalnews.com/vancouver_island_south/saltspringislanddriftwood/news/113314754.html)